

## CHAPTER TWELVE

# MAC VICAR, PUTNAM, WILLITS

1880-1885

*Malcolm Mac Vicar, 1880-1881*

When Principal Estabrook resigned in May of 1880, the State Board felt that special conditions made the selection of a successor one of exceptional importance.

“The school was to a certain extent in a transition state,” they said, “and it needed most of all one who could bring to its administration large experience, great executive ability, high scholarship, and honest sympathy with the progressive spirit of the institution.”<sup>1</sup>

They chose Malcolm Mac Vicar, principal of the Normal School at Potsdam, New York,<sup>2</sup> who took over the reins on November 12.

Malcolm Mac Vicar was unique among the heads of Normal; he was the only one to be foreign-born. He came with his family at the age of six from Argylshire, Scotland, to a farm near Chatham, Ontario, Canada. He entered Knox College, in Toronto, to study for the Presbyterian ministry but within a short time was ordained in the Baptist ministry. He transferred to the University of Rochester, New York, where he earned the baccalaureate and master's degrees.

At the time that Normal offered him its headship he had gained considerable administrative experience. As principal of the Brockport Collegiate Institute (1863-1867) in Brockport, New York, he became the first principal of the Brockport State Normal School when the Collegiate Institute was transformed (1867). Earlier, he had attracted the attention of the Regents of the University of the State of New York and at their invitation had read a paper at their convocation of 1865 which proved to be a first step towards the

adoption of "Regents' Examinations" in the academies. He proposed to the New York Legislature (with the support of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction) a bill for the establishment of a Normal and Training School at Brockport. That bill was modified in passage to provide four normal schools instead of one, and these, in substantial accord with a plan drafted by Mac Vicar, were located at Brockport (1867), Cortland (1868), Potsdam (1869), and Geneseo (1871).

While serving as principal at Brockport Normal, Mac Vicar's health posed a problem and he was granted a year's leave of absence. Traveling in the West, he visited Leavenworth, Kansas, where he was urged to propose a reorganization of the Leavenworth schools. Attracted by the problem, he undertook the task. This led to his appointment as superintendent of the Leavenworth schools, and his resignation from Brockport.

After a single year, however, he resigned and returned to New York where he was received with enthusiasm. The Regents of the University of the State of New York conferred on him an honorary PhD degree (1869), and a year later his alma mater, Rochester University, conferred an LLD degree. In 1869, he accepted the principalship of the newly-organized Potsdam Normal School.

When, therefore, in 1880 the State Board of Education of Michigan offered their school to him, they were choosing a man of eminence in the field of public education and of proven interest in teacher training. His acceptance was based on the appealing fact that Normal was the only school of its kind in the State, and that there appeared to be no conflict of interest in its management (contrary to New York State). The fact that he remained at Normal only one year must have been a keen disappointment to the State Board. His biographer states that in one year he was "thoroughly worn out with hard work."

When Mac Vicar (age 51) arrived at Normal, he found in operation the experimental curriculum that undertook to make of Normal an exclusively professional school. Academic subjects were placed in a definitely subordinate position, pursued only as reviews of subject matter that the budding teacher must teach, taught only by upper-class students. Considerable unfavorable reaction had developed to this program, and the school had experienced a severe setback in student enrollment.

Mac Vicar's major task and his most important achievement, in

the short year that he gave to Normal, was the restoration of balance in the curriculum, and the abandonment of the experiment. By shifting the emphasis from quantity production of teachers to quality of teachers produced, he persuaded the faculty to make a study of the needs of teachers on the job. And from this came a new approach to curriculum-making. The result was the abandonment of the attempt to restrict Normal's curriculum to professional courses in *Education* and a strong emphasis on academic preparation.

Insistence that *all* programs should include required courses in English was Normal's first step in the direction of what much later became known in higher education as "General Education." And the "special prominence" to be given to a particular area was the initiation of what later developed into required areas of concentration, known as "majors" and "minors." All of this led to the emphasis on academic courses in the preparation of teachers that brought high distinction to Normal.

