

## ALICE VINETTE WELLS AT ALFRED, NY

Fragments of the diary of a young lady who attended Alfred Academy and Collegiate Institute 90 years ago may prove of interest to present day Alfredians. The period covered by the entries is from January 1st to October 10th of the year 1869, and from January 1st continuing through December of 1872. By adding information from an autograph book of the period, the notations in two textbooks used, and a little general knowledge of the family, a fairly complete picture of the life of one boarding student can be drawn, which probably is more or less typical of the Alfred co-ed student of that period.

On a cold Thursday, September 2, 1869, a shy, serious girl of 17 named Alice Vinette Wells, registered for the fall term at Alfred University, or as she expressed it, "joined school". Alfred was probably the farthest away from home Alice had ever traveled. She was born on a small farm on the East Notch Road between Friendship and Bolivar and attended the little pink school house of District No. 8, Town of Wirt. By the standards of today she was incredibly naive. She had never been to a city, ridden on a train, nor eaten store bread. The family oxen had been sold only two years before and the menfolk still did most of the haying with a scythe. The family consisted of "Pa" -- George H. Wells-- who had come with his parents from Rhode Island to Western New York as a boy of 15; "Ma" --Nancy Ann LeSuer Wells-- who had likewise moved with her parents to the same neighborhood from Otsego County, New York; and three brothers, Hiram 20, Ernest 15, and Ralph 11. The farm was small, even for those days -- 83 acres listed in the 1865 census--and life was simple. The neighbors, a weekly newspaper, and an occasional visit to relatives in Richburg, Bolivar and Grandpa LeSuer's on the North Branch bounded her acquaintance with the world. Just why some schooling was decided upon at all has to be guessed at. These entries in the diary may be revealing:

1869 Jan. 22 We finished Bank Discount. Eighth week of school.

Thurs 14 I went to school and stayed to spelling school in the evening. Will Scott, Delia and lots of folks were there. Had a pretty good time, of course.

Thurs 21 In the evening we went over to the Allen District, to a spelling school. Had a very good time, of course, though we got spelled down.

Apparently someone during this winter suggested the thought that since Alice was quick at figures and one of the best spellers, why didn't she go to Alfred and learn to be a teacher? At first the idea must have been terrifying to one so closely bound to home. But Alice had made a new friend that winter named Sara Ayars who was planning to go, and Sara seems to have been eloquent about how you could get your own meals and invited her to share her prospective rooming place. Sara, in her early twenties, was older than Alice, and her mature presence calmed any worry about Alice being looked after. When Alice finally did mention the possibility at home, Ma, I am sure, said little, but was pleased and at once set to thinking of how it could be done. Pa openly scoffed at first, but because he loved to read and admired learning, he gradually became less skeptical. No one in the family had ever been away to school, but they were no "lunkheads" and "I guy", even if she was a girl, Alice was smart, and teaching brought in real money. So Pa came around and in the end was just as pleased as if he had thought of the idea himself. During the long evenings of that cold 1869 winter, endless discussions decided that Alice should study at Alfred and the younger brothers were both envious and proud. As for Hiram, he had never been interested in school and only thought of when he would be twenty-one and his own master.

Alice Vinette Wells and  
Sara M. Ayars taken from a  
tintype about 1865

Alice Vinette Wells  
taken from a photograph by  
Saunders who had a studio in  
Alfred and Friendship, c. 1872

In the late spring, Aunt Drusilla and children came for a long visit. That summer there was much activity concerning clothes:

Friday, June 4 Drusilla and I sewed.

Tues, June 8 Ma cut out my bloomer dress and sewed on it.

Friday, June 11 Ma and I finished my dress.

Tues, June 16 I made my apron.

Tues, June 29 A woman come along and cut me a dress pattern.

Friday, July 2 I washed. Ma and Drusilla sewed.

Tues, July 13 Lina cut out my dress and carried the ruffled down to Mr. Halstead's to be stitched.

Wed, Aug 5 Rose Kenyon and Sara Ayars called. Drusilla and I worked on my dress.

Mon, Aug 16 I finished an apron.

Mon, Aug 23 Ma fixed my dress.

