Experimentation: The First Principals

Bernard Mallon & Hildreth H. Smith, 1879-1881

And so they came: Aspiring students from the state’s foremost cities—Galveston and Houston and San Antonio—where by 1879 citizens were coming to expect such amenities as gas-lit downtown streets, indoor plumbing, and ready access to commercial markets; they came, too, from significant but lesser places like Waco, already a historic town with a frontier past and a cotton future; and subtropical Beaumont, its heady oil destiny yet undreamed of, a place where several hundred inhabitants depended on raucous crowds of loggers and ships’ crews for much of their livelihood. They came from such towns as Palestine and Ennis and Dallas, all of them currently booming, their fortunes transformed by the recent arrival of the railroads. Older, well-established towns like Victoria and Corpus Christi and Bastrop, whose foundings predated the Republic, also sent sons and daughters to the normal school at Huntsville.

There was Beulah Hall, who was raised on a plantation near Marshall in Harrison County. She anticipated her 150-mile trip having never ventured twenty miles from the spot where she was born. And Thomas Taylor, who arrived from the northeast Texas town of Bonham, having recently moved there from Parker County, beyond Fort Worth. At that western locale, he insisted, he had attended a “little log schoolhouse…so near the Indian country that every boy twelve years of age and older brought his rifle to school with him and stood it in the corner ready for use.”

Many more hailed from the isolated farms and indolent hamlets that covered mostly the eastern third of this overwhelmingly rural state. They converged on Huntsville from the open country around such ethnic enclaves as Schulenburg and Brenham in central Texas, and from the north Texas towns of Greenville and Whitesboro, where farmers were breaking the last acres of uncultivated land. They came from places like Comanche and Weatherford, where ranchers were as prominent as farmers. They emerged from the Big Thicket out of places like San Augustine, Crockett, and Woodville, where the rigid social codes of the Old South still dictated folkways and attitudes. They bid farewell to crossroads communities that would soon be all but ghost
First Principals

As envisioned by the legislature, the Sam Houston Normal Institute would instruct these raw applicants for up to two years in teacher training classes and then return them to their respective communities. Their newfound enlightenment, it was hoped, would radiate into every corner of the state, wherever grade school children gathered.

Scholarships for "no less than two students from each senatorial district, and six from the state at large" promised that every constituency, no matter how sparsely settled or weak in political capital, would be represented. As a condition of their award, young men and women who received their normal school training agreed to teach at local public schools in their home districts for a length of time equaling their attendance at SHNI. Seventy-four of them matriculated into the class of 1879-1880. A lesser number—referred to as the "paying students"—also enrolled.

Miss Lockett Blair, who had recently completed her studies at Huntsville's Andrew Female Academy, eagerly anticipated the chance to "mix and mingle with students from other counties and other schools." There were several more young local men and women who enrolled in the inaugural class, she recalled, "former classmates and friends, but the majority were strangers."

The town that greeted the students drew mixed reactions. Beulah Hall found Huntsville "ugly" and its streets hard to navigate. "Up hill and down dale it went, with black mud everywhere." She recalled that even where boardwalks lined the streets, the cracks claimed many a shoe heel and occasionally a sole as well, leaving unlucky pedestrians to head for the nearest shoe shop "with a sad, uneven gait." Anna Hardwicke, on the other hand, called her daily "walk through the pine forests" from her distant boarding house "one of my most pleasant recollections."

All of the students, in fact, boarded with local citizens, most in boxy two-story houses scattered about town. Scholarship students enjoyed their room and board at the expense of the state. It cost the paying students around $15 a month. Along with their acceptance notices, the successful candidates received brochures that described their prospective accommodations in glowing terms. For many of the rural students especially, amenities such as indoor bathrooms with hot water, electric lights, and "well supplied tables" represented uncommon luxuries.

Many of the students declined to obligate themselves without first inspecting the houses. Janie Park, for example, left Mexia determined to shop around. But when a "tall gentleman" met her train asking if there were any Baptist girls among the arrivals, she crossed the platform and answered, "Yes, my father is a minister of that church." From there, he escorted her to "the old Maxey place, at the foot of the hill," where her "search" ended. There she found an old acquaintance, Harry Estill, already settled in. Although the practice did not last long, she
Bernard Mallon. Bernard Mallon served as the first principal, as the chief executive was then called, of the Sam Houston Normal Institute. He came recommended on the strength of having organized successful public school systems in Savannah and Atlanta, Georgia, despite the formidable challenges posed by Reconstruction. In the first SHNI catalogue he defined the mission of the new normal institute as “the thorough professional training of teachers for the public schools of Texas.” In the weeks before classes began, Mallon handpicked the four professors who comprised the original faculty, outlined their duties, and organized the curriculum. Once the students began arriving, he met each one personally and gave them something akin to an informal orientation. His professed goal for Sam Houston had been to “make this my last and best work.” Tragically, a sudden illness cut short his life and career only eleven days after classes began.