Next in importance was Mac Vicar's emphasis on the fundamental importance of practice teaching. Observing that at Normal the Practice School had occupied a very subordinate place, he asserted that this was just the reverse of what should be. He said:

In making provision for the education of teachers it must not be forgotten that teaching, organizing, or managing a school is essentially an art, and that the power to do work well must be acquired, like all other arts, by doing the work rather than by 'talking' about it.<sup>3</sup>

In this connection, he made a significant recommendation as to the role of the critic teacher. Criticism of the student in practice teaching, he said, should be performed by competent and experienced teachers, and no part of their time should be used as regular teachers of classes. The critic teachers should be required not only to visit and observe the work done by the practice teachers, but also to meet them personally at regular intervals to point out their defects and to see that these defects are corrected. (In our present era, when the traditional on-campus laboratory school is being eliminated and the practice teaching is being done in the public schools, such a procedure, faithfully followed, might have special pertinence.)

In the last months of his administration, Mac Vicar took one other innovating step, to the particular satisfaction of the students. This concerned required study hours, a practice that had been fol-

lowed from the time Normal first opened its doors. Beginning with the fall semester of 1881, study hours were abolished.

“These,” said the student periodical, *The Normal News*, “have of necessity been a source of annoyance to those students who were men and women and who had regulated their own movements for years.”

The subsequent career of Malcolm Mac Vicar was characterized by a return to the Baptist church. From Ypsilanti he went back to Toronto where he occupied the chair of *Christian Apologetics and Biblical Interpretation in English* in McMaster Hall (the Toronto Baptist College). He was deeply concerned over the growing impact of science on the Christian religion. When Senator McMaster founded and endowed McMaster University of Hamilton, Ontario, in 1887, he made his close friend and adviser, Mac Vicar, chancellor, although during his incumbency only the theological department existed. In 1890, he left McMaster to become Superintendent of Education of the American Baptist Home Mission Society for the Colored People of the South, for the Indians, Chinese, and Mexicans. In this position he presided over a theological seminary, seven colleges, and twenty-four academies. His last four years (he died in 1904) were spent as president of Richmond Union University, Richmond, Virginia.

A restless, energetic, creative man, Mac Vicar had managed in the course of his busy and varied life to produce a number of texts and handbooks on arithmetic, and to write a manual on *Principles of Education*. His educational philosophy held that mental discipline alone was not an adequate preparation for life, but must rest on the building of a strong, reliable character.

In the training of teachers, he stressed the belief that no amount of book study can replace actual experience with children. The student teacher must, under the guidance of experienced teachers, “study the actual infant, child, youth and man under normal conditions and amid the various changes through which each passes in the process of development.” He was known, too, as a very resourceful teacher in his own right, especially as an ingenious inventor of teaching aids for arithmetic, geography, and astronomy. The outstanding example of this was his globe of the earth, together with a handbook of instructions for its use, which found wide acceptance (Mac Vicar’s Tellurian Globe).<sup>4</sup>

*Daniel Putnam*  
1880; 1881–1883; 1885–1886

Principal Estabrook's resignation in the spring of 1880 was followed by an interval of several months before a successor could be found and placed in the job. Daniel Putnam served as acting principal during this time.

When Principal Mac Vicar submitted his unexpected resignation after one year, an emergency was created, recovery from which proved to require a good two years. Daniel Putnam again served as acting principal.

The successor to Principal Mac Vicar finally was found in 1883, but Edwin Willits, the man selected, was called to the presidency of the Michigan Agricultural College at East Lansing in 1885. Again to meet an emergency, Putnam was placed in charge, this time with the title of vice-principal (a title that he retained thereafter).

Putnam's career and service to Michigan Normal does not, however, rest on these administrative interludes. Brought to Normal in 1868 to occupy the chair of Natural Science (teaching theoretical and applied psychology); resigning shortly because of the small salary but returning after a year; first head of the Training School; organizer and first head of the Library; first head of the Education Department (organized as a separate department some 25 years later), author of books and many articles and papers, and of the early "History of the Michigan State Normal School"—his 38 years at Normal and in Ypsilanti represent an impressive contribution.

New England was once again the early environment of a Normal head. Putnam was born (1824) in Lynderboro, New Hampshire. With very little education before his twentieth year, he entered the academy at New Hampton, New Hampshire, and prepared for Dartmouth College, from which he graduated in 1851. He then did some postgraduate work at Amherst College.

