

EARLY YEARS OF HUMBOLDT: PERSONAL THOUGHTS AND RECOLLECTIONS

PART 1

The First Ten Years of Humboldt

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The Humboldt State Normal School was established by an act of the California Legislature, sponsored by Assemblyman (later Senator) Hans Nelson and approved by Governor Hiram Johnson on June 16, 1913. Nelson Hall was named in honor of the sponsor of this legislation. The earliest Normal School in the State was the San Jose Normal School established in 1862 "for the education of teachers for the public schools of this State."

As it read in 1913, the California School Law authorized local Boards of Trustees governing normal schools "to establish at their discretion courses for the training of teachers, drawing, music, physical culture, and commercial and technical or industrial subjects in the elementary and secondary schools of this state and upon satisfactory completion of the course to grant diplomas of graduation."

Although the law mentioned "secondary schools," the training of teachers in secondary education, for years, remained the prerogative of the University of California.

The bill creating Humboldt specified that this normal school was to train "teachers and others in the art of instructing and governing the public schools of this state, the course of study prescribed for use . . . to include agriculture and manual training."

A governing board of five local trustees appointed by the Governor, with him and the State Superintendent of Public Instruction acting as ex officio members, was to select the site for the Humboldt State Normal School. The five local members of the Board were W. E. Cook, Henry Bridges, and Charlotte Gale from Eureka, Rease Wiley of Arcata, and Ed Haight of Fortuna. Also the Board was authorized to establish and maintain "a model and training school of the primary and

grammar grade and to require the students of the normal school to teach and instruct classes therein."

Prior to the establishment of the Humboldt Normal, and as late as 1923 when I joined the Humboldt faculty, a majority of the elementary school teachers in Humboldt County were certificated on the basis of a County Examination. The county suffered from geographic and cultural isolation, with San Francisco 300 miles away and difficult of access; and the nearest normal school, Chico State Normal School, 230 miles away with a range of mountains separating the two regions and no improved road between them. Students desiring to become teachers, therefore, had to leave the County, and because of its distance from other Normal Schools, the County found it very difficult to attract qualified teachers from outside. These conditions strongly argued for the establishment of a normal school in this area.

No sooner than the Act establishing Humboldt became a law, a fierce competition developed between Arcata and Eureka, each city desiring to establish the new school in its own locality. Eureka, of course, assumed that it was the logical place for the school because it was the largest city in the County as well as the County seat.

The legislature had appropriated \$100,000 "for establishing and maintaining said Normal School" for a two year period; but no money was to be spent until a two-year lease free of charge and suitable building for the use of the school was executed and delivered.

In compliance with this provision, Mr. J. J. Krohn, President of the Arcata Chamber of Commerce, and general manager of the California Barrel Company at Arcata, which at the time employed practically the entire labor population of the city, together with Mr. George Burchard, presented a

petition to the Board of Trustees for the establishment of the school in Arcata, offering, in support, the use of two buildings free of charge, together with laboratory facilities at the Arcata High School. In addition, a Finance Committee of the Chamber of Commerce, consisting of Mr. W. W. Stone, J. J. Krohn, and Henry F. Brizard undertook to raise \$15,000, more than matching the State appropriation, and their pledge to the Board was guaranteed by the Bank of Arcata. Also the Arcata Odd Fellows' and Masons' Lodges donated \$500 for financial assistance to students, later augmented to over \$1,000.

A series of meetings by the Board of Trustees were held in Eureka on September 17, November 6, and November 13. The first two were organizational, but at the meeting of November 13, the Board voted three to two in favor of locating the Normal School in Arcata. But Eureka protested, alleging that the Board had failed to notify the Governor and the Superintendent of Public Instruction to attend that meeting. The matter was referred to Mr. U. S. Webb, State's Attorney General, who in a communication to the Board, dated November 17, notified the Trustees that whereas the two organizational meetings were valid, the meeting of November 13 was illegal because the Governor and the Superintendent of Public Instruction were not notified of the meeting. Upon being notified of the Attorney General's ruling, Governor Hiram Johnson sent the following message, dated November 21, to the Trustees:

"I waive all former notices of prior meetings of the Trustees of Humboldt State Normal School and do confirm and ratify the action of the Trustees thus far taken."

