

EDWARD AUSTIN SHELDON: A SILENT AMERICAN GIANT AND FRIEND TO
CHILDREN

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Introduction

The time that produced Edward Austin Sheldon shaped the contributions and significance of this incredibly dynamic educator. He was an extraordinarily influential educator who shaped the American classroom and the professional training of teachers. The realities of his time and place shaped and motivated the aspects of what would become the Oswego Movement and the notions of practice or student teaching. These training elements eventually became universally practiced elements of teacher training across the United States.

The societal and cultural shifts of the mid-nineteenth century influenced the formation of both the Oswego Normal School and its teacher-training program. With the rise of the industrial age, the agrarian tradition of the United States was altered and would continue to be affected for the remainder of the century. One of the effects of industrialization was the formation of the middle class. Chapter one focuses on the emergence of the middle class and its values. Such a formation brought with it new class values in education and the professionalization of teachers. This newly forming middle class wanted public education and placed importance on learning for young people. As public education grew, the need for quality teachers also grew.

Edward Austin Sheldon was one individual who played a role in the public education movement. Chapter two examines critical events that shaped Sheldon. Sheldon established the Oswego Normal School as a means of supporting the growing need for quality educators. He believed that the use of Pestalozzian principles and teachers' use of such practices would excite learning. He created a practice school in Oswego to promote its development. Additionally, the middle class mindset of the nineteenth century promoted the notions of professionalization. The work of Sheldon coupled both the values of public education and the notions of

professionalization within the field of teaching. Just as other professionals required education, training and practice, Sheldon added education to these elements of professional training.

Within this exciting new world of public education and teacher training, Oswego became the place for young teachers to go and hone their craft in shaping young minds. The excitement that Sheldon's institution generated led many of his protégés to go forward and spread the Gospel of Sheldon to the rest of the nation and to other parts of the world. Chapter three investigates some of these personalities and the role they played in the development and expansion of the Oswego Movement. These graduates went on not only to schoolhouses across the country, but also to a number of normal schools. As one studies these individuals, one gains an understanding to the depth of Sheldon's influence.

In the fourth chapter, the focus shifts to the lasting legacy of Sheldon. The fact that so many places sought out the employment of Sheldon's instructors further emphasized the notion that his ideology and practices were widely embraced by the people and communities of the time. Such methods also caught the attention of the New York State legislature. It was not long before the largest and most powerful state in the union required almost all the normal schools of the state to use the methodology of Sheldon in their institutions as well. As one examines the life of Sheldon and investigates these various elements, it becomes clear that Edward Austin Sheldon was enormously instrumental in the public education movement of the United States.

Chapter 2: Edward Austin Sheldon – A Noble Life

Within the rise of the middle class and public education, many individuals worked to the expansion of schooling for American children. Certainly, individuals such as Horace Mann and Emma Willard were part of the early dialogue regarding public education. One could further examine the work of Catherine Beecher or historically black colleges to further assess the development of public education. In New York, Edward Austin Sheldon played a prominent role in the development of public education and the professional training of its educators.

The values that Borrowman conveys as part of Mann's way of thinking, most notably the development of the individual, were also possessed and encouraged by Edward Austin Sheldon. Sheldon was born in Wyoming County in upstate New York on October 4, 1823. He went to college at Hamilton but left following his junior year.¹ Four events or experiences played a significant role in the mindset of Sheldon. His time as the Superintendent of Syracuse, his trip to Toronto (where he learned about and embraced the notions of Pestalozzi), his experiences at the Ragged School, and the development of the normal school contributed significantly to the shaping of this pioneering educator. Each of these experiences, coupled with Victorian ideals of morality and hierarchy, made Sheldon. They represented not only formative and perhaps transformational events in his life, but are also symbolic of enormous shifts that were occurring in the American society of the day.

¹ Mary Sheldon Barnes, ed., *The Autobiography of Edward Austin Sheldon* (New York: Ives-Butler, 1911), 1 & 61. Sheldon worked on his autobiography toward the end of his life. After his passing, Mary Sheldon Barnes, his daughter, completed the work and incorporated letters and other items into the final version. Elements are seen in the twenty-fifth annual of the college.

I argue that Sheldon was a man who was ahead of his time, both in philosophy and social conventions. These progressive ideals had a profoundly positive influence on the establishment of Oswego Normal and Training School. His disposition towards teaching as well as his attitudes towards immigrants and the training of future educators drew other progressive-minded individuals to the shores of Lake Ontario and led to the establishment of Oswego as a national and international leader within the field of education for the rest of the nineteenth century. Its influence also shaped the development of normal schools and the expansion of public education across the state. The statue of Sheldon that sits in front of the hall at SUNY Oswego named in his honor symbolizes his influence. To quote the *Syracuse Post Standard*, “How influential was Edward Austin Sheldon? He was so well thought of around Arbor Day 1898; some 200,000 students from more than 3,000 schools gave penny donations to help create a bronze statue.”² That statue was unveiled in Empire Plaza by the federal education commissioner in the presence of Governor Theodore Roosevelt. The plaque on it reminds all those who gaze upon it of the significant contributions that Edward Austin Sheldon made to the education of the children of this state.³

A careful analysis of each of these experiences will clarify the significance each had on Sheldon. In his 1911 introduction to Sheldon’s autobiography, Andrew S. Draper, former Superintendent of Public Instruction, offers the reader some insights into the significance of Sheldon. He explained:

An educational philosophy, which came from his nature, his experiences, and his study, was enforced by his steadiness and his firmness, by his manner of

² Debra J. Bloom, “SUNY Oswego founder Edward Austin Sheldon commemorated with statue’ Oswego timeline,” *The Post Standard*, August 28, 2011, News Section. Accessed by the research on December 4, 2011 at 12:40 PM.

³ Bloom, “SUNY Oswego founder.”

preaching, and by practicing what he preached, until it gave the Oswego Normal School a distinctive character In the country; until it came to be discussed in all the educational conventions for a generation; and until it was clearly felt in all the schoolrooms in the land.⁴

Sheldon's influence on the "classrooms of the land" originated in his work at the Ragged School.

The Ragged School

Much of Sheldon's insight developed from his work with the Ragged School in the late 1840s. Oswego's Ragged School was an institution designed to educate 120 rude and untrained Irish boys. Sheldon saw young men (ages five to 21) on the verge of delinquency who, without support and education, would likely become Oswego's future criminals.

In 1848-49, the inquisitive Sheldon began investigating the "condition of the poorer people in the city of Oswego."⁵ He found some troubling situations and realized Oswego had a significant problem. Sheldon explains, "Greatly to my surprise, I found fifteen hundred persons who could neither read nor write... To me it seemed like being in the midst of heathendom."⁶ Sheldon was not the type of person to sit back and let such ignorance persist; throughout his work, he expressed an almost religious zeal in describing his efforts to bring learning to those who were lacking. He began working with other community leaders to

⁴ Andrew S. Draper, "Introduction" to *The Autobiography of Edward Austin Sheldon* in Mary Sheldon Barnes, x-xi.

⁵ Mary Sheldon Barnes, ed., *The Autobiography of Edward Austin Sheldon*, 74. When examining his words, it is important to keep in mind his language is a product of the Victorian Age, the post-civil war age, and of course the industrial and imperialistic ages. The times that produced Sheldon and his way of thinking are reflective in his word usage and may not translate well for some "modern" thinkers or individuals with a politically correct-minded agenda. It is in contextualizing Sheldon and his times, which one may hope to gain an understanding of the incredible influence that he garnered.

⁶ Mary Sheldon Barnes, ed., *The Autobiography of Edward Austin Sheldon*, 74. I am intrigued by this use of heathendom. To the best of my knowledge, he was never exposed to what people of his time may have thought of as part of "heathendom," yet he equates it to the notions of ignorance that he saw in the outskirts of the city of Oswego.

address the woes of the poorer classes. By the end of November 1848, the Orphan and Free School Association was created.⁷ In a letter to his sister, Sheldon reveals his level of compassion and commitment to the needs of the community. In a time prior to government support, the letter suggests the need for “good families” to assist poorer families by providing clothing and books for the children. He also mentions that students were to receive instruction in both academic and moral matters.⁸ The notion that such needs would come through the charity of the “good families” is representative of the mid nineteenth century mind.

Nineteenth century American society shaped Sheldon’s worldview. Oswego in the middle of the nineteenth century was like many other communities within the antebellum North. Agriculture, manufacturing, and an influx of immigrants seemed to influence the political landscape of the city and surrounding communities. The dynamism of an incredibly gifted and visionary educational reformer played a decisive factor in the region’s as well as the state’s history of public education. This dynamic personality served as a magnet for other like-minded visionaries who made Oswego a hot bed of education and a leader in the expansion of public education for the remainder of the century. A reformer attempting to purify nineteenth century America dominated the region. Central and Western New York were home to utopian societies as well as communities on and in the fringe of the “Burnt-Over District.” These dynamics also played a role in the moralistic notions of individuals like Sheldon. Even in his early involvement, with the Ragged School, Sheldon was informative about those individual with whom he worked.

⁷ Mary Sheldon Barnes, ed., *The Autobiography of Edward Austin Sheldon*, 74-75.

⁸ Mary Sheldon Barnes, ed., *The Autobiography of Edward Austin Sheldon*, 75.

The concept of mass education many have been foreign to many, but was gaining acceptance with the efforts of pioneers such as Sheldon. Sheldon conveys this challenge, “That is all new business to them; they want a good deal of training; and they will get it if I have to do with them long. It is no dishonor to be in a good cause.”⁹ The Oswego Normal and Training School and the Oswego City School District were outgrowths of what Sheldon continually calls his “missionary work.” Sheldon’s personality and drive shaped the institutions he oversaw in Oswego. Both are also the outgrowth of his interest in Pestalozzian theory. This emphasis on student center inquiry meant the need to train teachers in a fundamentally different teaching strategy than was common to this point.¹⁰ The emphasis was on the creation and implementation of lessons, and required young teachers to practice and receive critiques from educators familiar with the elements of Pestalozzi. These practices were further enhanced through the creation of the campus school. This practice teaching with criticism was revolutionary and became universally implemented in education programs around the nation.

To assess those contributions, one must first look at Sheldon’s views, achievements, challenges, and the tensions that engaged him. Sheldon was a controversial figure influenced by a number of factors such as immigration and the nativist response, the emergence of a middle class and the values that accompanied it, and the expansion of public education. Views of how and who to educate also influenced the political agenda of the day. For his endeavors to educate Oswego’s illiterate, Sheldon gained some attention. Clearly, he was troubled by

⁹ Mary Sheldon Barnes, ed., *The Autobiography of Edward Austin Sheldon*, 76.

¹⁰ The notion of Pestalozzian practice is a student centered, inquiry-based model. The use of the term “student-centered” would not have been used during the time, but this modern term certainly conveys the central theme of the practice.

what he saw and with his strong moral conviction, believed it was his missionary work to help lift this sorry lot from the tenements. He considered the sad state of affairs and declared, “There are hundreds of children in this city as ignorant and depraved as the children of India or China. Two or three missionaries might be constantly employed with profit here.”¹¹

Superintendent of Syracuse Public Schools

Sheldon’s work in Oswego earned him both a reputation and a job offer from the Syracuse Public Schools. That attention led to him taking the job of superintendent of the Syracuse City School District. He served in that position from 1851 to 1853. This placement should intrigue someone who is attempting to gain insight into Sheldon. First, one may be struck by the fact that, after the fact, he referred to his time in Syracuse as a digression. One might contend that it is not the misstep that he believed it to be. Perhaps Sheldon refers to this time away from Oswego as a diversion because Oswego seems to be where Sheldon’s heart was. He tells the reader as much when he states, “...and accordingly I returned to my first love.”¹² In his later self-assessment, recounted in his autobiography, the two-year hiatus was a digression from his missionary zeal and pioneering endeavors. Alternatively, Oswego offered him an opportunity to create and shape a system and a level of control that simply did not exist within the position of superintendent of Syracuse. Sheldon’s two years in the Salt City could be considered time well spent in supporting his development as an administrator. The enhancement of his administrative skills served him well for the remainder of his life.

¹¹ Mary Sheldon Barnes, ed., *The Autobiography of Edward Austin Sheldon*, 76. One might contend that he sees his work as no different as that of Livingstone half a world way in Africa. This concept may require an additional examination of the Evolutionists. Such an investigation may lead a scholar to see that Sheldon may have shared some similarity with John Dewey another educator.