Everything was home-made; at least there is no mention of buying anything. But all was neat and clean and in the best fashion obtainable. Finally we read:

Mon, Aug 30 Drusilla gave me a can of blackberries. Ma washed.

Tues Aug 31 Awful cold. I ironed. Ma and I picked up and packed up.

Alice was ready for the great adventure. On an unseasonably chilly Wednesday, Pa and brother Ernest loaded her trunk, some household utensils and food into the democrat wagon and the three started from the little farm house near Nile, for Alfred Center. They went over the hill to Belmont and up the Phillip's Creek road, about 20 to 25 miles, stopping somewhere to feed the horse and eat a lunch that Ma had packed.

Wed, Sept 1 Very cold. I left home for Alfred Center about nine o'clock. Arrived here about three.

Pa and Ernest left me about six. I unpacked and tried to be contented.

We have no inkling of where in Alfred Alice lived. It seems to have been in some private home, in "housekeeping rooms" shared by Eva Lanphear and friend Sara. Sara's name appears on almost every page of schoolday entries. She seems to have been a friendly person, always one to suggest a walk to the bridge, or a call at Mark Sheppard's or a trip to gather wild grapes.

After the first swift, sharp pang of homesickness, school life settled into a quiet, but not unpleasant routine. Every day opened with chapel and this included Saturdays and Sundays. Weekdays, the pupils studied and recited:

Mon, Sept 6 I got wet going to writing class.

Thurs, Sept 16 Went to chapel. Studied and recited as usual.

Tues, Sept 21 I tried to find a piece to learn. Knit some in the evening.

Wednesday afternoons were devoted to reading compositions and "speaking pieces". Later this was referred to as "rhetoricals". On Wednesday evenings the girls always went to prayer meeting, while Saturday evenings were given over to Lyceum:

Sat, Sept 4 Warm. We went to chapel in the morning, afterward to church and Sunday School. Sara and I went to Society in the evening.

sun, Sept 12 Sara washed. Eva made two pies and I made one. I wrote to Ma.

The third week of school Sara asked Alice to go home with her. They rode to the corner with Mr. Sisson in the rain and Sara laughed because they were so wet. The next week the two girls went home with Alice Burdick only to be pleasantly surprised by the appearance of Pa:

Friday, Sept 24 Awful warm. Eva went home and Hattie went with her. Sara and I went home with Alice Burdick. Alice, Sara and I went to the cheese factory.

Sat, Sept 25 Pleasant. Pa came up after me. Ma brought me lots of things.

If I remember my grandmother correctly, this would have included some fresh home-made butter, some eggs, cheese, and other good things from the farm larder.

The homesickness was pretty well eased on both sides after this visit and Alice began to make friends. Kate Hastings, Mary Davis, Flora Cottrell and Hattie Champlin exchanged visits. Professor Rogers lectured on the eclipse and then the entries stop with:

Sun, Oct 10 Somewhat rainy. Mary and I went to Elder Hull's in the evening.

It appears that Alice finished the term. Then she probably returned home and taught in a district school there during the years 1870 to 1871. In the diary there is a notation of expenses during the month of September at Alfred:

Sept 2 Grammar .85

Geography 1.60

Slate .90

Sept 3 pkg envelops .15

1/2 pkg notepaper .42

6 sheets foolscap .05

Sept 5 room rent 3.25

Sept 6 1/2 pd crackers .15

Sept 7 1/2 pt kerosene oil .05  
 Sept 8 1 hand dish .30  
 Sept 9 piece of meat .06  
 Sept 13 pins .04  
         1 pd crackers .12  
 Sept 15 washing .10  
         6 sheets foolscap .05  
         1/2 doz envelops .06  
 Sept 20 1 sheet brown paper .02  
 Sept 28 meat .09  
         2 yds lace .08  
 TOTAL: \$8.37

In the fall of 1871, Alice returned to Alfred for another year. After Christmas the entries resume in a new diary:

Mon, Jan 1 Warm and pleasant. We did not have any classes today. Sara sewed all day. Sara and I took dinner at Mrs. Babcock's. Miss Hattie and Miss Lottie Davis called, also Henry, Ellen, Albert, Mrs. Kenyon and several others. In the evening we went to Athenian Session.