A similar wire was sent to the Trustees by the State Superintendent. This entangled situation lasted for some time and although the Board declared January 5, as the official date for the opening of the school year, Nelson B. Van Matre, who had been elected as President of the Humboldt State Normal School on November 6, had to postpone the date because he felt he was not authorized to proceed until the problem was definitely solved.

Meanwhile, Eureka submitted to the Board guarantees for the financing of the School for two years, and a lease on a suitable building for the use of the new institution. Finally, the Governor called another meeting of the Board at Sacramento on February 4, 1914, at which meeting a majority of

four to three, including the Governor and the Superintendent of Schools plus Mr. Wiley and Mr. Haight, voted to locate the Normal School at Arcata. That marked the end of the controversy, and soon the Board of Trustees appointed N. B. Van Matre, who was serving then as Superintendent of Schools in Eureka, as the President of the Humboldt State Normal School.

One is tempted to speculate about the influences which prompted Governor Hiram Johnson to take such a strong position in favor of Arcata. The prompt and concrete response of the Arcata citizens in meeting the provisions of the act establishing the School must have been a factor. In fact the founders stressed the importance of this factor to me. Eureka took it for granted, they said, and they lost.

A more subtle factor may be found in the history of the early business relationships between Alexander Brizard, the father of Henry Brizard and founder of the Brizard enterprises, and P. E. Bowles of Oakland. Mr. Bowles was the organizer of the American Trust Company, an important banking concern in the Bay area. He was also a regent of the University of California, and Bowles Hall on that campus bears his name. His daughter had married the son of the Governor. One could conjecture, therefore, that this background afforded Henry Brizard, through Bowles, access to the Governor's office. At this time Henry was the President of the Brizard Company, the chief merchant in Humboldt County, and a very public-spirited citizen. A few years later Henry Brizard married Kate Bennet, niece of Mr. Bowles, who was brought up in the Bowles home.

Still another person who exerted, at the time, political influence in Humboldt County and worked to have the School located at Arcata, was Ralph Bull, an Arcata businessman, chairman of the County Republican Central Committee, President of the *Humboldt Times*, and of the same party as the Governor. Mr. Bull was later appointed Chairman of the State Highway Commission, and remained a strong supporter of Humboldt all his life. He and Rease Wiley, a member of the Board of Trustees above referred to, and owner of the *Arcata Union*, no doubt used their journalistic influence on the Governor.

The name "Humboldt" was given to the new Normal School not only in commemoration of Alexander Von Humboldt¹, a world renowned

scholar and scientist, but because the founders desired to develop a regional consciousness in favor of the School by adopting the name of Humboldt County.

According to Humboldt's first annual Catalog for 1915, the Humboldt State Normal School opened for business in the old Grammar School on April 6, 1914, with an annual budget of \$17,247, a year's enrollment of 78, about a dozen of whom were men, and initially with a faculty of four members, later augmented by three more. The 1915-16 catalogs list sixteen faculty members, among whom one finds the name of R. L. Jenkins, an instructor in "Manual Training," later the beloved "Pop Jenkins," Professor of Industrial Arts, after whom Jenkins Hall is named.

Although the catalog mentions that 150 students were in attendance in April of that year, for many years, while the institution struggled for survival, enrollment was greatly padded by the registering of people from town who took only one or two units of class work. Almost all students were from Humboldt County.