¹² Mary Sheldon Barnes, ed., *The Autobiography of Edward Austin Sheldon*, 94.

Sheldon explains, “I had been in Syracuse two years, ... [I] had accomplished something in the way of improving the classification and graduation of the schools, had put in operation a library system for the public and the schools, with a central library as the nucleus.”¹³ Sheldon worked with the community in the organizing of a public library system would have been quite complimentary to the emergence of the freshly formed public schools in the early 1850s. This advancement hardly seems to be a true digression unless Sheldon was romanticizing his feeling about his former community and longing to return to it. As he reflects on his accomplishments in Syracuse, Sheldon continues, “I had published, in pamphlet form, the first annual report [for the SCSD] that had been issued, in which I set forth very fully the utility of a High School as a keystone to the existing system of public schools, by which I had succeeded in awakening a deep interest in this subject.”¹⁴ George W. Fowler provides further evidence in understanding Sheldon’s efforts to establish a comprehensive high school.¹⁵ “Dr. Sheldon led the fight that resulted in the introduction of a high school into the curriculum (1855). The opposition strongly objected to a tax-supported high school – intrusion into the field of higher education, said the opposition.”¹⁶

Sheldon completes his commentaries mentioning some of his administrative achievements. He explains, “I had done much to improve the buildings and grounds, had put into operation a system of evening schools.”¹⁷ These comments suggest a focus that he would

¹³ Mary Sheldon Barnes, ed., *The Autobiography of Edward Austin Sheldon*, 93.

¹⁴ Mary Sheldon Barnes, ed., *The Autobiography of Edward Austin Sheldon*, 93.

¹⁵ George W. Fowler was a prominent educator who taught in the Syracuse Public Schools for four decades. He taught chemistry and physics at Central High School and later served as the district’s supervisor of science. His long time service and contributions to the school district led to a high school being named after him in the 1970s.

¹⁶ George W. Fowler, *The First 120 Years: An Historical Narrative of the Syracuse Public Schools* (Syracuse, Syracuse City School District, 1969), 167.

¹⁷ Mary Sheldon Barnes, ed., *The Autobiography of Edward Austin Sheldon*, 93.

revisit as an educational leader in the Oswego School District and the Oswego Normal School. Examination of this account of a temporary digression seems to suggest that his departure from Oswego afforded him the opportunity to enhance his talents and skills and develop a new skill set as an educational leader and reformer.

Return to Oswego and Educational Research

After a two-year sojourn in Syracuse, he returned to resume leadership within the Oswego City Schools. This opportunity in Oswego to reorganize the schools into a new model led him toward a path of teacher training and a philosophy to achieve it. Sheldon struggled with the board in Syracuse and desired to return to Oswego. This decision and the events in Oswego from the 1850s until his death in 1897 are the focus of this portion of the investigation. The search for some understanding of Sheldon, the Ragged School, and his experiences in Syracuse leads one back to Oswego and the work that Sheldon had left when he went to Syracuse. His digression now over, Sheldon returned to his beloved Oswego and to the education of children and the training of teachers.

Sheldon needed a philosophy or worldview of how to teach children. One can hardly teach young people without a driving philosophy and sound training. To this end, one must study two other aspects of Sheldon's life to gain a firmer understanding of him. He saw schools as institutions that became ever changing and exciting only when there was a vision that guides this metamorphosis. He was concerned about a lack of energy and dynamism in the classrooms of his schools. Within his autobiography, he explains the importance of a guiding vision. He explains, in reference to organization in general, "It was not a living organism. This I felt strongly. However, exactly how to go to work to remedy this defect I did not know. I

realized that our work was too formal, too much of a memorizing process. I wanted something that would wake up the pupils, set them to thinking, observing, and reasoning.”¹⁸ Familiarity with Sheldon and his work informs one that this guiding principle was “object learning.” By the late 1850s, Sheldon was not quite aware of this.

During the late 1850s, Sheldon became increasingly concerned about the classroom dynamics that he was witnessing in Oswego. Upon reflection and continued learning, Sheldon found the answer for his classrooms’ lack of vitality and energy. In 1859, Sheldon began his service as the Superintendent of Schools in Oswego and began touring a town or two with a reputation for having good schools. This led him to Toronto and yet another transformative experience. “Here I found, greatly to my surprise,” he explains, “what I did not know existed anywhere – collections of objects pictures, charts, books for teachers, giving full directions as to the use of this material.”¹⁹ One may note that he makes mention of directions for teachers. It seems as if this part of his commentary about his trip to Toronto may have been shaped by his early experiences at the Ragged School. The Oswego Normal School would eventually provide training in this area. This Toronto visit led him to embrace a new way of teaching. As Sheldon put it, “I invested three hundred dollars in these pictures, objects and books, and hastened home a happier man than I went. I was not long in making out a new course of study for my Primary schools, introducing a complete course of object work...”²⁰ His goal was to introduce these methods and techniques to his teachers and his classrooms, but the impact

¹⁸ Mary Sheldon Barnes, ed., *The Autobiography of Edward Austin Sheldon*, 116.

¹⁹ Mary Sheldon Barnes, ed., *The Autobiography of Edward Austin Sheldon*, 117.

²⁰ Mary Sheldon Barnes, ed., *The Autobiography of Edward Austin Sheldon*, 117.

would be much greater. It would lead to him creating an institution designed to address the instruction of teachers.

A closer examination of “direct object learning” and its initial developer – Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi – is of great value to understanding Sheldon. As dynamic and innovative as Sheldon may have been, his focus within education clearly placed him as Pestalozzian. Barbara Ruth Peltzman described many pioneers of early childhood education. According to Peltzman, “Pestalozzi believed in individual differences and in extending educational opportunity to girls and the poor based on a belief that education should not be denied to anyone.”²¹ From Sheldon’s previous words regarding the Ragged School, it is easy to see a connection between his thinking and that of Pestalozzi. The appeal to Sheldon went beyond the notion that no child should be prohibited from an education, or the Pestalozzian view of “object learning.” Peltzman explains, “[Pestalozzi] used real objects and object lessons to children discover language, concepts, and numbers based on children’s activities.”²² Educator Jennifer Wolf offers her readers more insights into what Pestalozzi promoted in his education theories as well as his importance within the history of education. “Pestalozzi was one of the first theorists to develop instructional methods that could be used directly in the classroom.”²³ She also offers her reader additional understanding of object learning, explaining what Pestalozzi saw as significant about objects and why they should be utilized in educating children: “He believed that the best way to learn many concepts was through manipulative experiences, such as counting, measuring, and touching. Children needed to be exposed to

²¹ Barbara Ruth Peltzman, *Pioneers of Early Childhood Education: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998), 91.

²² Peltzman, *Pioneers of Early Childhood Education*, 91.

²³ Jennifer Wolf, *Learning from the Past, Historical Voices in Early Childhood Education* (Mayerthorpe, Alberta: Piney Branch Press), 64

objects that had the essential characteristics of the class to which the object belonged.”²⁴

Sheldon’s autobiography depicts his enthrallment by Pestalozzian theory.

Sheldon’s implementation of these practices had a significant impact on American educational history. He must have realized the influence that this student centered approach was having on education during the late nineteenth century. He states, “A new era had come to our public schools. Important changes were being inaugurated that were destined to revolutionize methods of teaching not only in Oswego, but in the whole country.”²⁵ One of the more progressive aspects of this system seems to be in the acknowledgement that all children learn differently. That is to say, children learn at different rates and find the truth from defining the world from within. As Sheldon explains, “The system is founded on the principle, ‘That, as the different faculties of children are developed at different periods, care should be taken to adapt their lessons to the state of their minds, in order that all the faculties may be called out in right order.’”²⁶ Such thinking within the system acknowledges that learners are to be geared toward a common goal, despite the fact these students were in different developmental places. That differentiation is designed to pull all learners to the common objective that the course curriculum is set up to achieve.

Oswego Normal School

The object system of learning he promoted led many teachers to come to the new training school in Oswego to study it. These young teachers, grounded firmly in the Oswego Method, became followers of Sheldon and his teaching principles. The influence of these

²⁴ Wolf, *Learning from the Past*, 64.

²⁵ Mary Sheldon Barnes, ed., *The Autobiography of Edward Austin Sheldon*, 117-118.

²⁶ Mary Sheldon Barnes, ed., *The Autobiography of Edward Austin Sheldon*, 119.

disciples will be examined more closely in the next chapter. Wolf elaborates on this connection and the influence it would have on the United States. “Object lessons became the focus of the Oswego Normal School in 1861,” she states, “and this marked a turning point in the influence of Pestalozzi’s ideas across the United States.”²⁷ Once they had gained experience, Oswego graduates often brought these new methods to their communities, thereby furthering its use. State and national education conventions studying and supporting the effectiveness of the Oswego Method aided greatly in the spreading of this method. Sheldon realized that he needed to develop a new institution that could professionally train these teachers for other communities. “I found, however, before long that I was preparing teachers for other schools. As soon as they were well trained into their work, they received invitation to go elsewhere at salaries in advance of what our board would give.”²⁸ This demonstrated that the techniques and training at Oswego were highly valued and those words of its success inspired other communities to enhance the educational opportunities offered to their students.

Sheldon was the superintendent of Oswego schools and the President of the Normal School for several years. One can only surmise what his days were like or how he was able to delegate responsibilities. Sheldon’s ability to navigate both leadership positions is a rather overwhelming proposition to consider. The techniques that he promoted and developed were effective and were sought after by other communities. As Sheldon describes the situation, “At one time, nine of my best teachers were away from me. This was very discouraging, as it thus became necessary for me to be continually training new teachers. I proposed to the board that we should establish a city training school for the training of primary teachers.”²⁹ Such a

²⁷ Wolf, *Learning from the Past*, 71.

²⁸ Mary Sheldon Barnes, ed., *The Autobiography of Edward Austin Sheldon*, 133.

²⁹ Mary Sheldon Barnes, ed., *The Autobiography of Edward Austin Sheldon*, 135.

situation made Sheldon's resolution simple. He opted, after nearly a decade, to step down from the superintendent position and began to focus exclusively on the training of teachers. He did not step down from the superintendent position at that time. It was in this climate that Sheldon created the Oswego Normal and Training School.

The expansion of higher education was by no means limited to the growth of normal schools in the second half of the nineteenth century. Two federal acts played dominant roles in the development of higher education in the United States. As historians David Kennedy and Elizabeth Cohen explain, "The truly phenomenal growth of higher education owed much to the Morrill Act of 1862. This enlightened law provided a generous grant of public lands to the states for the support of education."³⁰ This legislation led to the formation of many state universities. The Hatch Act of 1887 further supported the proliferation of higher education institutions. As Kennedy and Cohen stated, "The Hatch Act of 1887, extending the Morrill Act, provided federal funds for the establishment of agricultural experiment stations in connection with the land-grant colleges."³¹ These two laws led to a tremendous upswing in students graduating from college. The growth of land-grant colleges and normal schools are depicted in the numbers of colleges and the number of high school graduates. The growth of normal schools also corresponds to the enormous increase in students graduating from high school.

Kennedy and Cohen depict the expansion of students graduating from high school and college utilizing information in the *Digest of Education Statistics*.³² Their charting of these

³⁰ David M. Kennedy and Elizabeth Cohen, *The American Pageant: A History of the American People* (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2013), 555.

³¹ Kennedy and Cohen, *The American Pageant*, 555.

³² Kennedy and Cohen, *The American Pageant*, 556.

statistics suggests that education became a national priority at the time of Sheldon.³³ From 1870 to 1940, the number of students graduating from college increased twenty-fold. In 1870, 16,000 Americans graduated from high school. These statistics strongly suggest that public education was expanding at a rapid rate in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. With such growth, it is clear that the professional training of teachers should have been of foremost concern. It is at the heart of this growth that the Oswego Normal School and Sheldon engaged the nation in the question not only of teacher training, but of also the way to best support student learning. For Sheldon, that answer was simple – Pestalozzian practice, which required the development of lesson plans and practice teaching.

