

THE LYCEUM IN AMERICA BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR

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A generation ago most literate Americans had heard at least once the story of a despised farm which became a fabulously wealthy diamond mine. Oddly enough, the speech itself proved the truth of its argument, for Russell Conwell and his famous lyceum address, "Acres of Diamonds," were the product of a movement which began on a Connecticut farm. That farm was at Derby, Connecticut, and on it dwelled Colonel Daniel Holbrook, whose son Josiah graduated from Yale in 1810 and returned home to start an agricultural school and to devote his life to the enthusiastic development of an idea.¹ The idea was a seed from which the roots grow deep and the foliage spreads far.

I

The word lyceum has meant many things to many people. Originally the name of an ancient Athenian grove where Aristotle taught, to Rome and to medieval Europe it became a generic term for a school of philosophy. In America it has been used to describe many sorts of organizations. It has meant a lecture hall and a theater, a Sunday School class and a vaudeville circuit, a mechanics' institute and a grange meeting. But usually it has referred to a group *bourgeois* and at least vaguely educational, and it is thus that the lyceum will here be discussed; *i.e.*, as a society for mutual improvement.

The lyceum movement which found a ready response in this country in the 1830's was no isolated phenomenon, but was accompanied by a wave of humanitarian activity in various fields. In Europe, too, a similar movement was occurring. Lord Brougham established the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in 1827,² and in Paris a series of popular lecture courses was established, a lyceum having existed there as early as 1786.³

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¹ *Dictionary of American Biography*, IX, 130-131.

² *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, III, 14-15.

³ Anna L. Curtis, "A Brief History of the Lyceum," *Who's Who in the Lyceum*, ed. by A. August Wright (Philadelphia, 1906), 18-19.

Lyceums bearing the name seem to have first appeared in America at the close of the Revolution. In 1797 a group of men calling themselves a lyceum applied to the trustees of the University of Pennsylvania for permission to hold their meetings in a room of the college.⁴ At approximately this time a society of the same name existed at Yale.⁵ Another lyceum—this one non-academic—appeared in Wilmington, Delaware; it may be more closely examined to illustrate the structure of such societies before Holbrook.

The Lycaenum of Delaware, for such was this organization's name, met twice monthly in the early part of 1798 and discussed such topics as:

"Whether there is more happiness in a Savage or a Civilized State."

"What is the most eligible Occupation or Employment in Civilized Society?"

"Whether or not there exists, in Human Nature, such a Principle as disinterested Benevolence."

"Is it to the Interest of the United States to encourage Manufactures?"

"Is Imprisonment for Debt consistent with Sound Policy?"⁶

The constitution of this society stated its objects to be (1) the improvement of morals, (2) the advancement of literature, and (3) the cultivation and diffusion of useful knowledge. Meetings were held twice monthly from November to March and once a month through the rest of the year. Dues were small: one dollar at initiation, one dollar annually, and special assessments when necessary. The officers in January, 1798, were definitely upper middle class: a lawyer was the president; a merchant, vice-president; two ministers, two physicians, and a farmer-soldier-statesman comprised the "select committee."⁷

II

Many societies existed in the early nineteenth century which were somewhat akin to the lyceum. The American Philosophical Society and the Franklin Institute shared the lyceum's interest in things educational, but the former as a learned society and the latter as a mechanics'

⁴ James Mulhern, *A History of Secondary Education in Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1933), 472.

⁵ George P. Fisher, *Life of Benjamin Silliman* (New York, 1866), 298.

