

Colebrook Schools Poetry From the Past

Recently, while visiting the fifth grade at the Colebrook Consolidated School, I found the teacher, Judy Oskandy, correcting papers, more specifically poetry papers. I noticed this at once, because just a half hour before I had been making copies of old graduation exercises that were part of the trove of material that Bob Deming had given to the Historical Society. The copy for 1935 was special because it fell on the tercentennial of the State of Connecticut, and the entire back page was devoted to a poem written by the graduates.

The graduation exercises were in the form of a play based on the tales that were told by colonial travelers assembled in the famous Colebrook Inn, where they related tales of long ago. Each of the three Colebrook schools had their own agenda. The three Forge School graduates presented "Beginnings of Connecticut". The story of Adrian Block was told by Faith Holcomb, Fenwick at Saybrook was related by Ralph Durst and Thomas Hooker's Fundamental Orders were told by Bernice Adams.

The Colebrook River School, which graduated four, presented Episodes from Colonial Connecticut, consisting of "New Haven and the Magistrates" by Virginia Nixon, "Andros and the Charter", related by Mildred Euerle, "The Battle of the Books" as told by Beulah Gramlich and "Israel Putnam" by Wellington Pease.

The Center School graduated the largest number by far- seven. They presented "Gleanings from Connecticut History", which consisted of "Nathan Hale" by George Gray, "Uncas and the Indians of Connecticut", presented by William Thomas, "Connecticut's Past in all Wars" as told by George Stenman, "The Webb house", presented by Eleanor Thomas, "Travel and Transportation", told by George Wolford, "Industries and Inventions", related by Sarah Lawrence and "Comparison of Old Connecticut With the New Connecticut", by Jeannette Porter.

My guess is that the piece on Uncas and the Indians of Connecticut would have been a very interesting one, because the Superintendent of Schools in those days was Lewis S. Mills, the same man for whom the regional school for Harwinton and Burlington is named. He was a world authority on the Indians of eastern North America, and we students always managed to turn whatever conversation might have been ongoing to the subject of Indians, and we were never disappointed. As proof of his status on this subject, the eleventh edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, published in 1911, employed the foremost experts on all the topics in that publication, and they let them write whatever they wished, with no restrictions as to length. As a consequence, it is still considered to be the most comprehensive encyclopedia ever published in English. Mills authored the entry on the Indians of eastern North America, and as he was a very open and friendly man, I'm sure that his prints would have been on that particular theme.

On the back page of the program, as I have already stated, is a poem obviously written for the graduation ceremonies. The authors are listed as Ruth Moore, George Wolford and Doris Webb, and there is a notation that it had been spoken by Doris Webb at the town contest and at New Hartford. Doris will be remembered by many as the wife of Porter Griffin, Sr., for many years chief of the Winsted Fire Department.

The Story Grandfather Told Me

Grandfather sat by the fire one night,
And told me a story by electric light;

He told me how people lived long ago,
And I shall repeat it, if you'd like to know.

The settler lived in a rude-built hut,
At night his door was tightly shut;
He used oiled paper to admit the light,
And closed huge shutters every night.

There were few windows made of glass,
And the roofs were thatched with grass;
Fire was started with flint and steel,
By it, the woman cooked their meal.

The children were so clean and neat,
And wore rude shoes upon their feet;
Boys wore long pants and large white shirts,
And the girls wore long skirts.

To church on Sundays the settlers went,
If not, someone for them was sent;
The sermons were always very long,
And one-half hour was saved for song.

The colonial people raised corn and peas,
And through the years they lived on these;
They caught deer and also fished,
And hunted turkeys when they wished.

The hills and forests teemed with game,
To kill these it seemed a shame;
But this is all they had to eat,
And best of all they liked deer meat.

And that, my friends, is what he said,
But now it's time we went to bed;
We'll hear some more some other night,
Out on the farm by firelight.

Historic Bytes

Bob Grigg