There is little doubt that Sheldon was an extraordinary individual who profoundly changed American education by promoting the professionalization of teachers. He argued for the professional training of teachers. He was strongly influenced by Pestalozzi and his ideas, which forged the core of his educational pedagogy. To validate these concepts, he advanced a training school to support Pestalozzian methods being more effectively used in the classrooms. These methods required labor-intensive action by the classroom practitioner. After all, he was “substituting the teacher for the textbook.” It did not take long for Sheldon to realize the dynamic nature he had unleashed. Districts outside of Oswego began poaching his protégés. Ever the pragmatist, Sheldon realized the need to establish an institution dedicated to the training of teachers. To produce teachers who embodied these methods, his training program included practice teaching with criticism. This monumental advancement in the training of teachers is one of Sheldon’s great accomplishments in the field of education. These methods

³³ They state that the Digest of Education Statistics is “a publication of the Nation Center for Education Statistics; Abstract of the United States, relevant years.

and training strategies garnered much interest in the expanding arena of public education. Normal schools from around the nation clamored for Oswego graduates to understand better the practices that are now universally practiced in the United States. It is ironical that the man who introduced them has become obscured in the historical record.

Sheldon worked diligently and created the program that was being developed at the training school. In fact, he comments, “This was the first Teachers’ Training School ever organized in America. They are now to be found in nearly every populous city, but I have yet to learn that any radical improvement has been made on the ‘Oswego Training School.’”³⁴ In fact, this method of teaching was widely embraced at other normal schools. Wolf explains, “Though the ideas of Pestalozzi had been used in isolated areas in the United States, they now became the primary focus in most normal schools. As schools proliferated after the Civil War, teachers turned to the objects lesson as the key method of instruction.”³⁵

At this point, one may take exception with Sheldon as a matter of semantics. He claimed to be first because he refers to Oswego as a training school. Normal schools had already been established in Massachusetts. The truth of the matter is much simpler and will be explained more thoroughly in chapter three. To explain briefly, the Oswego Method of professional training of teachers through practice teaching with criticism (student teaching) became part of all normal schools. In fact, as will be explained with more detail, the New York State legislature passed a law extending the Oswego Method to all normal schools in the state, except the Albany Normal School. The reality is what Sheldon created is an innovation in the formal preparation of teachers. In more contemporary times, the educational community

³⁴ Mary Sheldon Barnes, ed., *The Autobiography of Edward Austin Sheldon*, 138.

³⁵ Wolf, *Learning from the Past*, 71.

refers to this practice as student teaching. The notion of practice teaching with criticism became an element of all normal schools over time. Novice teachers entering into the craft on a regular basis and all do the process of student teaching or almost all education programs consider this a matter of course. At the time that Sheldon assumed leadership of the Oswego Training School, it was revolutionary. As Barnes suggests, “The need for the “Training” school was recognized and acknowledged by leading educational men of day.”³⁶

Historical Sketches Relating to the First Quarter Century of the State Normal and Training School at Oswego, N.Y., explains the forces that seemed to drive the earliest years of Oswego’s development. The authors make it clear that mission and vision motivating the early work at the Oswego Normal School was object learning. “Something, it is true, is now being done in this direction and teachers in these departments have regular and daily exercises in object lessons.”³⁷ To this end, the committee reporting on the first quarter century of the college offers insight in to how object learning really works as a philosophy. “In the above plan of studies the object is not so much to impart information, as to educate the senses; arouse, quicken, and develop and awaken a spirit of inquiry. To this end, the pupils must be encouraged to do most of the talking and acting. They must be allowed to draw their own conclusions, and if wrong, led to correct them.”³⁸ Hence, the program of study at Oswego emphasized the significance of the methodology over the importance of content. Teachers were to facilitate and guide learning; they were not to be givers of knowledge. Rather, they were to support the student in the learning process to afford the student the opportunity to

³⁶ Mary Sheldon Barnes, ed., *The Autobiography of Edward Austin Sheldon* 138.

³⁷ State University College of Education, Oswego, *Historical Sketches State Normal & Training School at Oswego, N.Y., 1861-1886*, (Oswego: R.J.Oliphant, 1888), 4.

³⁸ State University College of Education, Oswego, *Historical Sketches*, 9.

perfect the process of learning, thereby becoming capable of life-long learning. In fact, the goal of creating life-long learners is perhaps the universally held goal for educators. It appears that Sheldon attempted to teach future educators how to fish rather than providing them with a fish. Further elaboration of these pedagogical ideals will be examined in chapter three.

One can see that the nineteenth century witnessed tremendous changes, including profound transformations in the way people lived. Industrialization brought changes to culture, voluntary organization and mass education. With the field of mass or public education, the efforts of Edward Austin Sheldon hold a special place. His notion that practice teaching was essential in becoming an effective teacher remains an invaluable aspect of teacher training today. This experiment in the “object system” not only led to the establishment of the Oswego Training School, which would eventually become Oswego State, but it also had a tremendous impact on the education of the children of the United States and other nations.

Chapter 3: The Men and Women Who Shaped the Oswego Normal and Training School and Spread the Gospel of Sheldon

The previous chapter focused on several elements that had a profound effect on Sheldon as a person and shaped the emerging middle-class society of the mid and late nineteenth century United States. However, another area of interest is the people Sheldon surrounded himself with at the Oswego Normal and Training School. As is the case with many successful individuals, it appears that the cast of characters that Sheldon brought together along the shores of Lake Ontario were outstanding. They were like-minded in their views of teaching children in a student-centered model. The values of the emerging middle class in the latter half of the nineteenth century held sway with their thinking and development as well. These forces and the compatible collection of individuals created a dynamic institution that shaped American education in the late nineteenth century and in subsequent generations. The pedagogy shaped the training of future educators in what became known as the Oswego Method. The men and women who learned this way of teaching children left the shores of the lake and founded institutions that promoted the same agenda.

Reviewing the historical sketches of the first quarter century of the Oswego Normal and Training School can provide an understanding of the individuals who helped to shape and were shaped by the institution. The Oswego Normal and Training School generated a quarter century retrospective for each of the 25-year periods up to 1986.³⁹ An investigation of these individuals will allow the scholar to determine not just the development at Oswego, but how and where these men and women went to spread further the model. In addition to providing

³⁹ The Oswego Normal and Training School is now known as SUNY Oswego. For the sake of ease, from here on out, the institution shall be referred to at the Oswego Normal School.

information regarding “object learning,” this volume also includes many letters and sources that inform the Oswego and Sheldon scholar about the individuals who energized the lakefront school. These include an introductory letter for Sheldon and information concerning the men and women who served the college during its early history, such as Herman Krusi, Mary V. Lee, Mrs. M.E.M Jones, and several others who offer insights into the influence of the Oswego Normal School. These individuals were instrumental in the formation of the college. This volume of historical sketches also contains short biographical essays of several other key individuals of the early college. An evaluation of these prominent personalities may help the researcher glean a better understanding of Sheldon and the institution that he forged. While the list of individuals is not inclusive of every individual who influenced the Oswego Normal School or countless other teaching training programs, it is an indicator of both the range and type of person who was guiding the formation of the Oswego Normal School.

It is also of note that *Historical Sketches* included a brief biography of Sheldon himself. To put it into context, at this point – 1886 - he had been running the normal school for a quarter of a century, with the exception of the two years he spent recovering from fatigue. Such a length of service may have shaped the sentimentality of the biography by those who prepared the publication. In a review of its content, much of it seems to be an abbreviated version of the content contained within his autobiography. In some ways, that can hardly be surprising as Mary Sheldon Barnes wrote this Sheldon’s biographical sketch. She spent several years editing Sheldon’s autobiography following his death in 1897. This particular biographical sketch offers the researcher some insights into what individuals who engaged with Sheldon may have felt about him and provides a sense of the growing prominence of the Oswego Normal School. The development of lesson plans was clearly one of the focal points of

Sheldon's attention in his work at Oswego. As Barnes explained, "The whole program was worked out with such attention to detail that the work of every hour, in every grade, was printed in black and white. But a partial difficulty instantly arose, and the question was asked on every side, 'How shall we teach these things?'"⁴⁰

In the volume, one learns that a historical debate of the Oswego Method occurred as to whether or not such a way of teaching was appropriate and advantageous to student learning.

As Barnes explained:

It must not be imagined, however, that the results were obtained without encountering healthy opposition; in the New York State Education Convention of 1862, and in the National Education Convention of 1864, the whole system was very severely attacked from philosophical standpoints by Dr. Wilbur, superintendent of the State Idiot Asylum (in other writings it is referred to as the State Asylum of Imbeciles), a man everywhere noted for the successful training of the unfortunates.⁴¹

Many academics of the day, including many prominent individuals within the field of education, expressed their support for this new method of instruction and rallied around the teaching methods promoted at Oswego. Wilbur's criticisms led to further study of the "Oswego Method." Wilbur expressed his concerns about Sheldon's work to educational organizations. In 1865, Wilbur submitted an article to *The American Journal of Education*, expressing his distress over the methodology that Sheldon was using. Wilbur was concerned that these ideas originated in other countries and were being promoted by foreigners. He was troubled about "foreign ideas" influencing the national education of the New York State. He stated, "Besides in the State of New York legislation has been successfully invoked to establish

⁴⁰ State University College of Education, Oswego, *Historical Sketches State Normal & Training School Oswego N.Y., 1861-1888*, (Oswego: R.J. Oliphant, 1888), 139.

⁴¹ State University College of Education, Oswego, *Historical Sketches*, 139-140.

a school for training teachers in the methods of foreign school society – of dubious reputation at home – outside of its Normal School...”⁴²

The National Teachers’ Association examined Wilbur’s concerns and formed a committee to determine the appropriateness of these new and increasingly sought after techniques emphasized by Sheldon and his protégés. “The chairman of this committee, Prof. Greene of Brown University, after visiting our schools and testing the results as thoroughly and impartially as possible, made a report before the National Convention of 1865 so intelligent, exhaustive and favorable, that it was accepted as final, and since that time the underlying principles of the Oswego Methods have met serious opposition or discussion in any authoritative body.”⁴³

Perhaps the most telling quality Sheldon and the people who joined him at the Oswego Normal School demonstrated was a sense of loyalty held among them. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Sheldon left Hamilton College following his junior year in 1847, apparently a victim of exhaustion. Sheldon seemed to have suffered from another bout of exhaustion in 1879. Whether these episodes were primarily physical, emotional, or a combination of the two is a matter of conjecture. Sheldon assembled a staff that was devoted and loyal to him. As Barnes explained, “...it was then that strong friendships came forward to sustain him: the Normal School Board would accept but a temporary resignation, and insisted upon continuing his salary; his faculty hard-working as they always were, generously divided his work among themselves, in order that he still might keep his place...”⁴⁴ This reality enlightens the scholar

⁴² Wilbur, H.B., “Object System of Instruction: As Practiced in the Schools of Oswego,” in *The American Journal of Education XV*, new series vo. V (1865): 190.

⁴³ State University College of education, Oswego, *Historical Sketches*, 140.

⁴⁴ State University College of education, Oswego, *Historical Sketches*, 143.

about the mystique that seemed to surround Sheldon. His writings and work leave a limited understanding of his personality. He appears to be an honorable man who viewed the education of young immigrant children as his life's calling and much of his object lesson work incorporated his sense of morality that he believed should be extended to all in the general uplift of the fringe of society. His views suggest that he had a paternalistic view toward the lower classes of society. One can see this attitude in the first article of the Association that oversaw the Ragged School. "The object of this association shall be the intellectual and moral education and improvement of such poor and orphaned in this city as are not otherwise provided for in these respects."⁴⁵ His affiliation with this association reflected those values. One can also observe this in his writings. In 1870, Sheldon addressed the assembly of the National Teachers' Association on "What is the Proper Work of a Primary School?" He stated, "In its broadest sense it comprises all the influences that go to develop the human being. These agencies begin their work at birth and their unceasing activities until death."⁴⁶ Such an outlook on public schools and the nature of the individual is a testament to the character of Sheldon and demonstrates his commitment to learning and his faith in the general trajectory of the whole of humanity.

Such a positive view of the human spirit and his dynamic personality seems to have been a draw for other people. If not inspired by Sheldon's worldview, certainly many would-be educators may well have been motivated by his ideas of what schools and teachers were to promote. As he stated, "We must take care to stimulate that curiosity and love of novelty so

⁴⁵ Mary Sheldon Barnes, ed., *The Autobiography of Edward Austin Sheldon*, 77.