The same legislation that made Huntsville the home of the students’ future alma mater also provided an administration for directing the school’s operations. The governor himself served as the head of the State Board of Education and shared executive authority with the Comptroller of Public Accounts and the Secretary of State, whose ex officio title for the educational post was State Superintendent of Public Instruction. They, in turn, acted in concert with a committee of local advisors sitting in Huntsville. The Peabody Foundation, moreover, expressed its own interest in shaping the mission of the new school. However well-meaning their intentions, the direct involvement of so many powerful interests in shaping the new institution was never seriously threatened.

One among these powerful interests was the governor himself, Roger Q. Mills. Sitting to one side of the governor, the legislator shifted in his chair until his pants drew up, “exposing the reddest pair of socks I had ever seen.” As the student fixated on Mills, Roberts suddenly made a forceful gesture that knocked over a glass of water sitting atop the rostrum. The governor’s immediate reaction was to vow that the school would not topple so easily. Then, perhaps realizing how his words must have sounded, he cheerfully added that the accident symbolized the way Sam’s teachers would “overturn worn and no longer useful theories of education.”

Four days later it appeared as if the foreboding augury were coming to pass, when an “uncontrollable derangement of the bowels” seized Mallon. He had spent almost every waking hour until then getting acquainted with the students and helping them adjust to their new environment. His outgoing warmth and affection for them made an indelible impression. When the sudden illness struck, recalled a student, “it cast a gloom over the school and over the entire town.”

Laura English Brasher of Montgomery County gave an indication of Mallon’s devotion to the students when she related her only personal contact with him. The principal had written the young woman that he would meet with her when she got to Huntsville. By the time Brasher arrived, however, Mallon was on his deathbed. When the student went to the boarding house to pay her respects, the principal struggled into the parlor to fulfill his promise. “He had stayed up purposely to meet me,” Brasher marveled, “an incident I always remembered.” The next week she...
found herself in a line of mourners at the Episcopal Church. As each person passed by Mallon’s casket, they bid a sincere farewell to a man they hardly knew, but sorely missed.

Before the month of October was out, the Sam Houston Normal Institute had its second principal, Hildreth Hosea Smith. On paper, at least, his peers were few. Smith had already helped found two institutions in the South and had served as college president at another. He was busy organizing the public schools in Houston when Sears encouraged him to apply for the job that eventually went to Mallon. After the principal’s sudden passing, the invitation was again extended, and this time Smith accepted.

His brief administration, one that lasted only twenty-one months, was characterized by a test of wills that developed between Smith and the local board on one side, and between himself and the faculty on the other. In fairness to the new principal, the sudden call to duty did not afford him the luxury of planning. He was further hamstrung by the involvement of so many important state and local officials who insisted on taking an active role in the school’s affairs. Smith had little choice but to continue Mallon’s work, while trying to satisfy so many bosses.

He did have one idea to contribute—the “model school.” This concept aimed to extend practical experience to the students by allowing them to teach local children under genuine classroom conditions. Beginning in the spring of 1880 Thomas Taylor took charge as principal of fifty local pupils. Anna Hardwicke served as the teacher. Both, of course, were subject to Smith’s personal direction, and he was a regular visitor in the classroom. As the semester unfolded, each senior took a turn observing Taylor and Hardwicke and then assumed command of the classroom the following day. Miss Lockett Blair expressed that it was more difficult than it looked. The experience made her realize “that I was not then a model teacher.” Her comment revealed the conflicting priorities of training teachers and educating youngsters. Given such a fundamental weakness in the program, it should have come as no surprise when disillusioned parents began pulling their children out of the school.

The problems of the model school magnified Smith’s inability to charter the kind of course that would satisfy the high expectations placed on him. Confidence in his leadership gradually collapsed under the weight of suggestions pouring in from the faculty, local trustees, and the State Board of Education. In the face of so many demanding critics, Smith began pestering the governor with such minor administrative matters as student discipline, the maintenance of physical plant, and the purchase of materials and equipment that could arguably have been paid out of a petty cash fund.

Perhaps his behavior was designed simply to impress upon the governor that he needed real power in order to be an effective principal. If so, his gambit failed. When the State Board of Education during the spring semester of 1881 began receiving unsolicited complaints about Smith from members of the faculty, it responded by investing even more control in the local board. The new powers of oversight further cut the ground from under the hapless principal. With Smith’s relations among administrators...
at an impasse, and faculty members threatening to resign if he continued, Governor Roberts signed the order that ended the principal’s rocky tenure as head of the institute.

In the classroom, the dispute had little discernable effect on the students. Enrollment, in fact, almost doubled during the 1880-1881 academic year, and the number of graduates that May totaled fifty-five, half again as many as the inaugural class. For students who had typically received inferior preparation themselves and were expected to return to those same classrooms and start turning out well-versed children, the daily routine at the normal left little time for emotional distractions.