The School offered a one-year special curriculum designed to upgrade teachers in the field, and a two-year "professional" program to graduates from high school. It also offered college preparatory work for those who had completed only two years of high school work, or were only grammar school graduates. Both the one and the two-year programs consisted almost entirely of methods and vocational courses plus review of subjects taught in elementary schools. Entering students had to sign a declaration of intention to teach in the schools of the State. Graduates were entitled to a credential issued by the State Board of Education, authorizing the holder to teach in any elementary school in California.

The "Model Training School" for "practice teaching," began functioning in April, 1914, with five grades, utilizing the city school system under Normal School supervision.

Humboldt's first commencement exercises were held on May 26, 1915. Fifteen students, all women, graduated. Actually, Susie Baker, later Mrs. Eugene Fountain, was the first graduate. Possessing the B. S. degree from the University of Nebraska, she completed her studies five months ahead of the other graduates.

According to the School catalog, the 1915 session of the State legislature appropriated \$84,185 for support of the School for the next

two years, causing the School president to declare: "The above appropriation is in recognition by the State of the magnificent showing made, and the thorough and efficient training offered by this School."

It was soon realized that the old Grammar School, which housed the Normal School, proved inadequate, and the local Board members, in cooperation with other Arcata citizens, undertook to find a new site for the School. For this purpose, Mr. William Preston, the son of a pioneer family, and a man of simple taste but of large vision, deeded twenty-five acres of land, supplemented by another, equal, gift from the stockholders of the Union Water Company. These stockholders were: Noah H. Falk, a wealthy pioneer lumberman, President; Len Yocom, who was later elected to the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors, Secretary-Treasurer; Mrs. Arthur W. Way, the wife of Arthur W. Way, later a senator in the State legislature; and Mrs. Kate L. Harpst. Mr. Harpst was later President of the First National Bank of Arcata.

In 1915, Senator William Kehoe and Assemblyman John Quinn introduced companion bills that were soon approved by the legislature and the Governor. The bill appropriated \$91,285 for buildings and the Board decided to select the Preston tract as the site for the permanent and temporary buildings for the School.

A state architect having inspected and found the site suitable, the stump land was cleared and during the next six months temporary wooden buildings were erected and were ready for occupancy at the beginning of 1916. The new buildings, built around a quadrangle and interconnected, provided classrooms for Normal students as well as for the pupils of the training school. No provision was made for dormitory or cafeteria. After the move to the new buildings, several streets were graded giving access to the new campus.

In June 1915 a summer school was also organized, offering a program of courses and special lectures by invited prominent educators, designed to upgrade rural school teachers. Courses were also offered by correspondence to enable students to complete one-fourth of Normal School credits. The charge was one dollar for each course. To strengthen the School's relations with the public schools, arrangements were made in 1918 for members of the Normal faculty to devote one day each week as supervisors in rural schools, and in later years, a

program of affiliation was organized with the schools' area, aiming to coordinate their program with that of the Normal School.

Tuition for attendance at the Normal was free, and students had to furnish their own text books, but State textbooks could be drawn out of the school library.

Again it was soon realized that the temporary buildings, heated by stoves burning wood, unattractive and uncomfortable, could not meet the long range plans of collegiate education. So efforts were renewed for improving this situation, and the School having been already placed on a firm foundation and proven its value, justified the expenditure for a new permanent structure. In early 1917 a bill was passed by the California legislature appropriating \$245,000 for new construction and equipment on the new campus. The news was celebrated by the ringing of church bells and the sounding of factory whistles in Arcata; but because of the War, construction was delayed until 1920. Meanwhile the temporary buildings that housed the training school were moved to the present site of Nelson Hall, to make room for the new building on the crown of the hill. The new building, now named "Founders Hall," was completed in 1921, and a bronze plaque, dedicated in 1959, was placed on the wall at the entrance of the building "to honor the people whose vision, leadership, and action in 1913 resulted in the establishment of Humboldt State College." (The plaque was given by the Intercollegiate Knights and the Humboldt State College Foundation.) The plaque lists the following names:²