⁴⁶ Edward Austin Sheldon, "What is the Proper Work of a Primary School?" *National Teachers' Association Journal* (1870):751.

wisely implanted in the infant mind, and see that the senses perform their appointed task in imprinting correct impressions of the outward world.”⁴⁷

To what end are Sheldon’s expressed values representative of his time and in what ways are they revolutionary? One may turn in two specific directions to assess this nature and hence his sway over others. First, what does his creation of Free Public Schools in Oswego suggest about his worldview? To assess this aspect of Sheldon’s effort, the work of Michael Ruddy at the University of Buffalo offers an analysis. Second, one may wish to compare his views with those of another promoter of public education – Horace Mann. In assessing these elements, we may better understand Sheldon and those who were drawn to him and his work. Their zealous discipleship of Sheldon’s gospel changed American education forever.

Ruddy examines the mindset of Sheldon as it related to the creation of the City of Oswego Free Public Schools. One may be inclined to accept some of his premises, while questioning or rejecting some of his conclusions. Ruddy states:

Sheldon was a product of the [Second] Great Awakening. His zealousness embraced the complex and often contradictory elements of religious revivalism in America. The [Second] Great Awakening was both populist and reactionary. These are the traits held by Sheldon personally.⁴⁸

Ruddy’s conclusion represents an interesting perspective. Sheldon possessed a religious zealousness that guided his views of education as “missionary work,” that may or may not indicate that he possessed a religious bigotry toward Catholics.

⁴⁷ Sheldon, “What is the Proper Work of a Primary School?” 755.

⁴⁸ Michael Ruddy, “Edward Austin Sheldon and the Creation of the City of Oswego Free Public Schools” (Buffalo: University of Buffalo, 2001), 46-47. Michael Ruddy completed an independent study under the supervision of Dr. Maxine Seller in June of 2001.

Ruddy's concluding comments demonstrate his beliefs in what Sheldon valued. These views are consistent with mid nineteenth century thought. Sheldon was a man of his time who reflected the values and attitudes that nurtured the new American republic. Ruddy's conclusions affirm the complexity of the Silent American giant. He states:

In many ways Sheldon was the personification of the American public school. Unashamedly Protestant, often bigoted, but genuinely seeking a way to offer free education to the American masses. [sic] In other words, concurrently populist and reactionary. [sic] Like Sheldon, the American public schools are generally not purely Jeffersonian in their motives, but like Sheldon, the product is often Jeffersonian in spite of such limitations, bias, bigotry, and shortsightedness.⁴⁹

Such complexities suggest that Sheldon was a human filled with the positive and negative characteristics that seem to interact in the mid-nineteenth century. The question one may ponder is whether such complexities make him a hypocrite or they may have had the same biases, too. For Ruddy, the answer is "they do and do not." As one examines Sheldon's values and his efforts to bring education to the masses and energy to the classroom, he or she may reach a different conclusion. There is a level of certainty that the disciples of Sheldon did not see him as a hypocrite. If anything, they too embraced his teachings and his mission. These individuals at the Oswego Normal School played a significant role in the formation of public education across the United States. Additionally, they played an enormous part in the way teacher training developed in the nation.

Ruddy's contention that Sheldon possessed a Protestant bias that can be found in his manuals and teaching materials makes sense in light of the importance of moral education that dominated the thinking of Sheldon. In reflecting on Sheldon's autobiography, one is confronted with his fears of the moral decay within the tenements of Oswego. One notes a true

⁴⁹Ruddy, "Edward Austin Sheldon," 47.

level of empathy from Sheldon. He may have been raised in the Protestant wing of Christianity, but there appears a level of human concern. One may argue that the “heathendom” phraseology suggests a lack of regard for these new Irish and French immigrants of that hated Catholic faith, and certainly Ruddy, in his study, argues as much. That viewpoint seems to undercut the compassion that Sheldon depicts in his desire to improve the plight of those immigrants.

It appears that Sheldon’s compassion and promotion of the newly emerging middle class mentality of the mid-nineteenth century struck a powerful chord with those across not only the region, but also the nation as a whole. In the 1840s, Horace Mann began a discussion about the importance of mass education for the new republic. Sheldon expands that discussion in two fundamental arenas – teacher training and classroom dynamics. A closer look at Mann offers better insight into the dynamism that Sheldon offered as his work to popularize Pestalozzian theory in the primary classrooms of the United States. The congruence of both the mentality of Mann and the efforts of Sheldon, as they related to the classroom and the role of the teacher, continue to drive discussions about education to this day. Sheldon focused on the student-centered side of the equation. This meant that the focus shifted from the textbook to the teacher as the primary force of instruction. Such a shift altered the status of the profession and required a new level of training at the normal schools.

Mann’s work and words seemed to focus more on the product produced by the school and its impact on the American republic. He views schools as producers of better citizens with the capacity, through education, to avoid poverty. These cornerstone values of what schooling may provide have remained prevalent in the American psyche for more than a century and a half. One may see Mann’s views of education and its product when reviewing his own words.

For the creation of wealth ... intelligence is the grand condition ... In former times ... not one man in a million has ever had the development of mind as made it possible for him to become a contributor of art or science. Let this development precede [sic], and contributions, numberless, and of inestimable value, will be sure to follow.⁵⁰

Sheldon also held education in this same high regard. The ways to achieve these lofty ambitions were clearly developed in the classroom. To this end, Mann and Sheldon expressed their concerns about teachers and the discipline they observed in the classrooms of their youth.

As Morgan describes the time of Mann's youth, she states:

The schools of Horace Mann's boyhood had no comfortable seats, no blackboards, no maps or pictures. Teachers were poorly trained. Discipline was severe and "lickin' and larnin'" were the twin stars of knowledge. In 1844 the Boston Survey Committee found the floggings in a representative school to average 65 per day for 400 students.⁵¹

Sheldon, in reflecting on his primary school years, commented on the same conditions.

Sheldon describes on such experience of a classmate. "Another boy who got frequent whippings, managed to put on several waistcoats, one over the other, in this way thinking to pad himself for the blows."⁵² Such experience, if not personally applied, influenced both to desire improvements in the professional training of teachers. One may surmise that these events were common to many young people of the time and that those who opposed these long-held practices within the American classroom embraced Sheldon's methods. That is not to say that the practice of corporal punishment was abandoned, but perhaps they desired an improvement to the atmosphere in the classroom so such "whippings" and "floggings" became

⁵⁰ Joyce Elmer Morgan, *Horace Mann: His Ideas and Ideals* (Washington, D.C.: National Home Library Foundation, 1936), 140.

⁵¹ Morgan, *Horace Mann*, 9-10.

⁵² Barnes, *Autobiography of Edward Austin Sheldon*, 26.

less common. There was an American belief with a biblical foundation, “spare the rod and spoil the child.”

It is within this value of the human being, even if a child, that Sheldon’s vision was focused. The value of humanity was witnessed in several areas of his view of the student. He embraced a philosophy that was student-centered. Additionally, it placed value on the individual’s development. These educational views matched his political views that were depicted in some letters while he was the Superintendent of the Syracuse City School District. Some of his views toward the immigrants of Oswego may appear contradictory, but upon closer examination, perhaps not. In creating the Ragged School in the 1840s, Sheldon was focused on improving the lot of the immigrant. That notion appears to be consistent with the notion of individual worth and advancement. It also demonstrates his acceptance of Pestalozzi. In these aspects of Sheldon’s worldview, the dignity, worth, and ability of the individual are consistently appreciated and valued. In his letters to family members regarding his views of the Fugitive Slave Law, it is obvious that his progressive disposition was not limited to education. Within these words, one can get a real sense of the type of person Sheldon was. Furthermore, it may help to explain why so many individuals were drawn to him.

In his letter to his brother George, his commentary regarding the “Jerry Rescue” demonstrates his views toward slavery.⁵³ In discussing the proceedings, he states:

They now began to talk about adjourning to a larger room, when the prisoner, bound hand and foot in irons!!! (this is a *free* country you know, though he was not yet proved

⁵³ The “Jerry Rescue” was an event in which the people of Syracuse, New York expressed their disagreement with the Fugitive Slave Law. An African American was accused of being a runaway slave and was jailed to determine his fate. While in jail (then located along what today is Clinton Square), the people of Syracuse broke in and helped “Jerry” escape and assisted in getting him to Canada.

guilty of having escaped from slavery), was seized and conveyed through the streets by the agitated crowd.⁵⁴

Such commentary suggests that Sheldon had a regard for humanity at the deeper and more compassionate level. That value for the individual, no matter what his or her station in life, proved to be an attractive force for many as he moved forward within the ranks of the normal schools and the field of education. The notion that he was opposed to slavery is consistent with his worldview regarding the value of the individual. He clearly viewed himself as part of this illegal activity of human uplift. As he continues to discuss the events of the rescue, he reflects on Daniel Webster's speech in Syracuse regarding the resistance of the Fugitive Slave Law as the act of a traitor. As he explains it to his brother, "That our action was nothing less than high treason! treason! treason! treason!"⁵⁵ Sheldon's comments indicate that he was a staunch opponent of slavery and willing to engage in active social justice measures.

Whether involvement in these events played a role in his short time as the superintendent of Syracuse Public School is unclear. One cannot help but notice that in describing the rescue he includes himself as a participant – "our action." Such a confession to his brother indicates not only his position, but his willingness to do what he felt was right for American society. One can see that in this event, and certainly his ability to engage others in his educational crusade at the Oswego Normal School.

His comments indicate that he was concerned about the human condition. One may note that in this event, the views he expressed were also reflected in his comments about the Ragged School and learning object instruction. These perspectives suggest a man who was

⁵⁴ Barnes, *Autobiography of Edward Austin Sheldon*, 95-96. While these events are contained in these letters, Sheldon did not reference them himself. They are part of the edits added by his daughter. The motivation for their inclusion is unclear.

⁵⁵ Barnes, *Autobiography of Edward Austin Sheldon*, 97.

very much in step with his time and the growing sense of middle class values. Whether referring to the Ragged School in the 1840s, abolition in the 1850s or public education of the 1860s, Sheldon appears to be in step with some in American society. They also seem to suggest a man who is perhaps more progressive than many during his time. Certainly not everyone was in favor of public education or the abolition of slavery. Had the case been the opposite, his resignation would have been met with a quick departure and few tears. Even likeable individuals do not necessarily garner the support of their subordinates. His amiable disposition and charisma seemed to have generated not just like-minded individuals, but also individuals who seemed to have a strong connection to this man.

Because of his endearing personality and force of will, Sheldon was able to amass a talented collection of educators. One of the more interesting and significant figures in the early formation of the college is Margaret E. M. Jones. Jones was an important person in the development of the normal school. It is worthy of mention that Sheldon's school on the lake seemed to support and emphasize female leadership. Women were not only leaders in Oswego; they became strong leaders in public school systems and normal schools across the nation. Sheldon selected as an early leader of the training program to support the use of "object learning." Sheldon's autobiography mentions a \$1,000 salary for Jones. Such payment begs one to ask to fundamental questions. First, how does that salary compare to educator salaries of that time? The answer to that is clear – very well. Dearborn charts out the average annual salaries of educators in 23 states and territories for the years 1875-76 and 1876-77. The reality is stark. The average male teacher was earning \$389.88 in 1875-76 and \$439.98 in 1876-77. In contrast, female counterparts earned \$262.64 and \$290.69 in those respective

years.⁵⁶ The knowledge of this reality may lead individuals to the second question, why would Sheldon have advocated for such a high salary? As one studies the complexities that seem to permeate Sheldon, the answer may be yet another characteristic that seemed to pull educators to Sheldon. His vision was on a set direction and he was going to utilize whatever means at his disposal to make his vision a reality. He needed an expert in object learning and he was willing to pay that knowledge to guide the educational program at Oswego.

In *Rise and Growth of the Normal School Idea in the United States*, J.P. Gordy offered an explanation as to why Jones was hired. “Sheldon resolved to do it, because there was no one in the country who was familiar with the work to be done.”⁵⁷ It was clear that Sheldon wanted people who were capable and qualified to promote his vision of teaching and learning. While many women were involved in teaching, it is unclear as to whether having a female head of the program was an issue. During this time period, when a woman married her employment was terminated, it is likely that a female hire was an issue. It appeared not to have been too big of a concern, as there is no reference that people wrote about or saved any commentaries regarding the gender leadership issues. In reading the biographical sketch of Jones, one gains some understanding of what type of individual she was. “The alumni of the classes of ’62 and ’63 remember Mrs. Jones with deep affection, respect, and admiration. In her there was a rare mingling of qualities; she was all gentleness, love, persuasive patience, diffidence, reverence of human nature.”⁵⁸ These qualities also seem to be consistent with what made Oswego such a revolutionary institution. As the sketch elaborated, “Her pupils in America remember her

⁵⁶ Dearborn, *The Oswego Movement*, 32.