⁶ *Wilmington Delaware and Eastern Shore Advertiser*, Jan. 4, 11, 15, Feb. 5, May 31, 1798.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Jan. 15, 1798. The president was General Gunning Bedford; the vice-president, Eleazer McComb; the secretary, French Macmullan; the treasurer, Captain Robert Hamilton; members of the select committee, the Rev. Joseph Clarkson, the Rev. Francis A. Latts, Major John Patten, Dr. James Tilton, and Dr. George Monro.

institute were clearly of a different genre from the lyceum.⁸ Somewhat akin, too, were the series of lectures on science delivered by such men as Isaac Greenwood, Ebenezer Kinnersley, and Benjamin Silliman,⁹ and such scientific societies as the Chester County, Pennsylvania, Cabinet of Natural Science and the Lyceum of Natural History of New York.¹⁰

The beginning of an organized lyceum, the American Lyceum Association, may be dated from October, 1826, when the *American Journal of Education* published a letter from Josiah Holbrook urging the formation of an "Association of Adults for Mutual Education" which would have a three-fold aim: (1) to present an opportunity for mutual education through study and association, (2) to stimulate interest in schools and help teachers in service, and (3) to spread knowledge by establishing museums and libraries.¹¹ This new lyceum movement seems to have distinguished itself from its predecessors by its early and intense interest in common school education.

The founder of the American Lyceum was a Connecticut Yankee, Josiah Holbrook, who was born at Derby, Connecticut, in 1788.¹² To Derby he returned, and there he opened a private school after he was graduated from Yale. Still he kept in touch with his old college by attending a series of Silliman's lectures between 1813 and 1817. In 1819 he turned from more conventional forms of pedagogy to a new adventure; he opened on his father's farm an industrial school, designed to combine manual training and farm work with book learning. Though this venture was short-lived, he returned to the idea many times during his life, establishing as early as 1824 another ephemeral experiment, an agricultural seminary. By 1826 Holbrook had become an itinerant lecturer on scientific subjects—this would seem to indicate Silliman's influence—and soon he had a factory at Boston to make such engrossing mathematical and scientific instruments as the "arithmometer" and the "astronomical orrery."

⁸ Joseph J. McCadden, *Education in Pennsylvania, 1801-1835, and Its Debt to Roberts Vaux* (Philadelphia, 1937), discusses these movements and their interrelations. Morse A. Cartwright, "Adult Education," *Dictionary of American History*, I, 13-15, presents a clear brief picture of the development of adult education. See also Martha MacLear, *The American Lyceum Movement and Mechanics' Institutes* (unpublished M.A. thesis, Columbia University, 1910).

⁹ *Dictionary of American History*, III, 260.

¹⁰ William M. Smallwood, with Mabel S. C. Smallwood, *Natural History and the American Mind* (New York, 1941), discusses very briefly the contributions of the lyceum to the study of natural history. See also McCadden, *Education in Pennsylvania*, 81-83.

¹¹ *D. A. B.*, IX, 130-131.

¹² The *D. A. B.* article just cited, written by Daniel Knowlton, is the source of the following account of Holbrook's life.

The orator and manufacturer soon became also a journalist. From 1830 to 1832 Holbrook published semi-monthly a series of pamphlets with the imposing title of *Scientific Tracts Designed for Instruction and Entertainment and Adapted to Schools, Lyceums and Families*—similar to such cheap English publications as the *Library of Useful Knowledge* and the *Penny Cyclopaedia*.¹³ In 1832 he was editing a weekly newspaper, *The Family Lyceum*. Elected in 1831 a corresponding secretary of the School Agents' Society, Holbrook moved in 1834 to Philadelphia, where he plunged very soon into the job of giving Pennsylvania the strongest and most active of all the state lyceums.¹⁴

Even the communal movement did not exclude Holbrook. Supported by John Baldwin, founder of Baldwin-Wallace and Baker Universities,¹⁵ he established a Lyceum Village at Berea, Ohio, in 1837, and there manufactured globes for classroom use. A projected Lyceum Village near New York never materialized. From 1842 to 1849 Holbrook was secretary of a central lyceum bureau in New York which arranged lecture courses and the exchange of scientific exhibits. Like the good reformer that he was, Holbrook continued to promote the lyceum system until his death in 1854. The circumstances surrounding his death seem quite an appropriate finish to his life's drama, for his devotion to the collection of minerals and plants led to his death by drowning in a creek near Lynchburg, Virginia. The life of Josiah Holbrook was a symbol of the progressive ferment in the America of the early nineteenth century.

