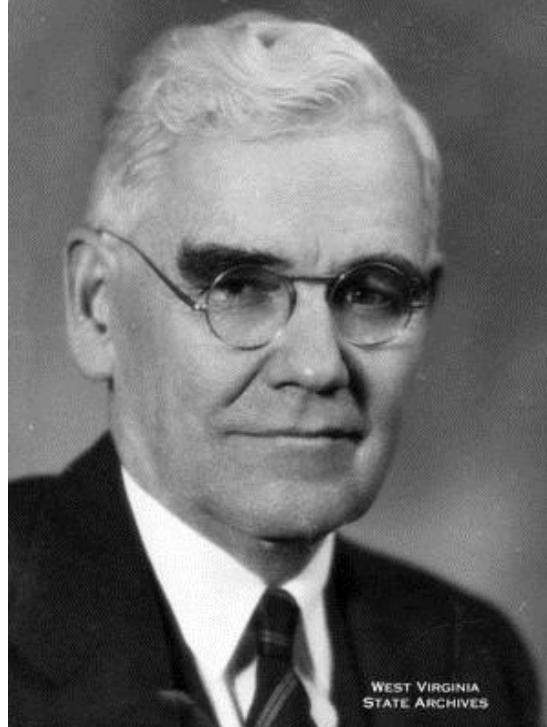


ON THIS DAY IN WEST VIRGINIA HISTORY JANUARY 31



W. W. Trent, who served as West Virginia State Superintendent of Schools from 1933 to 1957, was born on January 31, 1878 in Nicholas County.

CSO: SS.8.23, ELA.8.3

Investigate the Document: (Mountaineer Education: A Story of Education in West Virginia, 1885-1957; 1960, 379 T72)

1. What spurred Trent's interest in educating children in rural, isolated areas?
2. Some members of Trent's community stated to Trent, "You have gone to school long enough. Why not settle down in this community?" How has the perception of higher education changed in society since the early twentieth century?
3. Where did Trent teach from 1903-1906?
4. How many high schools existed in Nicholas County in 1893?

Think Critically: How would you put the importance of education into your own words? How can you make use of furthering your education through college or trade school? How are people from different socioeconomic backgrounds affected by educational opportunities? What might happen if free public education was not offered? What consequences may result from having an illiterate, uneducated society?

379
T72
c.3

MOUNTAINEER
EDUCATION



A Story of Education in
West Virginia
1885-1957



Autobiographical

W. W. TRENT



65392

Chapter I



Boyhood Education

I was the fifth of seven children, three of whom are still living—an older sister and a younger brother. In my early boyhood days father, mother, and all of the children who could run chores worked throughout the planting and harvesting season from sunrise to sunset. In other seasons we had time for squirrel hunting and an occasional fishing trip. Squirrels were plentiful and easy game for a boy with a muzzle-loading rifle, a good eye, and a steady hand. Small fish could be found in abundance in nearby streams. On good days we caught about all we wanted.

In winter months, the early morning and evening chores were milking the cows; feeding the horses, sheep, and pigs; and cutting and carrying wood to the back porch to provide fire for the long winter evenings. Kerosene lanterns provided light for many of the chores. We had to work to keep the wolf from the door but, busy as we were, there was always time for Bible reading and prayer twice daily.

We butchered our own hogs and sheep and raised the grain to feed them and our family. Corn stalks with ears attached were cut and assembled into shocks. Later when ears had dried they were husked and stored in a crib to dry. When meal was needed the corn was shelled, placed in a sack, and by horse with a boy atop sent to a water-powered mill some three miles distant. Wheat was cut with cradles and assembled in shocks. When it had dried it was hauled to a barn where, on a hard-clay "thrashing floor" the grain was flailed from the stalks—later known as straw—carried or hauled to a granary, and stored in drums which had been made by nailing

boards over one end of a hollow gum log, sawed to convenient lengths—upright some were five feet tall. When flour was needed a sack of grain with boy atop was put on horse and sent to a water-powered “flour mill” some seven miles distant.

We cut grass with scythes. Well do I remember the first mowing machine my father bought. What a relief! After that scythes were used to cut grass in fence corners and around trees. We grew flax which, when it had matured, was pulled by hand and spread out to ret. After retting it was broken, skutched, hackled, spun, and woven into linen from which were made towels, table cloths, napkins, dresses, shirts, etc., or crocheted into lace, doilies, table spreads, dresses.

Wool was shorn from sheep on the farm. After having been shorn it was washed by hand, picked free of foreign matter, and sent to a carding mill some twelve miles distant—sometimes small quantities were carded at home. The carded wool was spun by women of the household and woven into cloth from which were made such things as men’s suits, blankets, shawls, shirts, underwear. If not used for weaving the yarn was knitted into such things as mittens, scarfs, hoods, shawls, sweaters, and socks. Our shoes were made of cowhide, tanned by one neighbor and made into shoes by another. We had one horse which was used for cultivating crops and for an occasional ride to a store. We usually walked. Our heavy plowing was done by a yoke of oxen. My brother and I made a team. One would drive while the other held a McCormick plow. When the plow struck under a rock or root, we joined forces to free it.