The girls seem to be in a dormitory (I wonder if it was the Brick) with friends running in and out as today:

Thurs 4 I went down to Abbie Ellis' room to work Algebra examples.

Tues 2 Sara went to study French with Abbie.

Mar 9 I curled Mary Emma's hair.

Wed, Feb 7 Eva Allen and Ella McCray called, also Cora Porter.

Fri 9 I called on the Moon girls.

Occasionally, the teachers come in for some comment:

Tues. Jan 2 Mr. Cornell of Wisconsin made a speech in chapel.

Fri. Jan 12 We had an examination in Physical Geography.

Mon. Jan 15 We had a poor grammar lesson and Prof. Miller excused the class.

Fri. Jan 26 Prof. Allen was forty-nine years old today. The teachers gave him a nice lamp and a bouquet of flowers.

Mr. Miller taught both grammar and Geography and had an examination about every two weeks. He seems to have been "strict" and demanded respect. Upon request, he wrote in Alice's Autograph Book somewhat didactically,

"Virtue and not endless suns, matures the mind." P. Miller

The girls must have discussed names, for Alice begins to sign herself as "Nettie", by which name she was known the rest of her life. It may have been a bit confusing to have two Alices in a small circle, and such names as "Mattie", "Susie", and "Mamie" were more stylish. It also stopped naughty little boys from teasing "Ali Swells, Ali Swells", that had haunted her earlier schooldays and would not do for a teacher-to-be.

On Tuesday, January 9th of that year, a special series of prayer-meetings began that proved immensely popular. Every evening from six to seven o'clock, though the thermometer stood around zero, the girls bundled up and went down to participate. So the winter passed all too quickly with letters from the boys and Ma, a visit from Grandpa and Grandma, a box of "victuals" from home, rhetorical, one concert, a tea with the faculty, Frank Green's exhibition at Almond, and the red letter day when:

Tues. Feb 27 I received my Regent's Certificate.

After that things happened quickly:

Mon. March 11 Sara and I had some pictures taken. Our grammar class was examined in the afternoon.

Tues. March 12 I was examined in Algebra and Physical Geography. I packed up my things. Ernest came after me about five o'clock.

Wed. March 13 Not very cold--sunshine part of the day. I went to chapel in the morning and finished packing. Ernest and I left Alfred about eleven and arrived home in the evening.

So the pleasant Alfred days came to a close. Now with her teacher's Certificate, Alice began putting her training to use:

Mon. May 6 Commenced school in the Cottrell District with 5 scholars.

Fri. Aug 9 School closed today.

Mon. Aug 19 Started school with 31 scholars.

There are a few hints to indicate the subsequent fortunes of Alice's close friend Sara:

Sat. Aug 3 Sara Ayars came to visit. She is going west to teach.

Among the fancy little calling cards of the day kept as mementos is found one: Sara M. Ayars, M.D. and another: Sara M. A. Cowles.

On the fly-leaf of the "National Fifth Reader", which seemed to be used as a source book for rhetorical material, Sara wrote this poem in the fashion of the day:

Dear Nettie,

I would wish pure love a garland might twine,  
To crown that unclouded brow of thine  
Of flowers the fairest that ere did bloom,  
This side of the dim and shadowy tomb.  
That ye meet no dark storms as ye glide,  
O'er life's tempestuous ----- tide.

Friendship illumine thy pathway forever,  
Joy to thy heart be a stranger never,  
A happy home where'er it may be,  
All this and much more I am wishing for thee  
And would ask in return that you sometimes send  
----- kindly thought to your loving friend, Sara M. Ayars.

From the Autograph Book, together with names mentioned in the diary, we can compile a list of some of the students of the 1871-1872 school terms. The diary mentions mostly girls' names, but there are boys' signatures in the autograph book.

