CHAPTER ONE

Part One

“The Pioneers: Women at the State Normal School of the Ninth District, Indiana, Pennsylvania, 1875-1900”

The Indiana Normal School was in its youth when the class of ’79 was graduated. We were the pioneers sharing the privileges and privations of our time… We had wise instructors who were in love with learning and eager to impart it.”


Background

Sarah Gallaher, a graduate of Indiana State Normal School (ISNS), described the one room school that she had attended in the mid-1800s as having from 75 to 85 students below “high school attainment.” In age, she reported, they were ranging “from six minus to twenty-one plus.”

This situation was not uncommon. At the time school teaching paid little and required little or no professional certifications or degrees. Instructors in such challenging settings often had no training beyond graduation from a similar institution.

The teacher in this setting was also most commonly a woman. Teaching was one of the few professions open to respectable women in the first part of the century. By 1864, women made up the majority of teachers in many states, including Pennsylvania, causing scholars to comment on the “feminization” of the teaching profession.

Educational reformers lamented the quality of instruction in such schools. What could be done to improve the instruction in the rural schools which dotted the state? A commonly voiced remedy for this sorry state of affairs was to provide better access to professional instruction in teaching. Professional training beyond the common school was available in colleges and universities, but it was expensive and beyond the means of most of those who desired further preparation. The
salaries of teachers were also notoriously low, (women were paid even less than male teachers), and such positions were not attractive to college graduates.

The most accessible means of professional training for teachers were teacher’s institutes. These were workshops which offered teaching professionals opportunities to learn new methods from instructors with more expertise. At such institutes held in Indiana, Pennsylvania, between the years of 1869-1871, the notion of beginning a normal school at that location to provide for more regular teacher instruction found voice.

American normal schools began in the first decades of the 19th century. By the end of the century, they were flourishing and were being opened in locations across the country to train teachers for the common schools.

Normal Schools were considered to be exceptional places, permanent institutions which specialized in teacher preparation with a mix of instruction in content and pedagogy and actual practice in teacher methods generally in an affiliated model school. Many believed them to be the best means of preparing students for the teaching profession. In fact, they thought them much better than short-term teachers’ institutes, or even ordinary colleges. Their focus on teacher preparation made them different from colleges in that their students tended to include many females.

In 1857, the Pennsylvania legislature encouraged the development of normal schools with the enactment of a Normal School law which divided the state into normal school districts and provided some funding for one school in each district. Indiana, Westmoreland, Cambria, and Armstrong counties made up the State’s Ninth District. By 1869, it was still lacking a Normal School.

Leading citizens including bank president, real estate broker and merchant John Sutton and state senator Harry White, advocated for the development of a normal school in Indiana, Pa, and set about raising funds from private subscriptions and state appropriations to build one. Other leading voices in the community used the pages of the local newspaper to put out calls for building the school for a variety of educational, civic, and economic reasons.

Eager for an institution of higher education, they recognized that state support for a normal school would help make it a successful venture. Many argued that the school could have a positive
economic impact on the community. Senator White wrote and introduced a bill in the state legislature that was passed in 1871 which provided funding for the establishment of the school. Stock certificates were sold to private investors and sufficient funding was raised for the project to become a reality.

Though founded as a normal school for teacher preparation, those who developed the school had broader visions. At a time when high schools were not common, and colleges and universities expensive and far away, the normal school could offer an affordable, accessible alternative for those seeking preparation for other academic and professional work. Their vision is clear in the first catalog which claimed that “We feel confident that there are no better opportunities to obtain a general business, and scientific, and liberal education, or to pursue studies preparatory to those that are strictly professional, than will be afforded at this institution.”