Experiences such as I have related were the major part of an education in the early days of West Virginia. These early experiences taught lessons of economy that have remained with me to this day and were responsible for the feeling on the part of some members of the Department of Education that I spent too sparingly for equipment and supplies. False or true, I knew that money saved in the

Department meant more money for the public schools of the State that are financed from the same General School Fund.

Because my family had not recovered from the ravages of the Civil War, and the outlook on the farm was discouraging, I sought better advantages. My mother wanted me to be a minister or a teacher. Inspired by her aspirations for me and the ideals advocated by teachers, I determined to get an education, but how and when were the puzzling questions. My teachers did not have much “book-larnin,” but they could and did inspire for better things. The desire for an education instilled by them and my mother led to my saying later in life: “It means more to a child to create in him a desire to learn and to accomplish something worthwhile than to teach him a million facts.” Those who believe in teaching facts only and that facts are the essential things in life agree with Gradgrind and M’Choakumchild whom Charles Dickens ridiculed in *Hard Times*. Gradgrind said to M’Choakumchild: “You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon facts; nothing else will be of any service to them.” Dickens believed “in the distinctive soul as the real selfhood of each child, and as the only true reality of his nature, the determining influence in his life and character. He did not believe that knowledge formed the soul, but that the soul transformed knowledge.”¹

In 1885 I enrolled in a one-room, rural school one mile from home with a term of three months. Sometime later when the school in a neighboring community began earlier than the school in my community, I walked four miles to the school in the community until the school in my community began. The principal subjects were reading, writing, spelling, English grammar, and arithmetic, but for pupils remaining in the schools nine and ten years, as many did, there were other subjects legally approved. Among them were physiology, United States and State history, general and State geography, single entry book-

¹ James L. Hughes, *Dickens As An Educator*.

keeping, civil government, theory and art of teaching, and in connection with other subjects "instruction on the nature of alcoholic drinks and their effects upon the human system."² The textbooks for the major subjects were: Ray's *Practical Arithmetic*, Harvey's *Grammar*, Montgomery's *United States History*, Mitchell's *Geography*, and McGuffey's readers and spellers. The three R's, parsing, and diagraming were emphasized. Unfortunately, we were permitted to say: "punkin" for pumpkin, "instid" for instead, "crick" for creek, "poke" for bag, "had saw" for had seen, "far" for fire, and "har" for harrow.

The McGuffey's Readers, now referred to as "the old McGuffey's," were not popular with pupils but they were the only readers available. We read them from cover to cover two or three times each year. Other factors that made them unpopular then and endear them to adults of today who recall them, were the many selections that implied or stated specifically the morals intended to teach.

Reading these books throughout my years in the elementary schools and teaching them for five years left in memory a few of the sentences and poems that have served as guideposts for my life. The sentences are: "Never brag on your fish before you catch him"; "Do not meddle"; "Beware of the first drink"; "Pretty is as pretty does"; "A place for everything"; "Waste not, want not"; "Circumstances alter cases"; and "Dare to do right." Stanzas or lines from some of the poems are:

"The truth itself is not believed,
From one who often has deceived."
* * * * *

"'Tis a lesson you should heed,
Try, try again;
If at first you don't succeed,
Try, try again;
Then your courage should appear,
For, if you will persevere,
You will conquer, never fear;
Try, try again."
* * * * *

² Code of West Virginia, 1899.

"'Tis not in title nor in rank,
'Tis not in wealth like London bank,
To make us truly blest.
If happiness have not her seat
And center in the breast,
We may be wise, or rich, or great,
But never can be blest."
* * * * *

"Work, work, my boy, be not afraid;
Look labor boldly in the face;
Take up the hammer or the spade,
And blush not for your humble place."
* * * * *

"I live for those who love me,
For those who know me true;
For the heaven that smiles above me,
And awaits my spirit, too;
For the cause that needs assistance,
For the wrongs that need resistance,
For the future in the distance,
And the good that I can do."

Recently, I found myself quoting over and over the first stanza of the poem, "Forty Years Ago" with the word *seventy* substituted for "forty," thus:

"I've wandered to the village, Tom,
I've sat beneath the tree,
Upon the school-house playground,
That sheltered you and me;
But none were left to greet me, Tom,
And few were left to know,
Who played with me upon the green,
Just *seventy* years ago."