III

The breadth of Holbrook's vision is illustrated by his early plan for a national lyceum to be composed of local divisions, one atop the other, from town to county to state to nation. Eventually, additions to each end were contemplated: the town lyceums to be divided into family lyceums, and the national lyceum to become one of fifty-two national divisions of a universal lyceum over which Lord Brougham was to preside.¹⁶

The town lyceums, according to the original plan, were to be volun-

¹³ H. B. Adams, "Educational Extension in the United States," U. S. Commissioner of Education, *Report for 1899-1900*, I, 297.

¹⁴ McCadden, *Education in Pennsylvania*, 85-88.

¹⁵ *D. A. B.*, I, 535-536.

¹⁶ *American Annals of Education* (Boston), VI, 1836, pp. 474-476; *ibid.*, VII, 1837, pp. 183-184.

tary associations "of individuals disposed to improve each other in useful knowledge, and to advance the interests of their schools," by meetings "for reading, conversation, discussion, illustrating the sciences, or other exercises designed for their mutual benefit."¹⁷ Many advantages were anticipated from these societies; it was thought that they would improve conversation, direct amusements, save expense, establish libraries and teachers' seminaries, benefit academies and district schools, and compile town histories, town maps, agricultural and geological surveys, and collections of minerals.

County lyceums were to be semi-annual meetings of delegates from the towns. They would in turn send delegates to state lyceums, for which many possible tasks were suggested, such as acting as boards of education for the states, introducing uniform systems of books, revising curriculums and methods of teaching, and supporting infant schools and agricultural seminaries. The common school system, it is to be noted, was always close to Holbrook's heart.

To gain greater strength through union, the original plan projected a national lyceum, in which all the state lyceums were to be represented. Among other functions, Holbrook thought that the national lyceum should supervise the publication of a journal of education and of cheap tracts on the arts and sciences which the town lyceums might use.

Such was Holbrook's plan. Our study should emphasize, not that the reality was so much less than the ideal, but rather that it approached the ideal as nearly as it did.

IV

Holbrook's first step was the organization in 1826 of forty farmers and mechanics of Milbury, Massachusetts, into a society which was euphemistically entitled "Milbury Lyceum No. 1, Branch of the American Lyceum."¹⁸ Within a year a sufficient number of neighboring towns had lyceums to permit a Worcester County Lyceum to be established. Neighboring Windham County in Connecticut followed Worcester's example, and the movement spread rapidly through New England and then west and south.¹⁹ By 1831 three state lyceums had been formed, in Massachusetts, Maine, and New York.²⁰

¹⁷ For the plan of the American Lyceum see *Old South Leaflets* (Boston), VI, No. 139.

¹⁸ Adams, "Educational Extension," 285; *D. A. B.*, IX, 130-131.

¹⁹ Adams, "Educational Extension," 285.

²⁰ *Dictionary of American History*, III, 316.

In that same year a national lyceum was organized at a meeting held in the New York City Hall. Annual meetings were thenceforth held through 1839, but they were usually poorly attended, the state lyceums, especially, neglecting to send delegates. The American Lyceum did not meet after 1839, very likely because its main objective, the development of common school education, was now well under way and capable of carrying on without the aid of the feeble national lyceum organization.²¹

The failure of the American Lyceum removed the possibility of a central directive agency in the movement, but the individual town lyceums remained as active after 1839 as before, though now they lost much of their interest in the public schools and continued largely as self-improvement societies.²²