Ellen Place, Alfred Center

Mary (Mamie) Benjamin

Mary Compton

Huldah Stillman

Flora Cottrell

Hattie Champlin

Mary Billings

Phebe Saunders

Mary Gorton, Rushford

Flora Greene, Verona

Marina (May) Warner, Cameron Mills

Mary (Mattie) Davis, Shiloh, NJ

Sara Gardiner, Nile, NY

Hattie Wilcox, Oriskany, NY

Elizabeth (Libbie) Moon, Wayland, NY

Inez Maxon

Emma Rosebush, Alfred Center

Cora Potter, Whitestone

Alice Burdick

Ella Barber, Portville

Belle Barron, Addison NY

Archie Prosser, Little Genesee

Signoria Smythe, Hallsport

Julia Davis, Shiloh NJ

Ella Eaton

Lizzie Nelson, East Otto, NY

Frankie Van Allen

Belle Lyman, Roulette, PA

Sybil Lyman, Roulette, PA

Mary (Mattie) Burdick, Rapids, NY

M.E. Barager, Canaseraga, NY

Laura Johnson, Howard

Rosette Babcock, Westerly, RI

Mary Denison, Dansville

Looia Bosard, Andover

Vara Babcock, Alfred Center

Ollie Rosser (lived in Brick Hall)

Losia Dimick, Richburg

Augusta Kysor, Howard

Hattie Morton, Angelica

Lucy Colgrove, Post Creek

Myrtie Palmer

Kate Hastings

The young men, many of whom signed "your classmate" are:

Wm. D. Gorton, Rushford

P.A. Warren

Willie Langworthy

Milo Lyman, Roulette, PA

J.A. Ester

D.M. Ester

George Rosebush, Alfred Center  
A.H. Babcock  
Henry Maxson, DeRuyter  
Frank Summerbell, Berlin  
Winfield Barager, Canaseraga  
W.S. Bonham, Shiloh, NJ  
J.E. Spicer, Trenton  
C.E. Moore (who signed "Mihi amice memento")

Alice's life after her school days followed a more or less general pattern of the times. After some years of teaching, she married Charles H. Bracy of her home neighborhood and lived the rest of her life on the farm which had belonged to her grandfather Wells, about a mile from where she was born. She had two sons, one of whom died in infancy. The other, Edward Bracy, still lives and operates the farm on which he was born. Always a quiet unassuming person, her friends knew her as a good neighbor with a flair for flowers, and one who could supply names and dates and anecdotes from an excellent memory.

I would like to close with a few general observations. I was surprised to find that students and teachers both referred to "Alfred University". I suppose the combination of academic and college subjects made the term proper, though unofficial. The studies mentioned in the diary--grammar, writing, geography and rhetoric--seem like high school subjects. I think the Wednesday afternoon devoted to writing and speaking could be useful today. The only subject mentioned of college grade is French. It seems rather strange there is no mention of Latin. Surely it was offered.

In some ways the life pictured seems quite different from college today. The slower pace of life is very evident. I think that studies per se had more importance in the day's program. The student body was much more homogeneous and perhaps a bit older. Almost everyone came from a small town or farm in western New York, and the names are practically all of English origin. The majority were, no doubt, from Seventh Day Baptist homes. Those who came from New Jersey or Rhode Island did so through relatives or church connections. The social life centered around village and church affairs. The townspeople and the students mingled much more freely, due partly to the smaller numbers. There seemed to be no organized or commercial amusements or sports. Entertainment was home-made and the Lyceums flourished. The diary reflects an almost total disregard for world affairs. Whether that was personal or a prevailing attitude, I cannot say. Lack of easy communication made it almost inevitable.

But in other ways, Alfred's impact on present generation students is strikingly similar. Her teachers still take a personal interest not possible in larger institutions. She still acquires a majority of her student body through the recommendation of a friend or teacher. College acquaintances and friendships provide one of her most enriching and enduring benefits. Despite a much wider range of ancestry and birthplace represented by the class rolls of today, and greater outward sophistication, Alfred's freshmen are yet immature, timid, and untrained individuals asking to be molded "nearer heart's desire". Like the young lady of 1872, most of them in spite of early ambitions will settle for a busy, useful, but largely undistinguished life in their chosen communities--communities that are the richer for their presence.

Gertrude Wells Seaman 1958  
Gilbertsville, New York