⁵⁷ J.P. Gordy, *Rise and Growth of the Normal School Idea in the United States*, (Washington D.C., Government Printing Office, 1891), 66.

⁵⁸ State University College of education, Oswego, *Historical Sketches*, 133.

criticisms upon lessons given before her as so many gems – clear, faultless, diffusing light. In their strong light, faults unseen before were plainly shown, but most of all the virtues, the strong points in the lessons given were revealed for our inspection, appreciation, and imitation.”⁵⁹ Such commentary is a reflection of one of Oswego’s most legendary achievements – practice teaching.

The concepts of training teachers and to practice teach began in Oswego. The dynamic of a novice or pre-service teacher gleaning insight into the craft of teaching and instruction through support, practice, and criticism produced these sentiments. Such a model of practice instruction also led to the development of more structured and organized lesson plans. These two elements have become standards within the field for both classroom practitioners and those seeking entry into the field as a classroom practitioner. In this regard, Sheldon’s hiring of Jones was instrumental in Oswego’s development and the college’s emphasis as a “training school.” It seems clear that Sheldon’s vision brought the right people to create the dynamic to enact the values he held. It may also be possible that individuals were enthralled with his radical ideas and were willing led by this dynamic force of nature.

Another individual highlighted in *Historical Sketches* was Hermann Krusi. His inclusion among the staff of Oswego is significant. When examining the development of the Oswego Normal School, it is clear that Sheldon was an extremely able administrative leader whose transformative vision stretched far beyond the Oswego Normal School. Sheldon’s commitment to the principles of Pestalozzi led him to the hiring of both Margaret Jones and Herman Krusi. Both individuals were heavily involved in the formation of the training

⁵⁹ State University College of education, Oswego, *Historical Sketches*, 133.

program and the development of the Oswego Method. Both individuals were from Europe, suggesting that Sheldon was willing to extend expenses in the fulfillment of his goal – the professional training of teachers. Both Jones and Krusi were schooled in Pestalozzian practices and were experienced in their classroom use. Krusi was an experienced educator whose past provided him with a background that would fit Sheldon’s vision perfectly. “In 1862, Krusi went to Oswego, N.Y., at the request of Mr. E. A. Sheldon, who had established a Training school for teachers, founded upon Pestalozzian principles.”⁶⁰ Once there, Krusi used object learning in his formal instruction. “He also taught Philosophy of Education, including Mental and Moral Philosophy, without a book, by appealing to the experience and to the reflective powers of the pupils themselves.”⁶¹ Such instruction served as a model for pupils to emulate in future classroom practice upon graduation to their own classrooms. His overall disposition seems to have influenced the spreading of Pestalozzian concepts into the region’s classroom. As stated, “The clear, simple and logical way in which he analyzed a subject into its simplest elements, thus opening it up to the understanding, his quiet, conversational manner and pleasant humor made the conditions for mental activity and growth the best possible.”⁶² Clearly, the reflections of the instruction and the support of these early educators were highly regarded by its consumers.

The high praise may be a reflection of *Historical Sketches*. A retrospective on the first quarter of a century of an institution conducted by alumni, students, and staff may provide a more favorable depiction than may have truly been the case. Individuals with intimate understanding of the institution and the individuals who helped in its creation and development

⁶⁰ State University College of education, Oswego, *Historical Sketches*, 146.

⁶¹ State University College of education, Oswego, *Historical Sketches*, 146-147.

⁶² State University College of education, Oswego, *Historical Sketches*, 147.

generated the sources collected. While a degree of bias may exist within this source, there is no reason to disregard it solely on that basis. It is important that the scholar noting this dynamic still feel comfortable with the use of this source due to the intimate knowledge that the authors had regarding the institution and the individual(s).

They went to work at other institutions, including normal schools, becoming practitioners and spreaders of the gospel of Sheldon in the Book of Oswego. One needs to look no further than the sketch of Amanda Funnelle to note exemplars of this Oswego diaspora. Funnelle began her formal affiliation with Oswego when she entered the Training Class of 1861.⁶³ As mentioned previously, the Oswego Method was proclaimed to be successful and valid. With these affirmations of Sheldon's training program and the merits of his techniques, it is only logical that districts reviewing the new methodology would want to acquire individuals familiar with the tactics. Funnelle, having graduated and having worked with the master – Edward Austin Sheldon - offered an exciting proposition to newly forming education institutions and systems. She left Indianapolis and became a teacher of Methods of Primary Instruction at the Indiana State Normal School, where she chaired the primary instruction department for more than a decade.⁶⁴ Following her time in Indiana, she held the position of Principal Teacher of the Detroit Normal and Training class for five years. Funnelle traveled the nation spreading the word of the new teaching methods she embraced along the shore of Lake Ontario and that were being implemented around the country by disciples like her. Following her time across the Midwest, she returned to the Port City to enhance the further development of the Oswego Normal School. The exact year of her return to Oswego is a little

⁶³ State University College of education, Oswego, *Historical Sketches*, 152.

⁶⁴ State University College of education, Oswego, *Historical Sketches*, 152.

unclear; one's use of mathematics suggests it was in the last 1870s or early 1880s. Following her return to her alma mater, Funnelle served as the school principal of the kindergarten-training department.⁶⁵

Mary V. Lee was a teacher in Connecticut when her superintendent sent her to learn Pestalozzian methods in Oswego in the spring of 1862.⁶⁶ Teachers being sent to Oswego for study the new techniques seemed to be a fairly common practice. The notions of such professional development and travel have remained commonplace within public education. In September of 1862, she opened the Davenport, Iowa, Training School for teachers, under the general direction of Superintendent A. S. Kissell; this school was still flourishing in 1888.⁶⁷ From 1865 to 1872, she was first assistant to Professor William F. Phelps in the Normal School of Winona, Minnesota, and became the first teacher in Minnesota from Oswego. Following her time in Minnesota, she attended and graduated from the University of Michigan.⁶⁸ Lee's biographical sketch suggests that she was a restless learner who pursued many diverse experiences. From her time in Europe (1880-1882), "...she became acquainted with the Delsarte method of gymnastics, which seeks to produce bodies strong enough for life's uses, beautiful in form; form and pose; it trains the body to smooth, rhythmical movement, in harmony with the laws of expression and wonderfully quieting to the nervous system."⁶⁹ In her teaching at the Oswego Normal School, which began with the completion of her medical degree in 1874, she worked as a teacher of physiology. Her combinations of varying aspects of

⁶⁵ Edward J. Reid, "Alumni Ambassadors Spread the Oswego Method," *Oswego Alumni Association Magazine*, Fall/Winter 2011, 27.

⁶⁶ State University College of education, Oswego, *Historical Sketches*, 179.

⁶⁷ State University College of education, Oswego, *Historical Sketches*, 179.

⁶⁸ State University College of education, Oswego, *Historical Sketches*, 179. Perhaps it is interesting to consider that amidst her work in the Midwest, she attended the University of Michigan where she earned a medical degree.

⁶⁹ State University College of education, Oswego, *Historical Sketches*, 179.

her studies were well received by the students of Oswego. “Dr. Lee saw the advantages of this system, exchanged the old for it, and during the last five years (1881-1886) has sought to introduce it into the Normal and Practice schools. The system grows in favor, the pupils enjoy the exercises, and Miss Walter reports their refining influence upon the children whom she has in charge.”⁷⁰ These innovations suggest the willingness of Sheldon to allow and encourage changes within his program.

Still another teacher and disciple of the Oswego Method was Mrs. Mary Howe Smith. In 1861, Smith, recently widowed and with two young children, was “invited by Mr. Sheldon to return to Oswego, and share in the work, just begun by him, of adapting the educational methods of Pestalozzi to the needs of the Elementary schools in his care.”⁷¹ She, under the guidance of Sheldon, began to focus her attention on geography. The focus and her successes in that field led to recognition by Oswego.⁷² Eminent institutions and scholars from across the nation noticed her work in Oswego across the country. As one reviews the scattering of Oswego students and teachers, it becomes clear that the influence of Sheldon’s institution was spreading beyond the region and the state. Smith was extremely successful at her work and an Ivy League professor picked it up. “Such was her success in this department (geography), that in 1864, she was invited by Prof. Arnold Guyot of Princeton, N.J., the eminent scientist, to cooperate with him in the preparation of a series of text-books in Geography.” Upon further study of Smith’s life, it is clear that she was noticed far beyond the East Coast of the United

⁷⁰ State University College of education, Oswego, *Historical Sketches*, 180.

⁷¹ State University College of education, Oswego, *Historical Sketches*, 153.

⁷² State University College of education, Oswego, *Historical Sketches*, 153.

States and that her abilities to convey these new techniques and methods made her a prominent voice within the educational community.

In 1866, “Mrs. Smith was solicited to assist in the work of instruction in a series of State Normal Institutes to be held in Indiana...Her instruction everywhere aroused the greatest enthusiasm, and at the close of the engagement she complied with the almost imperative invitation of the President of the National Teacher’s Association, to appear before that body, at the coming session in Indianapolis.”⁷³ Smith was spellbinding and captivated the audience in Indianapolis. “This introduction to the educational world, led to repeated calls for similar work, the larger number of which were, necessarily, declined.”⁷⁴ Smith traveled around the country and spread the Oswego Method. “Mrs. Smith thus addressed bodies of teachers in all states north of the Potomac, the Ohio, the Missouri, excepting only Maine and Maryland. Everywhere ‘the Oswego methods,’ as presented by her, aroused the greatest enthusiasm and called forth enumerable inquiries...”⁷⁵

Yet another Sheldon disciple was Elizabeth Farrell. She graduated during the second quarter of a century of the Oswego Normal and Training school in 1895, shortly before the passing of Dr. Sheldon. “After graduating from Oswego, Farrell taught in a one-room school house at Oneida Castle. When she took a job in New York City, she formed the first ungraded class, devoted to helping students she described in her writings as ‘over-age children, so-called naughty children, and dull and stupid children.’”⁷⁶ It is worthy of note that, “classrooms across New York City were modeled after classroom and ... in 1906; Farrell was appointed the

⁷³ State University College of education, Oswego, *Historical Sketches*, 153.

⁷⁴ State University College of education, Oswego, *Historical Sketches*, 153.

⁷⁵ State University College of education, Oswego, *Historical Sketches*, 154.

⁷⁶ Oswego Alumni Association, “Alumni Ambassadors Spread the Oswego Method,” *Oswego Alumni Association Magazine*, Fall/Winter 2011, 31.

Inspector of Ungraded Classes for the city. A plaque in Penfield Library dates to her death in 1932 and honors Farrell ‘who gave her life that the least might live as abundantly as their handicaps permitted.’”⁷⁷ As was the case with many of the early graduates of Sheldon, Farrell’s influence went far beyond the region and far beyond New York City, where she worked. She promoted her methods and worked diligently to impact American pupils far from the boundaries of New York. “Farrell would go on to lecture at Teachers College of Columbia and New York University, and to found and edit the journal *Ungraded*. She founded the Council for Exceptional Children, which still serves educators of special needs children today.”⁷⁸ Farrell’s most significant impact may have been her innovative practices in dealing with special education students. “Farrell pioneered the notion of special classes, not special schools, with the goal of returning the children to regular classes. She advocated for placement in special classes based on the special needs of children, rather than IQ scores.”⁷⁹ Perhaps the greatest insights into her views of special education were found in her views regarding social and political agencies. It is hard to believe that Farrell was a forward thinking as she was. “She believed that schools should not exclude children, and that schools, hospitals, and immigration services and the criminal justice system should work together to identify and help the special needs children. In her insistence on treating each child as an individual, she echoes the philosophy of Edward Austin Sheldon.”⁸⁰

By no means were these the only individuals or the only places that benefited from Sheldon’s tutelage. Sheldon’s young protégés were fruitful and multiplied. They created

⁷⁷ Oswego Alumni Association, “Alumni Ambassadors,” 31.

⁷⁸ Oswego Alumni Association, “Alumni Ambassadors,” 31.

⁷⁹ Oswego Alumni Association, “Alumni Ambassadors,” 31.