In 1854, he came to Michigan to accept a professorship of Latin Language and Literature at Kalamazoo College where, at a later date and for a single year, he was acting head. For years thereafter he served as a trustee of the college. In Kalamazoo he also held the positions of superintendent of the Kalamazoo public schools<sup>5</sup> and superintendent of the Kalamazoo County schools.

While there, he became interested in the inmates of the Michigan Asylum for the Insane in Kalamazoo and served as their chaplain, maintaining this connection long after he came to Ypsilanti. Two books grew out of this interest, and these reveal both the compassionate and the deeply religious character of the man as well as a lively and genuine professional interest. The earlier one was a book of readings and prayers for daily use, entitled "Sunbeams Through the Clouds." "This little volume," he said, "owes its existence, not to the desire to make a book, but to a want of which long experience among a most unfortunate class of the suffering and afflicted has made me painfully conscious. The second book, "Twenty-five years with the Insane," was written as he brought this service to a close.

At Ypsilanti, the broad scope of Putnam's interests was again revealed. He served the community as alderman and mayor, and was ever a ready fill-in for the Baptist pulpit. During a brief one-year interval he held the position of superintendent of the Ypsilanti Public Schools (1870-1871).

With reference to community service, Sarah Putnam also deserves attention. Mrs. Putnam, although blinded by lightning (four of her five children she never saw), was also very active, and is credited with founding the Ladies Literary Club—an organization that boasts of being one of the ten oldest women's clubs in Michigan.

At the Normal his services were of a pioneering nature. As director of the School of Observation and Practice, a position that he held for 10 years, he was the first formal head of the Training School (1871). In 1873, under Principal Estabrook, the position of Librarian was established. Putnam was appointed. Julia Ann King, a colleague for many years, in eulogizing Putnam after 30 years of service at Normal<sup>7</sup> said that when he came in 1868 the library was merely a collection of books in an out-of-the-way room. Putnam had the books moved to a "suitable" room, and developed a card catalog system.

In 1875, as head of the School of Observation and Practice, he began to urge establishment of a kindergarten. In his report of that year to Principal Mayhew he said:

Kindergartens are being established in many of our larger cities and villages . . . I rejoice in the experiments and efforts which are being made. Out of these . . . I have no doubt, will come valuable results. One of these results, and perhaps the most important and desirable one, will be, I trust, the essential modification of the employments, studies, teaching and

training of our primary schools . . . The Normal Schools of the country should lead in this good work, and should by carefully conducted experiments determine how much and what of the kindergarten material, work and methods can be made useful in the schools referred to.

The State Board was slow to move on this recommendation, and although Putnam repeated his urging from time to time, no kindergarten was established at Normal until 1888, when an enlargement of Old Main made possible the expansion of the Training School.

In 1893, the work in professional education was organized as a separate department called the Department of Mental and Moral Science and Theory and Art of Teaching—referred to commonly as the Pedagogical Department. Putnam was placed in charge, and retained this position until his death in 1906.

Along with his varied formal responsibilities, in the course of his 38 years with Normal, Putnam wrote and published rather extensively in the areas of history of education and teaching. Among his major efforts were: a textbook in *Elementary Psychology* (1889); a *Manual of Pedagogics* (1895); *A History of the Michigan State Normal College* (1899); and a history of *The Development of Primary and Secondary Public Education in Michigan* (1904). Papers and addresses would form a lengthy list. In 1897, Putnam was recognized by the University of Michigan with an honorary LLD degree.

He would probably like to be remembered also as a teacher of teachers. One of his colleagues said of him, "He seeks to make of his pupils men and women of the best kind rather than simply scholars and teachers." Another colleague, Professor Edwin Strong, once said of him that "no man ever lost faith or heart or hope as a result of his teaching; rather, for many was his class room a fountain of inspiration to firmer faith and higher service."

