

The Educational Awakening in a Land Divided by Many Languages

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(Special for the United American)

IN OUR grandfathers' time an illiterate was unusual. In our fathers' time an illiterate was a curiosity. At the present time there are thousands of illiterates everywhere.

Connecticut is typical of the states of the Atlantic seaboard and of many states. Many years ago the General Assembly agreed that the children over sixteen years of age should not be compelled to attend school. Anyone who, after that age, could not read or write was either a dullard, a sluggard, or a nit-wit. There were only a few score in the state, but having boys in school as big as the teacher was an "infernal nuisance". Education was "for the common good and general welfare—for intelligent citizenship." "Yessiree, we'll pass that law." And it was.

Long years rolled by, a great World War was fought, and the Educator Rip van Winkle rose to his feet and staggered at what he saw. Where once had been intelligence was illiteracy, where once had been an American tongue under an American heaven now arose a babel of strange unknown languages, and Little Italies and Ghettos were everywhere. There were enough illiterates over twenty-one years of age to out-vote the combined votes of Maine, Pennsylvania, Michigan, California and Alabama at the last election. And this educated Rip van Winkle. Being wise beyond his generation, he knew that an illiterate under the definition of the U. S. Census Bureau was anyone over ten years of age who was unable to write (his name) in any language, not necessarily English.

Rip pulled himself together and began asking himself questions. Are these people here as potential citizens? Of course, otherwise they are alienating America. If potential citizens, why don't they go to school to learn English, to learn to read and write?

Perhaps no opportunity is offered them, perhaps they don't know of any such schools. Perhaps if there are such schools they have found unsympathetic and untrained teachers and an impracticable course of study, childish methods. Perhaps there is no money for such schools.

And good fellow that he was Rip started off in a hurry on his crusade, muttering like many a good schoolman who reads his Bible, "What does it behoove a town to be 100% efficient in the education of its children if it lose in its race for intelligent citizenship?"

And this is what he found. That in many states and communities the ideal of intelligent citizenship, of an intelligent and literate community, had been lost sight of in the annual school budget fight, in the estimate on the number of children of school age. Children were educated because they always had been educated. School officials knew all about the subject but little of the object of education. Like rowers lost at sea, with stars and compass gone, they just rowed and rowed. The "common good and general welfare" in Constitution and Charter was forgotten and was no longer in gold letters over each schoolroom door. Instead Rip thought he saw "for the good of the individual", and once he

thought he heard people say, "Let those who go to school or who send children to school pay for it". And Rip shuddered, for he had had bad dreams enough to know that that meant Democracy's End.

And Rip began to talk to the National Education Association and he said, "How many of you schoolmen have seen oysters soaking in fresh water?" And they thought him mad. And he repeated it until answered, and said, "Of course, so they could be eaten". And again he asked, "And which were more important, the big oysters or the little oysters?" And they said, "All were equally important. And Rip said, "Exactly—so is education for citizenship among the children and adults." "And which," said Rip, "is easier to get, a college education or citizenship?" And the great crowd shouted "Citizenship." "Yes," said Rip, "and which is more important?" And his words went far and sank deep, and the crowd went home in silence and deep thought.

And as he went through the land preaching the old time gospel of his educational ideal that democracy depends upon the diffusion of knowledge among all people many followed him. And he preached that adult elementary education was fundamentally educational, that it required certain money, carefully trained and certified teachers, practical courses of study, unusual devices and methods,—but above all pupils. For it was found that the more unlettered a man or woman was, the more difficult was it to interest him or her in night school. And all these same things applied to those illiterate native born who had had their education denied.

And Rip found that a common language was a common bond, that those foreign born who learned of and about America gave to America all they had while those who held back were denied even the pursuit of happiness and the sympathy of Americans who should have helped them. And he found that the children in the schools who had non-English speaking parents were retarded one full year at the end of the fifth year, and he put that in figures before boards of finance and education. And the argument of a saving cost rather than an ideal seemed to have a peculiar appeal to certain people.

And he found mothers in the homes, unhappy and miserable, estranged from their American speaking children and their husbands in the factories. And he found un-American standards of living and un-American thoughts in many such homes, and many of the names of such children, beyond parental control, he found upon the front pages of the newspapers. And the things they said were not complimentary.

And all these things Rip remembered and preached, and finally the government at Washington heard him and passed a law limiting immigration until that time when the great infected areas of the body politic could be eliminated and absorbed. And it was a great light and a warning to the land that those who opposed the passage of this National Law came from the states where were those of foreign birth—with votes.

And slowly a light began to dawn in the land, an

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