⁸⁰ Oswego Alumni Association, “Alumni Ambassadors,” 31.

normal schools and employed elements of the Oswego Method throughout the nation. “From what I have said it will be seen that the Oswego school has been an important influence on the school in this and other States. This influence was particularly felt in western and southwestern states, notably in Ohio, Michigan, Minnesota, and California,’ Sheldon wrote.”⁸¹ Such influence can further be seen in the work of Woodbridge N. Ferris, also an alumnus of the Oswego Normal School. He graduated in the class of 1873 and went west to Michigan where he too would spread the teaching of Sheldon. He was clearly impressed with Sheldon. “I loved Dr. Edward A. Sheldon for his sympathetic [sic] encouragement. In his relation with students, he was as democratic as Abraham Lincoln was. Hanging in my office over my desk is a life-size portrait of Dr. Sheldon. As I enter this room and look into his face he seems to say, ‘Good morning, Mr. Ferris.’”⁸²

There was an incident during Ferris’ third term at Oswego that may offer a deeper understanding of Sheldon. In reviewing the account of Ferris, one may truly begin to understand the practical nature of Sheldon and some of the elements that drew so many energetic individuals to him. As Reid elaborates, “Ferris had just returned from the city police headquarters, charged with striking a local youth who insulted him. Dr. Sheldon apparently was aware of the circumstances of the incident and wanted to advise his hot-blooded young charge that he was to ignore future insults and practice a ‘philosophy of non-resistance.’”⁸³ How these particular events played out is a testament to Sheldon’s leadership and depicts Sheldon’s personality and disposition. It displayed the humanity of the individual and his

⁸¹ Oswego Alumni Association, “Alumni Ambassadors,” 27.

⁸² Edward J. Reid, Ed.D., “Alumni Ambassadors Spread the Oswego Method,” *Oswego Alumni Association Magazine*, Fall/Winter 2011, 31.28.

⁸³ Reid, “Alumni Ambassadors,” 29.

ability to read individuals and take a course of action that drew the best out of them. Reid continues, “Ferris responded, ‘...I promised to continue to mind my own business, but when insulted I should defend myself. Dr. Sheldon smiled and made no further comment.’ In his autobiography, Ferris accepted the fact that his offense was serious enough to have ‘sent him home but for the generosity of the president, Dr. Edward Austin Sheldon.’”⁸⁴ Sheldon was profoundly concerned and focused on the individual and that was the basis of his teaching philosophy and his administrative action.

Like many pupils of the Oswego Normal and Training School, Ferris did not sit still. He forged ahead spreading the knowledge of the teachings he had acquired from Sheldon. It is clear from the evidence that many of these individuals became educational leaders in the communities in which their professional careers began and continued to do so in each community where they resided. In that pattern, Ferris was no different. Upon completing his training, he “returned to Tioga County as principal of the Spencer Academy... She (his wife, an also an Oswego alumna) taught in the Spencer Academy and become Ferris’ partner when later in his life he founded the Big Rapids (Michigan) Industrial School, forerunner to Ferris State University in 1884.”⁸⁵ The Big Rapids Industrial School experienced its share of challenges. It went bankrupt twice, but finally succeeded as Ferris Industrial. Ferris’ abilities were also seen in the political arena where he served as Michigan’s governor for two terms.⁸⁶ Reid’s assessment of Ferris’ legacy appears to be quite consistent with those that could be made regarding many of these early alumni ambassadors of the Oswego Method. Reid concludes, “...his story illustrates a uniquely American process that has enabled greater social

⁸⁴ Reid, “Alumni Ambassadors,” 29.

⁸⁵ Reid, “Alumni Ambassadors,” 29.

⁸⁶ Reid, “Alumni Ambassadors,” 29.

mobility among its people from the earliest period of the Republic. Perhaps his greatest achievement and legacy continues to affect the lives of thousands of students who enroll in the university that bears his name. For that, Dr. Sheldon may be owed a special debt of thanks.”⁸⁷

It is almost overwhelming to consider this cast of characters and the profound effect that they had on the development of American education. The influence of Sheldon and his protégés on the educational world will be examined more closely in the final chapter.

Still another apostle of the Oswego Method was Uldrick Thompson, class of 1879. Thompson brought his hands on learning techniques to the Kamehameha School for Boys in Hawaii. He began teaching there in 1889 and served as principal from 1898 to 1901. Charles King and Same Keliinoi of the first graduating class at Kamehameha, now one of Hawaii’s largest and most prestigious private schools came from the Oswego Normal School.⁸⁸ One may gain a better understanding of the object learning method in an anecdote regarding an incident when Thompson was principal of the school. In an excerpt from an unpublished history manuscript authored by Tim Nekritz, Thompson offers the reader a clearer view of what object learning was about. Thompson explains this as he explains specifically the rationale behind the educational philosophy. Nekritz states, “Then-principal the Rev. William B. Oleson, came down to Dormitory D and found me washing the two windows of my room.” Thompson wrote. “He stood a moment then asked in his concise way, ‘Why don’t you have one of the boys wash your windows?’ ... [I replied] ... ‘Because, if I’m responsible for the condition of the boys’ windows, I must first learn how to clean windows.’”⁸⁹ This thinking was

⁸⁷ Reid, “Alumni Ambassadors,” 29.

⁸⁸ Oswego Alumni Association, “Alumni Ambassadors,” 30.

⁸⁹ Oswego Alumni Association, “Alumni Ambassadors,” 30.

extremely consistent with object learning. Prior to having students delve into “hands-on” inquiry, the instructor must first understand the process and the elements at work, a concept fundamental to the contemporary thinking and actions of classroom practitioners (both at the turn of the twentieth century and today). If the teacher does not understand the processes, the teacher cannot anticipate the pitfalls of the lesson and prepare the redress of them.

The final ambassador of the Oswego Method in this investigation is class of 1877 alumnus Hideo Takamine. Japan was in the midst of the Meiji Restoration. This period was a great time of modernizing and Westernizing, which had followed centuries of isolation and inward reflection. Takamine came to Oswego and familiarized himself with the newest of educational techniques, the Oswego Method. He was part of a small Japanese delegation of students sent to America in the 1870s to study teaching methods. After graduation, he returned home to Japan, bringing with him these revolutionary ideas. Takamine brought the Oswego Method to Japan.⁹⁰ He returned to Japan and found that not all of the people he worked with were impressed the ideas he acquired in Oswego. A principal who believed that the old curriculum worked fine and no changes were necessary challenged Takamine’s new methods. In a letter to Herman Krusi, Takamine explained his position, “This is quite different from my views. I think the future of education is the cultivation of the mind, and for this purpose, the above curriculum is quite inadequate.”⁹¹ This debate has been in constant controversy since the beginning of public education. Sheldon fell clearly on the side of individual learning focusing on skill development rather than content. Object learning embraced the notion that if one teaches a man to fish one has provided him with a meal for life as opposed to giving a man

⁹⁰ Oswego Alumni Association, “Alumni Ambassadors,” 30.

⁹¹ Oswego Alumni Association, “Alumni Ambassadors,” 30.

a fish for the day. Object learning was about developing the skills of scholarship and learning. As Reid continues, “Takamine taught at Tokyo Higher Normal School, rising to the principalship of the school in 1879. He was also the principal of the Tokyo Art School, Tokyo Music School and Tokyo Women’s Higher Normal School. The Tokyo Normal School eventually became Tokyo University of Education, the forerunner of today’s Tsukuba University.”⁹²

These eager disciples of Sheldon scurried across the nation and the Pacific spreading the Oswego Method. Having gotten the word out, the remaining question is what impact this diaspora had on the culture of the American classroom and the mindset of the American educator. To this end, one must examine what the scholarship conducted in the decades following the diffusion of these ideas. It is nice to see that many of the alumni of the Oswego Normal and Training School went forth to proclaim the virtues of the Oswego Method. What was the lasting impact of these proclamations? The work of this scholarship may provide the researcher with yet another significant legacy of Edward Austin Sheldon – the soul of American education.

Chapter 4: Sheldon’s Lasting Legacy beyond Oswego

⁹² Oswego Alumni Association, “Alumni Ambassadors,” 30.

Sheldon's accomplishments along the shores of Lake Ontario are meritorious and praiseworthy. If that were the extent of his achievement, one would consider him extremely successful. However, Sheldon's legacy is far richer than the Oswego Normal School. *An Encyclopedia of Education* article by Monroe summed up the forces created at the Oswego Normal School. "Mr. Sheldon gathered striking personalities from Europe and America and held them together for many years, and as an American student of education well says, 'he shaped a coherent course of study and turned out a large group of teachers who taught teaching, on Oswego lines, the greatest thing in the world.'"⁹³ Additionally, the dynamic men and women that he trained certainly spread Sheldon's Oswego Method everywhere.

However, the story does not end there. Across the country, his pioneering methodology became the standard in professional training for teachers. The influence that Sheldon's training program had on the field of education in the United States is the focus of the chapter. *American National Biography* discussed the significance of Sheldon in eloquent and simple terms. An entry stated, "Sheldon provided numerous innovations to the field of education in the areas of administration and teacher training. While not an original thinker, his effective advocacy of the principles of Pestalozzi, as well as his universally used program of practice teaching, places him solidly within the ranks of such educational pioneers as Horace Mann and Samuel Gridley Howe."⁹⁴

The nature of a fact driven curriculum seemed to trouble Sheldon greatly. He believed that the result of that form of instruction was developmentally inappropriate for children. He

⁹³ Paul Monroe, Ph.D., ed., "Edward Austin Sheldon" in *An Encyclopedia of Education* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1914), 335.

⁹⁴ John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes, eds, "Edward Austin Sheldon" in *National Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 782.

also felt that such a methodology was not in the best interest of teacher. His perspective led him to accept the notions of “object teaching.” John Manning in his examination of the Oswego System began with an excerpt from Charles Dickens. “‘Teach these boys and girls nothing but facts. Facts only are wanted for life...Nothing else will ever be of any service to them...This is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to facts, Sir!’ The dry, inflexible, and dictatorial voice was that of Mr. Thomas Gradgrind, that matter-of-fact man of realities, in the opening pages of the novel *Hard Times*.”⁹⁵ Dickens’ vision was not so unrealistic. In fact, it was the troubling way those students were being compelled to learn in a fact driven mindset that Sheldon saw the classrooms in Oswego. Fortunately, his exposure to Pestalozzian practices energized him and the American classroom. To that end, Manning explained the basis of Pestalozzi theories. “In his well-known book, entitled *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children*, Pestalozzi had insisted that observation was the basis of all knowledge. He went further to attest that the first principle of education was to lead a child to observe with accuracy; the second was to teach a child to express correctly the results of his observations.”⁹⁶ The ability of Sheldon and the Oswego Normal School to forge ahead and have its methods accepted and developed in all parts of the country is arguably Sheldon’s greatest accomplishment and legacy.

One may wish to consider the contributions of Sheldon to the national conversation regarding education in the 1860s. In 1863, Sheldon addressed the National Teachers’ Association (now the NEA) about “object teaching.” Sheldon informed those assembled that his discussion would address three aspects of this new method: the basic principles of that

⁹⁵ John Manning, “Charles Dickens and the Oswego System,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XVIII, no. 4 (1957): 580.

⁹⁶ Manning, “Charles Dickens,” 580.

method; some of the difficulties in implementing these “reformed methods of teaching;” and the purpose of these methods, as applied to the development of children.⁹⁷ After a brief discussion of what object learning is and is not, his focus changed to supporting the education of teachers in this method and how that was to be achieved. Sheldon stated, “Teachers are endeavoring to imitate methods from books, rather than making themselves familiar with the principles upon which these methods are based, and then using these models as aides in applying them.”⁹⁸

In such a situation, where he was clearly altering the role of the teacher in the classroom from textbook based to facilitating an experienced base environment, it was obvious to Sheldon that professional development and support were needed and that the solution was training schools. While the “normal school” existed prior to Sheldon, the normal school after his model became much more like Oswego than they had been prior to his work. “The only remedy to this evil,” he stated, “as it seems to us, is the establishment of Training Schools for the *professional* education of teachers.”⁹⁹ This institution transformed normal schools through its work and provided needed support in the expansion of public education to the masses. With the rise of the middle class, there was a rise of credentials and professionalization within various fields of study. Older systems of apprenticeships were abandoned as fields of studies became more “scientific” and expert driven and Sheldon contributed to the emergence of professionalization in education. He concluded his commentary about these training schools. This aspect of his commentary altered the professional training of teachers. Sheldon stated, “In these schools should be exhibited the highest excellence in the art of teaching. There should

⁹⁷ Edward Austin Sheldon, “Object Teaching,” *National Teachers’ Association Journal*, (1863): 357.

