

## Lessons From an 1825 Spelling Book

The Colebrook Historical Society is justifiably proud of its collection of vintage textbooks with which our children are instructed while attending the Rock School. One such volume is entitled “A Just Standard for Pronouncing the English Language” by Lyman Cobb, printed in Ithaca, N. Y. July 4, 1825.

Cobb was a well-known and greatly respected educator of his day. His book, which we will take a glance at today, is an example of the early evolution of the dictionary. We tell our students that when they honor the memory of teachers who have had a great influence on their lives, they should include Lyman Cobb, not only because of the text books he left us, but because it was he who pioneered the movement to abolish corporal punishment in schools. Today Colebrook students see the humor in the “whipping stick” made from a branch of black locust, thorns and all, which sits on the teacher’s desk. Humans love to embellish the truth, and learn to do so at an early age, therefore the frightful switch is what a student of 160 years ago might have described to a parent, while in reality, it was a hickory stick with which the teacher corrected him or her. The innocent-looking hickory could have been a devastating instrument in the hands of an insensitive, or worse yet, sadistic instructor. At any rate, hickory sticks and other forms of physical abuse are now relegated to museums such as the Rock School, thanks in part to the efforts of Lyman Cobb.

Throughout this 1825 book there are scattered sayings and parables, which are just as readily identifiable today as they were nearly 190 years ago. As you read these, note the vocabulary and the use of multisyllabic words. Another of Cobb’s teaching philosophies was never to talk down to young people. The purpose of an education was to learn, and in those days when the majority of youth didn’t pursue an education past the age of 16, it was vitally important that a well-rounded curriculum be implemented from the very beginning, and the use of short, simplistic words had no place in the classroom.

Here then are some of the “fillers” scattered throughout this 168-page spelling book:

“If men praise your efforts, suspect their judgment; if they censure them, your own.”

“We ask advice, but we mean approbation.”

“If you are under obligations to many, it is prudent to postpone the recompensing of one, until it shall be in your power to remunerate all, otherwise you will make more enemies by what you give, than by what you withhold.”

“If rich, it is easy enough to conceal our wealth; but, if poor, it is not quite so easy to conceal our poverty. We shall find that it is less difficult to hide a thousand guineas than one hole in our coat.” [A guinea was a British gold coin worth 21 shillings, or about \$7.00. The term “Guinea” referred to the origin of the gold, which came from the region of West Africa known as the Guinea Coast.]

“He that can please nobody is not so much to be pitied, as he that nobody can please.”

“None are so fond of secrets as those who do not intend to keep them; such persons covet secrets, as a spendthrift covets money, for the purpose of circulation.”

“We hate some persons because we do not know them; and we will not know them, because we hate them.”

“Ignorance is a blank sheet, on which we may write; but error is a scribbled one, on which we must first erase. Error, when she retraces her footsteps, has farther to go before she can arrive at the truth, than ignorance. How necessary, then, to obtain knowledge, to discard error, and to dispel ignorance.”

“The friendships of mankind can subsist no longer than interest cements them together.”

“A good book is like a good friend, it will teach us good things; but bad books are like bad men, they will teach us wrong things, and lead us to sin and death.”

“If we lead a good life, we shall have no reason to fear death; but if our ways be bad, we must change them, or our end will be miserable.”

“Our whole life is made up of hours, days, months and years; and if we wish the whole to be good, we must see that each part is good, and then our end will be happy.”

“Men are born with two eyes, but with one tongue, in order that they should see twice as much as they say.”

“There are some men whose enemies are to be pitied much, and their friends more.”

“The excesses of our youth are draughts upon our old age, payable with interest, about thirty years after date.”

“The sweetest revenge is to do good to our enemies. By taking revenge, a man is but even with his enemy; but in passing it over, he is superior to him.”

“Were the life of man prolonged, he would become such a proficient in villainy, that it would be necessary to drown the world again, or to burn it.”

The members of the third grade of the Colebrook Consolidated School have just completed another “Rock School Day”, where the students relived a day in the mid-nineteenth century, part of which consisted of reading from vintage books such as Lyman Cobb’s text, and observing, rather than experiencing the sting of whips and switches, and where wearing the dunce cap is a desirable result of the learning process.

Poor Mrs. Manulla had a difficult time finding excuses for relegating students to the “dunce’s stool”; when asked if there was anyone who had not had a chance to wear the cap, one girl in the back of the room put her hand up, and after a few moments of determined observation, she noticed that the girl had accidentally dropped an ink blotter on the floor. This heinous crime was judged punishable for a session in the dunce’s chair, and finally everyone was happy!

Probably it is my age that makes me feel comfortable researching old books and documents, while at the same time having concerns about today’s methods of storing information. I am writing this on my computer, and every now and then “save it” to the hard drive, but for how long; will someone 180 years from now be able to read these words?

**Historic Bytes**

Bob Grigg