Although considered important, the learning acquired in the three or four months in the public schools was a minor part of education in the State. Many mountaineers lived and thrived without it, but they could not have lived and thrived without the guidance of fathers, mothers, and the experiences related earlier in this chapter. Although "book-larnin" was not too popular, it did give those who had it a decided advantage—an advantage that caused more and more mountain folk to provide schools and to send their children to them.

In 1893, there was no high school in Nicholas County nor in any of the surrounding counties. Four years later, "West Virginia had only twenty-five 'so-called high schools,' only half of which equalled the standards of Ohio and Pennsylvania."³ In 1903, "Fayette County enjoyed the distinction of being the foremost county in the State, perhaps, in establishing district high schools.***One for whites at Oak Hill, and one for Negroes at Hill-Top."⁴ By 1906, the number [of high schools] had increased 'in name' to fifty or more, but in reality, there were only a few; these were in the larger towns and cities."⁵

The enrollment in public high schools in West Virginia in 1909-10 was 4,878 and in 1919-20, 18,512. In 1933, the year before the adoption of the county unit system, the enrollment in junior and senior high schools was: white, 90,422; Negroes, 2,860; total, 93,280.⁶ For the school year 1955-56, the total enrollment in junior and senior, races not reported separately, was 162,003.

Because there was no high school to attend when I was ready, I remained in a one-room rural school where I studied bookkeeping, general history, and civil government. I borrowed money from a sister who was a teacher and enrolled, 1895, in the Summersville Normal Training School. That summer I took my first teachers' examination which I recall vividly. For a grade in reading, I was asked to read aloud one paragraph from "The Quail," a selection in McGuffey's *Fifth Reader*. I mispronounced one word but was granted, or given, a second grade certificate. To make a first grade certificate, the applicant had to be prepared to parse difficult sentences according to Harvey's *Grammar* and to solve difficult problems in Ray's *Practical Arithmetic*. Certificates were issued by a county board of examiners consisting of the county superintendent and two members appointed by him.

Teachers were employed in the rural communities by trustees, three in number, appointed by magisterial dis-

³ C. H. Ambler, *History of Education in West Virginia*.

⁴ Thomas C. Miller, *History of Education in West Virginia*.

⁵ *Biennial Reports of State Superintendent, 1934 and 1956*.

trict boards of education, three in number, who had been elected by the voters of the district. These boards laid the levy on real and personal property which provided major support of the schools, and received annual reports from the trustees and teachers which they summarized and forwarded to the State Department of Education. The minor support came from the General School Fund of the State, not then known as State aid.⁶

Failing to secure a teaching position for 1895-96, and needing money, I "hired out" for the summer of 1896. I worked as a farm hand for Joe Tyree at Ansted, lived five months with the family in the house now known as the "Half-Way House," and worked at odd jobs among which was to plow and sow in oats the land on which the first high school for Ansted was later constructed. The salary was fourteen dollars a month, plus board and room. Mrs. Tyree was quoted as saying: "Will Trent will amount to something. He spends his off-time in reading books." One book that I read was *The Life of Buffalo Bill*. In my home the chief books, and about the only books, were the Bible, school textbooks, West Virginia Code, an almanac, and Reports of the United States Department of Agriculture. We received one county newspaper. Mother didn't permit novels in our home.

⁶ *Code of West Virginia, 1899*.

Chapter II

A Teacher

In the fall of 1896, I began my first school, which was located on Big Laurel not far from the present coal-mining town of Saxman. The land which Richwood occupies was then a farm. The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad terminated at Camden-on-Gauley. The school term was five months; the salary on a second grade certificate, twenty-two dollars a month; and the cost of board and room and washing, five dollars and twenty-five cents. The twenty-five cents was for washing. Access to that community was by a horse path from Grassy Creek, a community some three miles distant. The nearest store and post office were five miles away. The log house with four blank walls, without ceiling or weatherboarding and with only four small windows, was dark and gloomy. Its only furniture was a table for the teacher, home-made benches, a painted blackboard, and an elongated stove for burning wood. The absence of a library, supplementary books, and teacher's supplies placed that school in the category of other rural schools of that day.

The absence of facilities in the rural school that I attended and in the one in which I first taught, was the beginnings of my interest in the children in isolated communities, which grew with the years and became a major factor in determining my activities as State Superintendent of Free Schools, 1933-1957.