Minnie Rawlings, who did so well on her entrance examination that she was assigned to the senior class, nevertheless expressed what many of her classmates must surely have felt. “I was not prepared,” she asserted. “How I got in is a mystery even today.”

The school’s mission, of course, was to train teachers in pedagogy; content was supposed to be a prerequisite. Nevertheless, Smith felt that most students—both scholarship and non-scholarship alike—did not demonstrate a sufficient background in the subjects they would be teaching, so he expanded the curriculum to include elements of a classical liberal arts education. A two-year course of study divided the student body into classes of juniors and seniors, depending on how they scored on their entrance examinations. In addition to the “three-R’s,” juniors studied philosophy and physiology as well as methods of instruction and school management. The seniors studied Latin, chemistry, geology, astronomy, and mental philosophy, which eventually grew into the field of psychology. Beyond mastering the methods of each subject, students also had to learn the history and philosophy of education.

Atop College Hill, Estill and Taylor and Hardwicke joined scores of other students who attended classes in rooms where they shared textbooks and sat on chairs and benches after the first-comers had claimed the few desks. “We took notes in tablets held in our hands or on our knees,” Miss Lockert Blair later reflected. She also recalled a classmate who stood up in psychology class to complain that the “back of her head was melting...between attention, concentration, repetition and a very hot stove.”

Despite a rigorous routine, the students nevertheless found time for a variety of diversions. Almost every Saturday they looked forward to gathering at the auditorium in Austin Hall, where the Philomathians and the Quarrelsome Vagabonds met for debates. In one memorable contest, they were discussing the imponderable topic of the “woman’s mind.” Frank Etheridge, defending the distaff side, sensed that his litany of the great women of history was not as persuasive as he had hoped. So, with grave conviction, he underscored: “Why, don’t you know that England’s greatest king was a queen?” With that, his fellow classmates broke into convulsions of laughter, leaving him baffled, until someone explained to him how ludicrous his “closer” had sounded.

Just as often as the debates, the lyceums included theatricals, music, and chorale ensembles. The students also found other ways to pass their leisure hours. Like the times when Austin College was enjoying its heyday, prominent men and women opened their parlors to homesick students after Sunday church services. Occasionally, the aspiring teachers enjoyed the plays of traveling acting troupes, and prominent visitors frequently addressed the students on important issues of the day. As in any college at any time, however, the most popular pastime was flirting with the opposite sex. Once again young men and women piled onto wagons filled with hay, or gathered around campfires to tell stories; more often, enamored students simply looked for ways to chance upon the objects of their affections.

Among the scant handful of faculty, Professor Oscar Cooper quickly earned the reputation as the school’s most exacting taskmaster. His intimidating presence lingered in the memories of almost everyone who later recalled their training school experience. Student Janie Park described him as “an old young man who began life backwards and was then in the old age of his youth.” Educated at Yale University, Cooper came to SHNI from the Henderson Male and Female College in East Texas, where he had served as president. A confident air amplified his polished manners, and even well-prepared students cringed when he called upon them in
class. "Geometry was my bugbear," said Lockett Blair, "and many a time did Professor Cooper's dignified 'that's sufficient' send me to my seat after an imperfect demonstration." Almost every student found him or herself on the receiving end of that curt but withering comment at one time or another.

That did not mean Cooper held his charges in low rearg. To the contrary, he simply demanded they achieve at a level equal to their full potential. Like so many professors who would follow Cooper into classrooms at Sam Houston, he admonished the most promising ones to set their sights on even higher planes of education. On an afternoon that found Thomas Taylor helping Cooper grade geometry quizzes, the professor asked the young man if he had ever considered obtaining a university degree after his education at the Normal was completed. Taylor responded forlornly that he "did not have a cent in this world…no dowry, patrimony, or prospects." Yet Cooper persisted. "You can do it. I have seen men at Yale as poor, or even poorer than you, and with less ability, work their way through Yale University." That did it, Taylor later intimated. After receiving his teaching diploma and fulfilling the obligation of his scholarship, he enrolled at the University of Virginia and graduated in 1883. Later he became dean of the engineering department at the University of Texas. It was Oscar Cooper to whom he attributed much of his success.

In the first two years of its existence, the Sam Houston Normal Institute had proven that it was capable of fulfilling its mission to cultivate teachers whose mastery of the art of pedagogy prepared them for educating the public school children of Texas. The contrast between the SHNI graduates and their untrained counterparts was readily apparent, and a resounding demand for the services of these skilled teachers soon echoed from every settled corner of the state. Sam Houston had certainly survived its wobbly beginnings and gave every indication that it sat poised on the cusp of a thriving future. Along the way, the normal school gained new supporters, both legislators and community leaders, who determined to assure that the institute would enjoy every advantage it was due.
Class of 1884 - 85 with Principal Baldwin