But before our discussion passes beyond the American Lyceum, a brief glance at one of its units may be worth while. The Salem Lyceum, today known as the Essex Institute, is one of the few Holbrook-sponsored lyceums which are still active.²³ Through the *Essex Institute Historical Collections* may be traced the history of this society's early years.²⁴ "A sense of the value of knowledge and of the importance of its diffusion" was aroused among the citizens of Salem by numerous lectures given there in 1828 and 1829.²⁵ On December 30, 1829, a general meeting was held at Topsfield in the same county for the purpose of forming a county lyceum, according to the plan proposed by "Mr. Holbrook, of Boston, a gentleman who, by giving the first impulse to the present general movement in favor of education and knowledge, has laid the foundation of a reputation which any man might envy."²⁶ The Topsfield gathering decided that town lyceums must first be organized, the only existing one being at Beverley, and to that purpose a circular letter (just quoted on Holbrook) was issued. The appeal to the towns was successful, local lyceums arising throughout Essex County. "Such an entire change has come over the spirit of society, since these institutions have been put into operation, owing, I doubt not, to their influence," wrote the Salem Lyceum's chronicler

²¹ The story of the conventions of the American Lyceum may be followed year by year in the *American Annals of Education*.

²² *Dictionary of American History*, III, 316.

²³ Curtis, "Brief History of the Lyceum," 22-24.

²⁴ The story of the Salem Lyceum is told by one of its founders, Charles W. Upham, in his "Memoir of Francis Peabody," *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, IX, Part II (Salem, 1868).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

²⁶ Charles W. Upham, "A Circular Letter . . . for Establishing a County Lyceum," *ibid.*, XVIII (Salem, 1881), 296.

in 1868, "that it is impossible for the present generation to estimate or account for the excitement attending, or the resistance made to their introduction. Great activity and energy were required to bring the public mind to appreciate the movement."²⁷

After two preliminary meetings, one private and one public, the Salem Lyceum was formed on January 18, 1830. The organization meeting was "numerously attended, great interest was manifest, and the elections, by ballot, were accompanied by a lively contest between the supporters of different tickets."²⁸ The question of a meeting place soon arose. Refused the Town Hall, the society held its first meeting in the Methodist Church, where the president lectured on "The Advantages of Knowledge." A rapid growth of the membership forced the group to seek larger quarters, and so the Universalist Church was substituted for the Methodist until the next season, when a Lyceum Building was erected. Even then the society was so large that it had to be divided into two sections, for the second of which each week's lecture was repeated.²⁹

During the first course of lectures in the Salem Lyceum, from February to March, 1830, speakers were heard on "the authenticity of ancient manuscripts," the steam engine, physiology, geology, optics, the nervous system, astronomy, a workingmen's party, public education, the human mind, respiration, the circulation of blood, and digestion. A second series, extending from December, 1830, to May, 1835, included lectures on such subjects as "power of mind," moral philosophy, gardening, historical probability, pneumatics, Dr. Jenner and vaccination, the solar eclipse of 1831, climate and its influence on organic life, Salem withcraft, electricity, the French Revolution, optical instruments, heat, natural history, Russian history, the political prospects of Europe, zoölogy, Polish history, "the influence of the country and the age on the condition of Mankind," and "a review of the continual progress of the improvement of Mankind."³⁰ No honoraria were paid to the purveyors of this weird assortment of knowledge, all but five of whom were Salem townsmen. "This," says the chronicler, "was in accordance with the original design of the institution, which was to develop materials existing among us, encourage home talent, and here, especially, to keep in vigorous action the transmitted love of knowledge." Writing in 1868, the chronicler bewails the

²⁷ Upham, "Memoir of Francis Peabody," 51-52.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 53-54.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 55-56.

change which has brought paid lecturers "from abroad." A return to the old system, he feels, "would renew the original interest of the whole people," would raise "the standard of general intelligence," and would "perpetuate the scientific and literary reputation and pre-eminence of our city."³¹

V

The great stimulation given to the lyceum movement by Holbrook's work is shown by the increase in the number of lyceums from about nine hundred in 1810 to three thousand in 1835, just short of the zenith of the American Lyceum.³² That the collapse of the national organization did not greatly hinder the numerical increase of lyceums is shown by the fact that the number had swollen to twelve thousand by 1915.³³

