

Voices from 19<sup>th</sup> c. Rye Superintending School committee – G. H Jenness

The Rye Town Museum has multiple collections of Town Reports and the library has a complete set as well. This is common in most towns. In Rye our collection begins in 1863, but we know they existed before then. The report was very slim because there were no narrative reports, only statistics. The first narratives appeared 1869 with GH Jenness who was the “Superintending Committee” and he was assisted by the “Prudential Committee” of four people, one for each of the four districts (schools). Mr. Jenness did not pull any punches in his reports. This was an epoch when town officials had no fear of litigation and when he saw the abominable state of some of the town’s schools, he did not hesitate to let loose!

See excerpts below:

In 1886 GH Jenness was still at his job and he had nice things to say about teacher Clara Harvey, of Nottingham who taught in the West School. (kindness, high level of scholarship, etc.) The prudential school committee person in charge of West School was Orin Green and he must have had even nicer things to say! Although the following information does not appear in the reports, we know that Orin quickly became sweet on Clara and they were soon married. One of their sons, Harry, was a legendary woodsman and law unto himself who lived off the grid in back of the family homestead on Washington Rd. Harry attracted many visitors with his fine hard cider and venison and he was sweet on Rye’s first librarian, Helen Drake, but they never married. In 1903, his brother Charlie, drove his mother home to visit in Nottingham. It took the whole day and Charlie drove back alone to Rye the next day. Charlie ended up living alone in the family home, practiced farming, served as selectman and was a true townie. My brother David, a like minded soul, was great friends with Charlie and learned a lot of town history and culture, much of it irreverent, and all very colorful. The 200 year old home still stands on Washington Rd. near Fern Ave.

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1869

The low wages paid to female teachers have compelled many of them to seek more remunerative employment ; and we may not expect, in future, to be always able to secure the services of competent instructors at the merely nominal prices hitherto paid. A too rigid economy in this respect may lower the standard of our schools, and prove more injurious in the end than a judicious liberality at the outset.

1870

## REPORT.

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### FELLOW CITIZENS :

In presenting my second annual Report, I regret to say that the past year has not been one of unexampled prosperity to our schools. The results attained in some of the districts are discreditable to the teachers, and devoid of material benefit to the scholars. This is, doubtless, an unwelcome statement to those who have at heart the interests of education. I deem it best, however, to conceal nothing, but rather to look the matter squarely in the face — to candidly acknowledge failure wherever there has been such — to recognize merit wherever it has been manifested, to bestow praise where it is deserved, and censure where it is needed. Wherever mortifying instances of failure have occurred during the year, it has been from want of capacity to govern, rather than any lack of educational qualifications. To *govern* a school properly — to acquire the love, respect, and good will of the scholars, to impart instruction intelligently, and at the same time to maintain correct discipline without resorting to harsh measures — is something that requires rare ability. Wherever such a teacher can be found — and there are some — their services are cheap at any reasonable price. Mere book-learning is but a small part of the material needed to make a successful teacher. In addition, there are needed firmness, patience, good judgment, and above all, the ability to read human nature aright. If these latter qualities are wanting, the most splendid talents, and the most brilliant intellects may find their Waterloo in the common school-room. While I am ready to concede much that may be said concerning the fallibility of teachers, I would not for a moment hesitate to denounce the pernicious tendency of parents to prejudge them. There have been instances within my recollection, where parents have frequently expressed their dislike of the teacher, in presence of their children, weeks before said teacher entered

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1870

We cannot expect healthy children with clear heads, and active mental powers, if they are allowed to sit in hard, narrow, cramped-up benches, in bad rooms, and vitiated air, week after week, without *some* kind of physical training. While mentioning this matter, I respectfully suggest to the citizens of the East and West districts the propriety of providing some suitable place for their children to attend school. The so-called school houses in those districts, are miserable old hovels, totally unfit for the purposes designed, and hardly up to the level of second class pig-pens. They are but the relics of a by-gone age, and standing monuments of disgrace to the districts that tolerate them.

There are but few school-rooms to be found, anywhere, so mean and dirty. There are not twenty farmers in Rye, who would shelter their cattle where others seem perfectly willing to send their children, to be prepared for the active duties of life. Rye is a wealthy town, and abundantly able to support her schools in a *decent* manner at least. It is not enough that we can get along with poor school houses and schools, and still live. I desire to see our schools steadily advancing in the path of progress, until they reach a degree of perfection hitherto un-attained.