On a first grade certificate, with a salary of twenty-five dollars a month, I taught two years at the Moore School (near where Canvass is now located), which had forty-five pupils, some five or six of whom were older than I. I taught one year, 1899-1900, in a one-room school at Mt. Lookout. I attended the spring and fall terms, 1898, at

[8]

Summersville Normal Training School. In the spring of 1899, I went to Glenville State Normal School. My father took me on horseback to Camden-on-Gauley, some thirty miles from home. From there, at age twenty-one, I had my first train ride. At Burnsville, I was told that the road to Glenville was impassable for "hacks" and practically so for a horse. I was advised to walk and send my baggage by boat the next week. Taking the only means of transportation, with umbrella over my head, I trudged through fields and muddy roads toward Glenville. Late in the afternoon, I inquired for lodging from a man and his daughter who, riding horses, were driving cattle through ankle-deep mud. Pointing to a house some distance away, the father said. "We live there. You may stay with us if you can put up with what we have." The next day, because of rain, I was pleased to accept an invitation from Mr. Floyd, the owner of the home, to remain until Monday. On the next morning, I paid him sixty-five cents—he evidently did not charge for the second night—and walked to Glenville. With the exception of White's *Pedagogy*, the subjects taken are now high school subjects. The examination for the class in pedagogy was: "Write two and one-half hours on White's *Pedagogy*." Having been given good grades and chosen a debater for the annual literary contest, I must have fooled both the students and the professors. At the close of the term, three other students joined me in hiring a hack to return to Burnsville. That venture had a happy ending, but I returned home with only seventy cents for further expenditures.

With the money earned by teaching, 1899-1900, I entered Marshall College at the beginning of the spring term in 1900. I returned for the fall term with money enough to pay entrance fees and board for a short time, but not enough for buying books. President Lawrence J. Corby gave me work as janitor and advanced money for books. During the summer of 1901, I sold books in the Mountain Cove and surrounding communities. During the school year, 1901-02, I managed a boarding club for board and borrowed more money for other expenses. For the com-

mencement program, I was chosen a debater for the annual contest between the literary societies. I lost in the debate, but was fortunate in being graduated with the class of 1902, which consisted of ten normal school graduates, twenty-two academic, five business, five shorthand, and two business and shorthand. With that graduation, another venture had ended happily, except that I was deeper in debt. Evidences of my financial straits are notes still in my files: June 13, \$15.00, redeemed December 15; August 2, \$10.00, redeemed January 14, 1903; and August 21, \$10.00, redeemed February 27, 1903.

My family encouraged me to continue in normal school and made sacrifices in my behalf, but members of the community questioned the need for more education. Some even said: "You have gone to school long enough. Why not marry and settle down in this community?" Few, if any, others about me had attended normal school. A small love affair contributed to the sentiment in the community. I owned a little sorrel horse with a white face that liked the apple twigs on a tree that stood just outside the yard gate on a neighbor's farm. In fact, he liked the twigs so well that he visited the tree nearly every Sunday afternoon. When I left for normal school, a bay horse with a buggy took the place of the sorrel horse with a white face. That horse with the buggy liked those twigs, too. Visiting the tree often, he grew to like them more and more. In my second year at normal school, the bay horse with the buggy won over the sorrel horse with a white face. One good woman in the community was heard to say: "I am sorry for Billy Trent. While he was away getting an education and trying to make something out of himself, Mr. _____ married his girl." Incidentally, within that last year at Marshall College, I met another girl, a classmate, who later became my wife.

Within the school year 1902-03, I taught about eleven months—the fall and spring terms at Beckley Seminary and the winter term in a two-room school at Beckwith, Fayette County. The building, remodeled, is still used for classroom purposes.

For three years (1903-06), I taught the junior class in the high school at New Martinsville. I taught Ray's *Higher Algebra*, Caesar's *Commentaries*, English, and history. One year, geometry was substituted for algebra. Since that time great changes have been made. Now teachers are limited to the subjects for which they are certificated, with requirements varying from eighteen to twenty-four semester college credits. Because I had to study to keep ahead of the pupils, I believe I did some of the best teaching of my career. I had the learner's point of view.

As a result of limiting teachers to the hour requirements, many high schools in recent years had difficulty in finding teachers for certain subjects, especially in the smaller high schools, even though there were teachers in the school who had semester hours slightly fewer than those named in the requirements. The theory that a teacher with twelve hours of mathematics, not having had trigonometry and calculus, cannot teach arithmetic and beginning algebra is specialization gone "to seed." Bosh! Standards against children! The standard devotees went one step further with the legislature of 1957, by having a law passed authorizing certificates for combination of grades. The idea, if such it can be called, that a teacher's preparation should be narrowed to two or three grades is silly to the nth degree. Regimentation, eh? I know a teacher who prepared for upper grade teaching where discipline gave her trouble. Fortunately, the recently enacted law was not then in force. She was transferred to the first grade, where she was a successful teacher.

I must not omit reference to my most pleasant days of teaching, which was my contribution to the uniform examination. Within the summers of 1905 and 1906 at Bell, near Mt. Lookout, I taught a number of young people who were preparing for teachers' examination. Neither punishments nor rewards were necessary. The young people were there to study and learn. Those schools, later referred to as "cramming schools," had their place. They aided in supplying teachers in a day when very few teachers had attended normal school or college.