But if the numerical increase was not hindered, the removal of an intelligent central body allowed several of the local units, lacking direction, to follow frivolous pursuits. The possibility of great service from the existence of a central advisory body may be suggested by listing a few of the measures recommended by the national committee: the establishment of a central museum of natural history; exchanges between local museums; the introduction of apparatus to illustrate lectures; the introduction of vocal music into the common schools; the advancement of the study of American history, constitutional law, and natural history and the environment; the adoption of a uniform plan for keeping meteorological tables; the establishment of people's colleges with departments of mechanical and applied arts; the beautification of village scenery; and the introduction of traveling libraries.³⁴

Perhaps the very breadth of interest of the lyceum movement prevented its national organization from ever attaining the obstinate, persevering stability of a society with one great love or one great hate. An authority on the lyceum has described it with six adjectives (of their aptness let the reader judge), as a voluntary, social, self-adapting, patriotic, benevolent and Christian institution.³⁵

The breadth of the national lyceum's interest is reflected by the great variety of composition and of aim among the individual lyceums. The Beriah Sacred Lyceum, for example, was a New York Sunday

³¹ *Ibid.*, 56-57.

³² Adams, "Educational Extension," 285, 290.

³³ *Dictionary of American History*, III, 316.

³⁴ Adams, "Educational Extension," 284.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 285-286.

school class which reorganized itself according to the lyceum pattern.³⁶ In several colleges, Jefferson and Williams among others, the students formed lyceums of natural science.³⁷ The West Pennsylvania Lyceum founded a manual labor school in 1833 at Zelionople.³⁸ A Philadelphia Lyceum of Teachers called an educational conference at West Chester in 1835, which led to the formation of a state lyceum in Pennsylvania.³⁹ The manual labor and vocational education aspects of the lyceum movement appealed strongly to the Pennsylvania Dutch, an immensely practical people, who formed many lyceums in the 1830's.⁴⁰ From the United States Naval Lyceum and from seamen's lyceums in various ports much aid was expected in the collection of rare foreign specimens for the cabinets of natural history which were everywhere the vogue.⁴¹ For many years army lyceums were the only educational institutions available for soldiers.⁴² Social and family lyceums and a "Young Ladies' School Lyceum" gathered innumerable collections of rocks and weeds in Pennsylvania.⁴³ Juvenile lyceums appeared in many schools, one club in New Brunswick, New Jersey, publishing a weekly journal, while many such lyceums seem to have chiefly engaged in collecting.⁴⁴

The early lyceum leaders were a very interesting group of great and, more often, near-great men. Of Holbrook much has been said. Among the other leaders were Edward Everett, scholar and statesman; William Duer, president of Columbia College; Roberts Vaux, Philadelphia educator; Thomas Grimke, South Carolina lawyer; Samuel G. Howe, pioneer in the education of the blind; and James M. Garnett, Virginia teacher and politician.

³⁶ *American Annals of Education*, VI, 1836, pp. 275, 379.

³⁷ William M. Smallwood, "The Williams Lyceum, 1835-1888," *New England Quarterly* (Orono, Me.), X, 1937, pp. 553-557; McCadden, *Education in Pennsylvania*, 82.

³⁸ McCadden, *Education in Pennsylvania*, 83.

³⁹ *Proceedings of the Education Convention held at West Chester, August 18, 1835* . . . (Philadelphia, 1835), 3; Cecil Branner Hayes, "The American Lyceum: Its History and Contribution to Education," *United States Bureau of Education Bulletin* No. 12 (Washington, 1932), 13.

⁴⁰ Adams, "Educational Extension," 290; *American Annals of Education*, VI, 1836, p. 476. A paper was presented to the 1836 lyceum convention by Hermann Bokum on "The Moral and Intellectual Condition of the German Population in the United States," *American Annals of Education*, VI, 1836, p. 273.