Governor Hiram Johnson	J. J. Krohn
Assemblyman Hans Nelson	G. A. Leach
Senator William G. Kehoe	William Preston
State Superintendent Edward Hyatt	Larry Puter
George Averill	Mrs. M. P. Roberts
J. F. Benton	Charles Stern
Henry Brizard	Hugh Stewart
Henry Bridges	W. W. Strong
Berneice Bull	Frank Toobey
Ralph Bull	Union Water Company
George Burchard	N. R. Falk
Sam Cerini	Kate Harpst
W. E. Cook	Blanche Johnson Way
Charlotte Gale	Len Yocom
Edward Haight	Nelson Van Matre
Aleanor Brizard Holcum	Rease Wiley

From the beginning a vigorous program of student recruitment was undertaken, through the

publication and distribution, in addition to the annual catalogs, of special bulletins, pictorial brochures, and quarterly letters informing the public of living conditions, of the scenic and climatic wonders of Arcata, and of the advantages of teaching as a profession, especially to men. We read in the 1915 catalog, repeated in later issues:

"Travellers who for the first time set foot in Arcata speak of the neat, trim houses, so largely finished in the clean color which has given Arcata her name (White City). Inevitably they grow enthusiastic over the happy conception which located this city on a gentle declivity, backed by ever-verdant slopes of an imposing mountain on the east, while southward are the calm waters of land-locked Humboldt Bay, and on the west the majestic Pacific Ocean, reached after a brief drive through the fruitful dairy farms which are a feature of the "Arcata Bottom."

"In situation and climate Arcatans justly feel that nature has bestowed gifts upon them with a lavish hand . . . A series of splendid drives (?) by auto have been arranged . . . vast redwood forests . . . a beautiful Plaza . . ."

The catalog also boasts of a "wholesome moral environment" and stresses that "greatest possible attention is given to the moral conditions of the School and to the moral conditions in the homes where students reside."

After describing the educational program of the School, it was stated that "knowledge gained can be directly applied by the individual for the betterment, contentment, happiness, and building of the community in which she (note the *she*) resides."

The appeal to prospective students was couched in attractive, almost flamboyant language — a sales talk. Each course description was an essay describing the contents of the course as well as the values to be derived from it. Apropos to the course in Story Telling, it was "the chief entertainment for courses and palaces. Then strong men and brave deeds were celebrated in lines that thrilled to renewed action . . . It is through the story that the mother ushers her children into the 'land of faery'." On the course in Hygiene: ". . . it should have more to do with the practical facts relating to food, fresh air, bathing, exercise, self control, work and play, than with the mechanism of respiration, or circulation or structure of nerves and bones . . ."

Two special, promotional, bulletins issued November 1915 and February, 1916, made their

special appeal to prospective students:

“... Our lives are rich or poor, depending upon the service we do and render . . . Is there any other field of endeavor that offers such opportunities for service as that of teaching? . . . Think of the joy which must come to the graduates of a Normal School . . .”

“Such graduates,” the Bulletin went on, “develop moral character, a dynamo of energy, latent powers, sensibility, makes of real men and women.”

A special appeal was made to young men students, stressing earning power, self-development, transfer value of credits earned at the Normal, and speaking to parents: “. . . about thirty-five fine, clean, young men, such associates as you want for your sons and daughters” are attending.

All these ideas reflected, for the most part, the zeal and philosophy of President Van Matre. As mentioned above, President Van Matre, at his appointment, was Superintendent of Schools in Eureka. He had received his Bachelor's and Master's degrees from Dixon College, and his Doctor of Education degree (probably honorary) from the same institution. He had considerable teaching and administrative experience prior to assuming the presidency of Humboldt. He exercised strict discipline and control over both students and faculty, and, within the law, complete control over the development of the curriculum of the School. Each member of the faculty served at his discretion. I was told that the faculty turnover was high because the President did not want any faculty member to earn sufficient tenure to challenge his authority.