This can be done with proper management, and will yield a bountiful return for the Town's generous expenditure. It is a duty incumbent upon every good citizen to see that his children are educated to the extent of his means. It is more desirable to educate our children than to support them as criminals and paupers. It has always been a source of local pride, that none of our citizens have ever been in Congress or the State prison, and it should be our bounden duty, to see that the rising generation are saved from such a fate.

1871

The dirty old hut in the West District, miscalled a school-house, "still lives" as a monument of disgrace to the good citizens of that district. The only hope seems to be in a reliance upon the intelligence and good sense of the citizens to pull down such miserable shanties, and erect more elegant and commodious structures. I affirm that there is not a family in Rye that would live twenty-four hours in the West School-House without doing *something* to improve it. Its interior decorations (?) and its surroundings are all disgusting and demoralizing; and I wish I could add to this well-known fact, decreasing intelligence that some enterprising soap-boiler had

It is the poorest kind of poor economy to hire *cheap* teachers. The result will be *cheap* schools in every sense of the word.

The moulding of the youthful intellect and shaping of future character is, in a great measure, in the hands of the teachers: and, as a class, they take no "back seats," in shaping the destinies of mankind.

Therefore I would renew the suggestions previously made, and urge the committee to hire only such teachers as are *known* to possess the proper qualifications to teach and govern. They should be persons who have the ability to make their instruction *practical*, and who can *originate* ideas and illustrations *outside* of the dull pages of the text book.

The mass of our children do not need elaborate, high-flown theories, but plain, practical knowledge, adapted to the various business pursuits of every-day life. It may cost us three or four hundred dollars more per year to provide and support first-class schools, but will not the benefits derived more than balance the increased expenditure? An additional tax of only one dollar per voter, would give us upwards of \$1500, for school purposes.

Some arrangements ought to be made for a High School, either public or private. Hundreds of dollars are annually expended in sending our scholars abroad, which might be saved if we had a High School of our own. Those who have not the means to send their children away to school, would then be able to educate them in the higher branches at comparatively little expense.

All these contemplated improvements will undoubtedly be met by some matter-of-fact individuals, who propound the ever-recurring query, "what's the use?" I answer, "what's the use" of *anything*? "What's the use" of having a mowing machine when scythes are in the market? or of riding in the cars when coaches are made, or of telegraphing to Turkey in a minute, when it would take only a month to send by mail? The individuals who *ask* such questions are oblivious to Gallileo's discovery that "the world moves," and forget that they are living in a time that requires inventive, genuine and increasing intelligence. They serve a very useful purpose however. They stand as fossilized mile-stones upon the railway of intelligence, vainly endeavoring to stop the engine of progress as it thunders along and knocks them right and left.

We are a law-abiding and intelligent community, and we will keep pace with the spirit of the age, by providing for our children all the necessary means for their Education.

During the past year a very commodious, and elegant school house has been erected in the West District, at an expense of only two thousand dollars. Owing to unfortunate divisions of opinion, the District refused to build, and upon petition, the trustees assumed the direction of affairs, as they were compelled to do by law. Whatever ill feeling existed has mostly subsided, and now that the house is built and paid for, I am sure the good people of the District will regard it with feelings of pride, and wish it to remain a monument to their liberality and intelligence. The District is largely indebted to the generosity of William J. Rand, Esq., who donated a suitable building lot, thereby saving considerable additional expense. The house is very conveniently arranged, properly ventilated, and furnished with modern desks and chairs. The blackboards are a miserable failure, and ought to be "reconstructed" at once.

The East District enjoys the unenviable distinction of having the meanest school-room in this, or any other locality. A new school-house, or a grave yard, will have to be provided immediately. No child can occupy the wall benches in a cold room, except at the imminent risk of life and health. In such a place, everything is cheerless and gloomy, and wears the aspect of degradation and decay. Children sent from elegant and comfortable homes to such a place, soon become restless and discouraged, and sigh for the comforts of the pauper-house or penitentiary, as a welcome relief. I do earnestly hope that the citizens of the District will build a house worthy of the name, for the accommodation of their well-behaved and intelligent children.

The Bill passed at the last session of the State Legislature, regarding compulsory attendance, was, I presume, designed to remedy the growing evil of non-attendance in the large cities and villages of the State. As far as I have heard of its operation in the small country towns, it is practically a dead

All of which is respectfully submitted.

G. H. JENNESS,

Superintending School Committee.