⁹⁸ Sheldon, “Object Teaching,” 359.

⁹⁹ Sheldon, “Object Teaching,” 359.

also be schools of practice where students should have abundant opportunity for applying the instruction they receive, and the methods they observe.”¹⁰⁰ This method is today referred to as student teaching and is considered the standard within the field. There were no consistent standards to joining the profession. During the nineteenth century, many fields struggled with the professional standards that would come to unify admission into the occupation. The standards have gone from some time of normal school training to state licensing tests and state issued credentials that contain a series of regulations and requirements. Public education and its great champion, Horace Mann, were newly forged only a generation prior to Sheldon’s endeavors at the Oswego Normal and Training School. Sheldon’s method of practice teaching with critic teachers (trained experts who could assess how well the practice teacher was implementing and facilitating his or her lesson plans) was ground breaking.

In May 1893, Professor William Aber published an article entitled “The Oswego State Normal School” in *The Popular Science Monthly*. His opening line is a clear reference to the effect Oswego already had. “To-day, in the quiet, old city of Oswego, N.Y., stands a school whose influence has extended throughout the land. At its head is its founder, Dr. E.A. Sheldon: the school is his life work.”¹⁰¹ One can see that normal schools (as they developed with Sheldon’s influence) and Sheldon are inevitably connected. To discuss one without the other is not truly appropriate. Aber offered the reader even more comprehension into Sheldon’s impact on education when he stated, “The old education takes the standpoint of the adult; the new that of the child.”¹⁰² The answer may be debatable, but the notion of the student-centered classroom in the United States has a strong connection to the work of Sheldon and his

¹⁰⁰ Sheldon, “Object Teaching,” 359.

¹⁰¹ William M. Aber, “The Oswego State Normal School,” *The Popular Science Monthly*, May 1893, 51.

¹⁰² Aber, 69-70.

protégés. In some ways, one could contend that Sheldon's promotion of the Pestalozzian theory had a tremendous effect on the development of the "student-centered" classroom in the United States.

Another interesting element of Aber's article was his commentary regarding the training received at the normal school and the reactions of the students. "Students at Oswego have sometimes complained of the rigorous drill of classes in methods, and of the practice school, as too mechanical, tending to produce mannerisms and to crush individuality..." For the average man and woman comprehension of principles does not secure practice."¹⁰³ Aber's elaboration explained the important function of practice teaching and the rationale behind it. Whether a teachers' training institution was engaged in the same classroom philosophy (Pestalozzian Theory) does not preclude it from valuing the rational offered by Aber. His explanation of Sheldon's great legacy of practice teaching as follows. "Right habits can not be formed in the teacher by imparting to him the principles merely of his profession more than in a soldier...To the careful, unremitted drill of his method and practice school work is largely due to the fact that the Oswego Normal School has turned out so large a product of successful teachers as compared with her production of mere talkers and essay writers."¹⁰⁴

The impact of practice methodology at "training schools" for professional teachers became the work of the Oswego Normal School, and normal schools throughout the nation. In an 1891 Bureau of Education Circular, the United States Government recognized Sheldon's contributions to education and higher education 30 years after the formation of the Oswego Normal School and while Sheldon was still living. Gordy discussed the impact of Oswego in

¹⁰³ Aber, "The Oswego State Normal School," 70.

¹⁰⁴ Aber, "The Oswego State Normal School," 70-71.

his work *Rise and Growth of the Normal School Idea in the United States*. Gordy dedicated an entire chapter to the Normal School at Oswego. His opening, too, testifies to the significance of Sheldon's work. "The history of the normal school at Oswego, N.Y., constitutes an important chapter not only in the history of the training of teachers, but in the history of the public schools of this country."¹⁰⁵ Gordy explained how Sheldon perpetuated the program he developed in Oswego and how it had become a national model. Gordy explained, "Mr. Sheldon's observations of the results of the new methods on the teachers and pupils, led him to believe that their general adoption in the schools of the country was a matter of the highest importance."¹⁰⁶ Sheldon urged the board of education in Oswego to invite prominent educators from across the county to view and assess the system. When they arrived, Sheldon stated in his formal welcome, "Should your judgment, after a careful investigation, accord with your own, it can be lead to a complete revolution in our methods of teaching; it will make teaching a profession, a title it has yet to earn."¹⁰⁷

Dr. H. B. Wilbur, superintendent of the New York State Asylum for Imbeciles was a principle opponent of the methods promoted by Sheldon. Brown University Professor S.S. Greene headed the committee of distinguished educators who assessed the methods used in Oswego. The committee also included the superintendents of Boston and Chicago, the state superintendent of Connecticut, the principal of a normal school of Illinois, and an educator from St. Louis.¹⁰⁸ The committee whole-heartedly endorsed the methods and system that Sheldon had developed in Oswego.

¹⁰⁵ J.P. Gordy, *Rise and Growth of the Normal School Idea in the United States*, (Washington D.C., Government Printing Office, 1891), 61.

¹⁰⁶ Gordy, *Rise and Growth*, 66.

¹⁰⁷ Gordy, *Rise and Growth*, 67.

¹⁰⁸ Gordy, *Rise and Growth*, 68.

Toward the end of the chapter about Oswego, Gordy explained the significance of Oswego on American public schools. He stated, "...the methods of teaching in our large towns and cities have radically changed within that period, and that the change has been in the direction of the reforms first introduced into the public schools through the practice school at Oswego."¹⁰⁹ Gordy informed the reader that these methods had been adopted in New York City and in Syracuse. He also indicated that the cities of Toledo and Cincinnati had also adopted the Oswego Method. Such information demonstrates that the Oswego Method, introduced by Sheldon, was taking hold in some of America's larger cities within a couple decades of their introduction. Many Oswego graduates and disciples traveled throughout country to preach the gospel of Sheldon. Gordy indicated as much, "In attention to these, Oswego graduates were invited to organize training schools in Cincinnati, Ohio, Indianapolis, Ind..., Rochester, Syracuse, and Malone, N.Y., Dayton, Ohio, Detroit, Mich., Philadelphia, Pa, Washington, D.C. Reading Pa, and many other smaller places in different parts of the country."¹¹⁰ This implementation and replication of the Oswego Method led to wide spread use and garnered significant national recognition for Oswego and Sheldon.

The state of New York further ensured the widely practiced methods and success of the Oswego Normal School. Gordy explained, "All the state normal schools in New York, excepting the one at Albany, have been organized on the Oswego plan. Normal College in New York City was organized on the same plan, with Oswego graduates to do the work in methods and criticism."¹¹¹ Such commentary was a clear indicator that the Oswego Method was widely accepted by and in the Empire State. In addition, there was earlier discussion

¹⁰⁹ Gordy, *Rise and Growth*, 73.

¹¹⁰ Gordy, *Rise and Growth*, 74.

¹¹¹ Gordy, *Rise and Growth*, 74.

within this pamphlet pertaining to the dissemination of the model and plan to other places. Gordy offered still more support to his claim of the implementation of Sheldon's model and Oswego graduates influencing the training of teachers throughout the nation. "Beside these institutions, Oswego graduates have been called to do similar work in a number of State normal schools of Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Maine, Wisconsin, New Jersey, Nebraska, Missouri, Mississippi, California, Kansas, and Iowa."¹¹²

Perhaps Gordy's most insightful evaluation came in his closing remarks of the Oswego chapter. He stated, "This will give some idea of the direct influence exerted by Oswego, but the indirect influence was even more powerful."¹¹³ Gordy explained the importance of the Oswego Normal School was clearly contained in the method of practice teaching. The emphasis on Pestalozzian or object teaching was nothing new. Gordy explained, "The school at Oswego marks an epoch in the history of the normal schools of this country, in another respect, and that is, in the emphasis which it laid upon the importance of practice teaching."¹¹⁴ He elaborated on Oswego's role in practice teaching when he stated, "From the first, the school at Oswego, set a high value upon this work, and it is doubtless due to in no small measure to its influence, that a practice school is now so generally regarded as an indispensable adjunct of a normal school."¹¹⁵ All theories and practices are trivial until one can demonstrate the ability to facilitate the learning process with students. Gordy delineated the aspects of good teaching when he stated, "No argument is needed to show that the better a teacher knows children, the more he knows of their likes and dislikes, of their knowledge and their ignorance, of things that

¹¹² Gordy, *Rise and Growth*, 75.

¹¹³ Gordy, *Rise and Growth*, 75.

¹¹⁴ Gordy, *Rise and Growth*, 122.

¹¹⁵ Gordy, *Rise and Growth*, 123.

interest them and the modes in which their interests are developed, the more effectively he can use the objective method.”¹¹⁶ Any instructional leader may see the significance of the Oswego Method and the extraordinary importance of Dr. Edward Austin Sheldon.

Dr. Dorothy Rogers offers additional understanding into the legacy of Oswego and Sheldon in *SUNY College at Oswego: Its Second Century Unfolds*. Sheldon’s legacy beyond the shores of Lake Ontario may be witnessed in the honors and recognition that his contemporaries bestowed upon him. Rogers explains,

Sheldon and the school continued to win honors, adding a glow to an already bright image. Sheldon never earned a college degree, but was awarded two honorary degrees, the first an honorary master’s by Hamilton College in 1869, and the second in 1875, an honorary doctorate by resolution of the Board of Regents. At the 1893 World’s Fair, in Chicago, Sheldon became the president of the Department of Professional Training and Teachers, the highest honor in the field. At the close of the Fair, the Oswego Normal School was awarded a medal of honor.¹¹⁷

These accolades certainly suggest that his legacy was recognized in his lifetime. Such recognitions strongly indicate that his legacy was influencing the nation as a whole.

Recognition at the Columbian Exposition indicates that Sheldon and Oswego’s impact be reported to the rest of the world.

Rogers offers the reader two other aspects of Sheldon that help gain still more perspective on this silent giant. First, she provides a better understanding of the nature of the man. As she describes Sheldon, one begins to sense the forces that endeared him to so many.

Sheldon could be extremely firm about matters of principle, a characteristic both friends and critics came to respect. When the Normal trustees asked him to modify certain policies, his daughter, Mary said he brought his hand down on the table with

¹¹⁶ Gordy, *Rise and Growth*, 123.

¹¹⁷ Dorothy Rogers, *SUNY College at Oswego: Its Second Century Unfolds* (Oswego: Auxiliary Services, 1988), 5.

great force and said, “I would resign from this school and lose my salary before I would give up that which I know is right.”¹¹⁸

This anecdote supports the notion that the respect and affection for Sheldon was far-reaching and based on his personal character. That character is part of the legacy of Sheldon and a spirit that seems to have been developed in many of his protégés.

Ned Harland Dearborn examined the influence of Oswego in *The Oswego Movement in American Education*. One needs to look no further than Dearborn’s dedication to note the impact that Oswego has had on American education. Dearborn dedicates his work “To those who have contributed to the fame of the Oswego State Normal and Training School and to those who are now striving and who in the future will strive to maintain its honorable position in America education.”¹¹⁹ Dearborn elaborated on the ways that Oswego had produced its honorable position. He offered the reader an important understanding of teacher training programs. As he explained, “There were only twelve state normal schools in the country when the Oswego Training Class was organized in 1861.”¹²⁰ If one were to consider that statistical reality, it provides some understanding of the possible influence of Oswego. Sheldon’s school was at the start of the movement for professional training of teachers and that afforded him the opportunity to have a prominent voice in the process. A skeptic might be inclined to see Sheldon as a self-promoter who cornered the debate and silenced the naysayers. The historical record of both the study of the Oswego Method and the published debate between Sheldon and critics such as H.B. Wilbur suggest that was not the case. In fact, that record depicts an

¹¹⁸ Rogers, *SUNY College at Oswego*, 5.

¹¹⁹ Ned Harland Dearborn, *The Oswego Movement in American Education*, (New York: Arno Press & The New York Times, 1969), dedication.

¹²⁰ Dearborn, *The Oswego Movement*, 98.

educational dynamo who, with his protégés, promoted a course of action in the American classroom.

It is clear that public education and the training of teachers were relatively new concepts in 1861. While most states in the north had developed public school systems for the education of children in the reform era of the antebellum period, ideas about how teachers would be formally trained and what approaches were best implemented to advance society were just beginning to be explored. Sheldon saw the need to create a system to educate the whole child and develop the teacher to achieve that objective.