The President had a sort of proprietary interest in his School, and was very proud of it. Building and ground maintenance had to be meticulous, especially after Founders Hall was built. No speck of dust escaped his attention. Students had to wear dark suits and white shirts, and no women were allowed to wear bright colors. “Responsibility” was the keynote in the President's creed. Relations between students and faculty had to be formal, the only way, the President thought, for the faculty to exercise moral influence over the students. (Early this lesson was impressed upon me, still in my twenties, and I risked the President's remonstrance by dating with a certain student. Later, I married one.) He was a tireless worker, and discharged in addition to the functions of the President, those of

admission officer, registrar, program adviser, and financial controller.

Up to 1917, the local Boards governing the California State Normal Schools were authorized to prescribe the specific courses of instruction required for graduation, and exercised control over the programs of these schools; but on January 1 of that year, authority was transferred to the State Board of Education, which now prescribed a standard curriculum for all the Normal schools in the State that would “prepare teachers of special subjects as drawing, music, physical culture, and commercial, technical and industrial branches,” including publication of textbooks for such schools. The State Board also was authorized to prescribe admission and graduation requirements. Prerequisites to admission were now graduation from high school with high grade achievement in specific subjects, plus recommendation from the principal. Health and good moral character were also stressed.

As good old “Pop Jenkins,” professor of industrial arts at Humboldt, used to say, “Humboldt was at times one gasp ahead of itself.” During World War I, enrollment dropped precipitously, with the almost total disappearance of men students from the campus, few as they were previously. The summer session had to be discontinued for a year. The decline in enrollment increased the per capita cost of maintaining the School, and raised questions about the advisability of maintaining a Normal School in this isolated area. No sooner the appropriation for the new building was approved than the State Board considered the action a mistake, and only prompt action by Senator Hans Nelson prevented the death of the new institution. Later on, during the Great Depression, the life of the School was again in jeopardy because of its high per capita cost and the drop in the State's revenues. During that period, while serving as Vice-President, I was defending our budget before a committee of the legislature, when I was told that all the students from Humboldt could be transplanted, maintained, and educated at the San Francisco or San Jose State Colleges, with a considerable saving to the State. I reminded the legislators of the State's educational philosophy: “Get the money from where the wealth is, and spend it where the children are.”

For some time the Presidents of the State Normal Schools had been meeting periodically for

the exchange of view on their instructional programs; and at their 1920 meeting at San Diego, they recommended the discontinuance of their secondary course offerings, the reduction in the number of methods courses required for graduation, and permission for electives. Also they agreed to continue their two-year teacher-education programs; but following the national trend for upgrading normal schools, they recommended the approval of a four-year curriculum covering two years of "general college work," and two years of professional education, leading to the bachelor's degree. At the same time these colleges were now authorized to offer a two-year Junior College program designed to meet the lower-division university requirements. Humboldt now adopted the name of Humboldt State Teachers College and Junior College and its 1921 catalogue included the lists of courses and other requirements prescribed by the University of California (then only at Berkeley) for the Junior Certificate. The objective of these colleges, however, remained teacher training, but now some liberal-arts courses were introduced into the curriculum. Humboldt, of course, was not prepared to offer except only a few courses in its Junior College program. Nevertheless President Van Matre issued in 1922 and again in 1923 special bulletins listing fourteen "members of the Humboldt State Teachers College and Junior College," and explaining the Junior College program. The name of Homer P. Balabanis, Instructor in "Foreign Language, Sociology, and Economics," first appeared on the 1923 roster of the faculty.

(This is the first of a two-part series. Part Two will appear in the next issue.)

¹ A profile of Baron Alexander Von Humboldt which appeared in the October 16, 1974, issue of the *Humboldt Statements* is the best and most complete story of the life of this great scientist.

² The contributions made by all these people were not equally significant. Some supported the new school and participated later in its development, but had little to do with its "establishment".