⁴¹ *Report of the Progress of the Pennsylvania Lyceum* (Philadelphia, 1836), 5; *American Annals of Education*, VI, 1836, pp. 411-414.

⁴² *Dictionary of American History*, I, 118.

⁴³ *Report of Progress of Pennsylvania Lyceum*, 4.

⁴⁴ *American Annals of Education*, VII, 1837, p. 96.

VI

After the fall of the American Lyceum, the local lyceums retained a vigorous, if undirected, life. Unfortunately, the membership which originally had furnished the speakers and had collected plants, minerals, books, and apparatus—and sometimes used them—began to play an increasingly passive part. As home talent proved insufficient to supply the needs of the lyceums, a class of itinerant lecturers grew whose livelihood was made by the fees paid by the lyceums. Properly to book such talent a central organization was needed, and this we have seen Holbrook tried to supply with his Central Lyceum Bureau from 1842 to 1849. The greatest demand for such an organization appeared after the Civil War and was supplied by many organizations, among them the Associated Western Literary Societies and the Redpath Lyceum Bureau.⁴⁵

Originally many of the societies pledged themselves to avoid political and religious debate, but as reform ever increasingly entered politics, the lyceums were often found to like the reformers more than they disliked the politicians. Literary figures and travelers joined the reformers on the lyceum stage, only to give way in time to a sort of early vaudeville, as humorists, musicians, minstrels, magicians, and troupes of actors took over. The roll of lyceum lecturers of the mid-century sounds like a list of the most prominent names of the day; *e.g.*, Emerson, Greeley, Beecher, Thoreau, Sumner, Bayard Taylor, Wendell Phillips, Julia Ward Howe, Josh Billings, Lowell, Lucy Stone—to mention only a few. The fees were gradually increased as the lyceums became more prosperous. Whereas Beecher once received twelve bushels of potatoes for a lecture, and John Gough talked temperance for a ham, and even Emerson hoped for little more than ten dollars and expenses,⁴⁶ toward the end of the century fees had risen to a point where Mark Twain received \$300 a lecture, Ole Bull was paid \$25,000 for fifty concerts, the explorer Stanley was given \$100,000 for one hundred lectures, and Archdeacon Farrar made \$2,150 from two speeches.⁴⁷

VII

A final judgment on the early American lyceum movement demands more information than anyone has yet gathered together in

⁴⁵ Curtis, "Brief History of the Lyceum," 28.

⁴⁶ James Eliot Cabot, *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston, c. 1887), II, 460.

⁴⁷ Curtis, "Brief History of the Lyceum," 27-30.

print. The material doubtless exists, but it is in such profusion and in such odd places that the attempts already made to judge the movement have merely skimmed the surface. The fields of American history, American literature, and education all may claim the subject or disown it, with the result that no one is willing to study it in all its aspects.

The motives of the American lyceum are those common to most of the reform movements, which, like it, spring out of the American and French Revolutions.⁴⁸ Perhaps in its earlier phases—before it was turned into a vaudeville circuit—the lyceum movement was the best evidence of the American people's indomitable striving after culture. The significance of the movement lies both in its motives and in its influence on American thought.

If the lyceum had no other reason for being, its existence would be justified by the mere fact that its fees, small as they were, often were the chief support of Emerson and of many others of lesser stature. But the lyceum did more than this. It did much to popularize local history and science, especially natural history. It introduced the people to libraries and museums. It supported the cause of public education during difficult years, and it gave the American people at large their first taste of adult education. More spontaneous and democratic than many experiments in adult education, the lyceum movement was virile but often lacked direction.⁴⁹

Truly there were "acres of diamonds" in the Derby farmer's field.

⁴⁸ Adams, "Educational Extension," 284, suggests this connection.

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Mead and Donald Slesinger, "University Extension," *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, XV, 187-189, suggests that this last statement is true of the entire adult education movement.