Oswego was at the front end of the curve. That placed Oswego and its new model of training, focused on Pestalozzian theory and practice teaching, as a model to be examined. Sheldon and his protégés not only developed a systematic program at the front of a new movement, the Oswego graduates also moved on to many other institutions. Dearborn elaborated, “Just what impetus was given to the development of the professional schools by the Oswego institution is difficult to determine. Convincing evidence that Oswego substantially influenced these schools during this period (1861-1862) rests in the distribution of its graduates among teacher-training institutions.”¹²¹ Dearborn listed a partial list of state normal schools and city training schools that had Oswego graduates among their ranks. He explained, “These lists, although incomplete, include sixteen different state schools in eleven different states outside New York, and twelve city schools in ten states.”¹²² Once again, if scholars were to investigate the number of training institutions and the portion of those institutions that had

¹²¹ Dearborn, *The Oswego Movement*, 99.

¹²² Dearborn, *The Oswego Movement*, 99.

individuals who were trained in the “Oswego Method,” it appears that Sheldon’s practice and disciples had a tremendous effect on early teaching training programs.

Dearborn further analyzed the impact that Oswego had on American education by investigating the alumni records over the first twenty-five years of the Oswego Normal School. Dearborn indicated, “A study of alumni records shows that during the twenty-five year period (1861-1886) graduates taught in 43 states besides New York State, and in the District of Columbia.”¹²³ Such a distribution of alumni demonstrates the potential impact that Oswego had on the nation. First, the spreading of Oswego alumni may suggest that there was a desirability of emerging public school systems to have people trained in the Oswego Method. Perhaps the reputation of Oswego and Sheldon was leading schools from everywhere to extend offers to employment to individuals trained there. Second, the individuals who attended Oswego shared Sheldon’s view of teaching as a calling and desired to go forth and spread the Gospel of Sheldon and individual student potential achievement through direct object learning.

A commitment to this teaching philosophy and a willingness to spread the Gospel of Sheldon lead to a great migration of Oswego alumni. Such a migration of Oswego alumni suggest that techniques and principles of teaching and teaching training were diffused globally and may have influenced educational thought and philosophies in ways that may be impossible to assess. Having stated that, Dearborn offered the scholar a strong rationale and insight into these concepts of Oswego influence. He stated, “Graduates went into these many localities throughout the country and beyond its boundaries in practically every existing educational capacity – classroom teachers, supervisors, principals, superintendents, critics, directors of

¹²³ Dearborn, *The Oswego Movement*, 100.

training, and normal school presidents.”¹²⁴ Dearborn’s analysis, while unable to provide definitive or quantifiable evidence to assess fully Oswego’s influence, indicates that such influence was definitely present. He further suggested,

To add to the probable influence of the Oswego School, mention should be made of educational contacts made through lectures and institute work on the part of its instructors and its graduates; by the textbooks, manuals, and materials prepared by the same groups; and by the publicity and information given by the frequent appearance of articles in newspapers and educational journals. There can be little doubt in the face of the facts presented in this study, and reports given in miscellaneous form elsewhere that there was justification for Oswego being called a Mecca of American elementary education.¹²⁵

Dearborn turned his attention to the influence that practice teaching has had on American education. While the importance of direct object learning and the development of the child’s potential are enormous concepts to the world of elementary education, practice or student teaching is a fundamental and universally practiced aspect of teaching training regardless of age group.

Rogers elaborates on the unique efforts made at the Oswego Normal school professional training. She states:

Just as Oswego had become famous as a center for training elementary school teachers, it became well known as a source for manual training instructors...Oswego cannot claim to have offered the first manual training course in America; this distinction belongs to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. However, Oswego was the first Normal School to offer such training, and was among the first, if not the first, in 1896, to organize a shop for training teachers to make your own school equipment, and among the first to introduce a shop course in the elementary school.¹²⁶

Such innovations demonstrate a normal school atmosphere that matches the inquisitive nature of Sheldon. As one studies his life, he or she is amazed to note the lifelong curiosity that the

¹²⁴ Dearborn, *The Oswego Movement*, 102.

¹²⁵ Dearborn, *The Oswego Movement*, 102.

¹²⁶ Rogers, *SUNY College at Oswego*, 9.

man possessed. That personality trait may have contributed not only to the success of the college, but the legacy of Sheldon himself.

One can examine the events of 1896 as representative of the exploring nature of Sheldon's mind. As Rogers reports:

Sheldon's wife died in 1896, a terrible blow to him; nevertheless, in 1897, at age 74, he enrolled as a student in a summer-school course in Chicago to learn more about the Spear methods of teaching arithmetic. The very next month, August, Sheldon died. But his work survived him, with his signature clearly stamped on it.¹²⁷

Such a curious mind, even to the end, depicts an individual who would have been attractive to others, but also worthy of the praise that he earned over his lifetime.

Dearborn examined the notion of practice teaching, as it existed in varying schools around the time that Oswego was founded. He suggested that elements of practice teaching in varying forms existed in other places around the time that the Oswego Method was being established. To depict the difference in teaching training that is unique to Oswego, Dearborn emphasized the importance of the campus school. He explained, "Oswego emphatically endorsed the idea of practice in teaching by establishing at the outset a 'practicing school.' In this respect Oswego may be said to have established a precedent among the state institutions engaged in teaching training."¹²⁸ Such an emphasis on practice teaching is the foundation of teacher training and the culminating element of most education programs. Dearborn concluded, "Perhaps we owe the impetus to the movement as a phase of teacher training to the Oswego State Normal and Training School."¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Rogers, *SUNY College at Oswego*, 5.

¹²⁸ Dearborn, *The Oswego Movement*, 106.

¹²⁹ Dearborn, *The Oswego Movement*, 106.

There can be little doubt that Sheldon was an extraordinary individual who profoundly changed American education. He did so primarily through his promotion of the professionalization of teachers. He promoted the need for the formal training teachers. He was strongly influenced by Pestalozzi and his ideas. These values forged the core of his educational pedagogy. To validate these concepts, he advanced a training school to support Pestalozzian methods being more effectively used in the classrooms of Oswego. These methods required labor-intensive action by the classroom practitioner. Dearborn relates the importance of the application of Pestalozzian principles within the normal school. As he explains, “It is quite clear that Dr. Sheldon selected his teachers for their ability to advance the principles of education which are based upon Pestalozzianism.”¹³⁰ In so many ways, this citation of Dearborn epitomizes the true nature of Sheldon and why the Oswego Movement was so far-reaching. Sheldon developed a worldview toward education and the dynamics of the classroom. This view was accepted by others and embraced by fellow educators; he stayed on point for more than a quarter of a century, until his view of teaching, and learning had been accepted everywhere.

The value of what these protégés brought to these distant communities is noticed in their compensation. Rogers explains:

Oswego alumni fared somewhat better than the average, at least economically. By 1880, 98.5 percent of them were teaching in twenty-nine states and territories, including Japan, the Sandwich Islands, Nova Scotia, and Argentina, and at considerably higher than average pay, because of Oswego’s reputation.¹³¹

¹³⁰ Dearborn, *The Oswego Movement*, 36.

¹³¹ Rogers, *SUNY College at Oswego*, 13.

Such a reputation within twenty years of the school's creation suggests that Oswego's methods and newly implement techniques and training elements were extremely well received.

After all, Sheldon was "substituting the teacher for the textbook." It did not take long for Sheldon to realize the dynamic nature of what he had endeavored to produce. Districts outside his own began taking his well-trained young teachers and bringing them to their communities. Ever the pragmatist, Sheldon realized the need to establish an institution, which would be dedicated to the training of teachers. To produce teachers who embodied these methods, Sheldon's training program-included practice teaching with criticism. This monumental advancement in the training of teachers is one of Sheldon's great accomplishments within the field of education. These methods and training elements garnered much interest in the expanding arena of public education. Normal schools from around the nation clamored for Oswego graduates. They vied for these graduates to gain better understand of the practices that are now universally practiced in the United States. These Sheldon disciples spread the Oswego Method everywhere with such completeness that Sheldon has been almost completely forgotten though his method endures.

Concluding Thoughts Regarding Sheldon

As is often the case, a historical investigation of an individual suggests that things are more complex than they first appeared. It would be easy for me to conclude that Sheldon a pioneering force in the world of public education and leave it at that. Such a response would be incredible shortsighted and offer little opportunity for further study of him. Due to a range of issues, I am left with many questions left unanswered and wanting resolution. If my time

was unlimited and I was not a full-time teacher in the Syracuse City School District, other documents could have been explored and a fuller picture into Sheldon could have been painted.

One of the more interesting issues that I was unable to determine is that of Sheldon's personal struggles. While he was dynamic and a true force of nature, Sheldon suffered from his own personal demons. Whether those demons were psychological, physical, or familial are left for further examination. The historical record depicts a man who left his college after his junior year, never to complete his degree. The evidence further indicates that he took a two-year leave of absence from his time as the leader of the normal school. In both incidents, there is an indication that he was suffering from fatigue of some sort. Is this a matter of a man pushing himself so hard for so long that he simply wore himself into true physical exhaustion? I am not an expert in the field of psychology, and even if I were, the evidence is sparse and filled with conjecture. In Sheldon's time and place, psychology was a newly emerging field of study. Sheldon's state of mind, on the whole, was inquisitive and energetic. These two episodes within his life suggest that there were moments when he struggled. That reality is quite appealing to me – it makes him a little more human to me.

Other element that intrigued me was the issue of Sheldon as an abolitionist. While his letters indicated that he was in anti-slavery camp, he did not choose to include them in his autobiography. His daughter added these letters, indicating his personal views, into the autobiography. One must ask why. Why did he not opt to include them? Did his daughter include them to give him an even more favorable light in history? Did his involvement within events like the "Jerry Rescue" curtail his job as the superintendent of the Syracuse Schools? If so, was he bitter about leaving Syracuse? He comments do not suggest any of this, but perhaps

he is just trying to give himself more positive spin on returning to Oswego. Such questions fall outside of my examination, but perhaps offer future researchers some topics for consideration.

What also seems clear is that the dialogue that he fostered regarding the nature of students and learning has been ongoing ever since. The notion of the teacher as the knowledge giver versus the student-centered inquiry based model discussion is always being debated. The notions of education and its impact of students have also remained with us. Just as Sheldon was concerned about delinquency and future criminal behavior, these notions have persisted for more than a century and a half. Students who do not receive a quality education are often believed to be on the path to a wayward life.

One of Sheldon's most strongly supported convictions centered on the notions contained in Pestalozzianism. He became convinced that through object learning every child could learn. Within his way of thinking, the teacher became the facilitator of learning and the student became the learner. This notion would alter the nature of the American classroom forever. This model allowed each student to be looked at as an individual rather than a container into which knowledge could be poured. The modern school looks to "differentiate" learning so that the student may learn at a developmentally appropriate level. Hence, elements of Sheldon's lessons have remained with us to this day. While I have not examined his lessons specifically, future researchers may wish to do so.

These educational values led to the formation of the Oswego Normal School. It is not only a lasting institutional legacy; its innovations were embraced by other institutions and became universally practiced. The notions of both lesson plans and student teaching have endured more than 150 years. While the some of the elements of these practices may have

changed, the essence of both are essentially as Sheldon developed at the normal school. These elements focused on honing the skills needed by teachers to aid in student learning. Once these skills were developed, the potential for life-long learning was possible. Further examination of these lesson plans may afford scholars an even clearer picture of what seems to be part of Sheldon's appeal for many during his lifetime.

In his time in Syracuse, Sheldon argued that a comprehensive high school would be the focal point for every community and be the capstone of public education. He expressed the view that a high school would be the institution that every community would rally. Not only is it referenced in his autobiography, Fowler supports it in his study of the first 120 years of the Syracuse Public Schools. More than 150 years after the fact, Sheldon's view of the community comprehensive high school exists throughout the country. While there have been efforts to promote magnet schools or other types of schools with specialized curricula, the standard promoted by Sheldon in 1851 continues to this day. The impact can be seen in the fact that by 1940, more than 1.2 million students were graduating from high school. Was Sheldon a forerunner to the comprehensive high school or just one of many cheerleaders? I did not examine that aspect of him. A future researcher may wish to examine that element and assess his role in the development of the comprehensive high school.

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