The City Schools of Terre Haute

The love of learning, always alive in the hearts of the city fathers, stirred citizens to establish the beginnings of a system of education for Terre Haute and Vigo county. Terre Haute had begun its existence about six weeks before Indiana became a state in the Union, and in the years from 1816 to the 1830's children of the community like the children in other places attended whatever private schools there were in their neighborhoods. When parents paid the expenses of the school, they sometimes sent part of the teacher's salary in skins, grains, or garden truck. The story is told that one teacher received so much of this kind of pay that he kept a pupil sitting at the door to hail all who passed by and sell some of the produce. At least one of the private schools of those far gone days has left some slight record for itself. It is described in the early history of Terre Haute as follows: "The school house stood at the northwest corner of fifth and Mulberry streets, a roughly hewed log house of one story with the size and shape of the windows and the door cleverly indicating the purpose for which it had been built."

By 1831 the hardest days of getting settled were over for some families and they felt that they now could turn to the problem of providing some organized schooling for the rising generation. Judge Amory Kinney and John F. Craft were the principal movers to organize a society to erect a permanent school building, and thus the "brick school house" came into existence. Terre Hauteans "puffed out their chests" and pointed with pride to this edifice which was constructed at the corner of fifth and Walnut streets. Certain parts of the walls of this building still are preserved in the Catholic church now occupying the site. To finance the project, a group of men had formed an association, each taking $100 stock divided into 20 shares of five dollars each. The house was planned to seat comfortably at rather primitive double desks about fifty pupils, but some times three pupils were crowded into the space intended for only two. The care with which the citizens put into this common endeavor is seen in the fact that "the house was built back a little way from the sidewalks, out of the reach of the din and distractions of business. Fifth street was selected because it was then almost out of town, for education seeks a quiet nook for its ingratiating influences upon mankind." The first board of trustees for the Terre Haute school society consisted of Russell Rose, Joseph Miller, and William C. Linton.

During the period from 1832 to 1838, the public school system of Terre Haute was under the jurisdiction and pay of Harrison township.

One of the outstanding teachers of the day was Benjamin Hayes who taught for more than a quarter of a century. He came to Terre Haute before 1835 and taught continuously until old age and new methods admonished him to seek rest. William Wood Parsons, who later became the eminent president of the Indiana State Normal, went to school to "Uncle Benny". Mr. Hayes taught at different times in the Congregational church basement, in the brick school house, on north third street, on the corner of third and Oak streets, in a white frame house on the northwest corner of sixth and Cherry streets, and finally in the front part of his own home on Eagle street. He was a conscientious voter of the rod for the government of the child, and he stoutly maintained that a boy must go through arithmetic three times before he could cipher worthy of the name.

The period from 1838 to 1853 found the Terre Haute schools with little public money. A number of private schools arose in which the pupils studied whatever the teachers could teach, but in June 1853 the General Assembly passed an act to form a system of free public schools; and, consequently, the Terre Haute city council elected the first five school trustees: Moses Soule, Virgil J. Burnett, James Hook, Amory Kinney, and Joseph Cooper. Several "early-candle-light" meetings of the school board were spent in ordering committees to "report in writing", which they failed to do, in requesting citizens to help in securing the rental of school rooms; in the election of three male teachers, T. D. Isam for one quarter at five dollars per month; and Benjamin Hayes and C. F. Frost at one hundred and twenty-five dollars per quarter; and instructing the clerk to advertise in the "Prairie City" for six female teachers.

There were 1,324 children of school age within the city limits.

The Vigo County Seminary was purchased, and in addition, church basements were equipped for school rooms. During the ensuing term, the board paid $2 for stove wood, and $1 for a Webster's Dictionary—declined to employ a music teacher for the schools—printed 500 copies of "Rules and Regulations"—compromised a claim for repairs on the house in District No. 2 rather than stand a suit at law—made an order in regard to the times for the ringing of the Seminary bell—returned one boy to his own school who had "transferred himself" so as to associate with companions he considered more congenial—and voted the Friday after Thanksgiving a holiday in the school. The salaries of teachers ranged from $16 to $40 a month for women, and $33 to $45.50 for men. A new school was built at third and Oak streets (the old Ross building).

William M. Ross was elected principal of the schools and shortly afterwards was made superintendent.

All Vigo county at this time had only $60,693.80 to her credit, and since the interest on this sum would not reach very far in educating children, the Common Council was kept busy filling vacancies caused by the resignation of