*Edwin Willits*  
1883–1885

The vacancy left by the resignation of Mac Vicar was filled in 1883 by the appointment of Edwin Willits (age 53). Editor, lawyer, public official, congressman, Willits was not the type to which Normal had become accustomed. He was neither a protestant minis-

ter nor a professional educator. The State Board, in making the appointment, felt called upon to explain its decision. They said:

In appointing to so important a position as the Principalship of the Normal School, one whose life-work had been in other callings than the profession of teaching, one who had not through experience and study a systematic course of pedagogy behind him, the Board were mindful that they were departing from the ordinary course of procedure; but they desired especially to emphasize that clause in the legislative action of this State, which, in instituting a Normal School for the preparation of teachers, required that the State Board of Education should also provide for the instruction of its pupils '*in the fundamental laws of the United States, and in what regards the rights and duties of citizens.*' With this in view, no one seemed to the Board to combine, as Mr. Willits does, so many of the requisites necessary to lead the Normal School on to that great future which its founders confidently expected for it.<sup>8</sup>

The Board praised the record of Putnam as acting principal, saying that he had served to their entire satisfaction, as also to that of the faculty and students. "Under this administration," they said, "the work of the school became more and more systematic, the interest of the students steadily increased, and the attendance was over twenty per cent larger than that of the previous year." But they stressed the very important position that Putnam would occupy in the "Chair of Moral and Mental Philosophy, and the Science and Art of Teaching."

The student paper expressed surprise that the mantle had not fallen on Putnam.<sup>9</sup>

A clue to why Putnam was not chosen lies in his attitude toward the question of the true function of a normal school. He had apparently taken a position in support of the experiment of 1878, whereby academic courses were to be eliminated and Normal would become strictly a professional school of education. This experiment was, as we have seen, abandoned with the Board's reversal of its stand, and its appointment of Principal Mac Vicar.

The attitude of Willits was expressed in his first annual report to the Board:

I am not prepared at this time to solve the "Normal School" problem . . . I shall note only the most obvious points that have impressed themselves upon me during the year I have given to this work . . . Theoretically, it has been claimed that each should be strictly confined to its sphere

—that the academy, high school, or college should have the sole supervision of the subject matter and the Normal School of the methods. Like all theories, this one fails in its extremes.

By calling attention to the broader scope of the legislative intent for Normal, and implementing its position by the appointment of a man whose background was not that of the professional educationist, the State Board would appear to be insisting that the experiment of 1878 was not to be revived.

Thus, the very appointment of Edwin Willits was of fundamental significance to Normal. He remained with Normal only two years, resigning in 1885 to accept the presidency of the Michigan Agricultural College at East Lansing. In this connection it should be noted that Willits is credited with proposing the plan by which the Michigan Agricultural College was removed from the jurisdiction of the State Board of Education and placed under a State Board of Agriculture.<sup>10</sup>

But his influence was out of all proportion to the time-span and, indeed, had been previously felt by Normal over a period of a dozen years when he had served as a member of the State Board (1861–1873). Putnam commented at a much later time that when Willits became a member of the Board, Normal was but eight years of age; that it was during his incumbency that the character of the school became established; and that he exercised a strong influence on the selection of faculty. Putnam also asserted that Willits had the confidence of the school, the faculty, and successive legislators.

“The teachers who remained for any length of time in the school came to know him,” Putnam said, “not only as an official of the governing body, but also as a personal friend and a wise adviser.” He had, indeed, exercised a strong influence on the selection of the faculty. Six became potent factors in Normal’s history: two (Bellows and Putnam) served as acting principal, and two (Mayhew and Estabrook) as principal. The other two (McLouth and Lodeman) were outstanding in their respective fields of physical sciences and modern languages.

The career of Edwin Willits parallels to a degree that of Normal’s first Principal, Adonijah Welch. Both came from the East (Willits was born in Cattaraugus County, New York); both were graduates of the University of Michigan; both began as lawyers (Willits prepared for the bar by study in the law office of United States Senator Christiancy in Monroe, Michigan). Both were officially connected

with the Michigan Agricultural College at East Lansing; both were members of Congress (Willits as a Republican in the 45th, 46th, and 47th Congresses); both were appointed to the Department of Agriculture.

Willits' experience as a lawyer was more extensive. He practiced in Monroe, was prosecuting attorney for Monroe County. In Congress he was a member of the Judiciary Committee and the Committee on Patents, and spent his last years in law practice in Washington, D.C. Other interests and occupations included journalism (assistant editor of the *Monroe Commercial* for several years), trustee and director of the Monroe High School (18 years), postmaster at Monroe. In 1873, Governor Bagley appointed him to a commission to propose a revision of the State Constitution and he was made chairman of the Committee on Education.

Willits' attitude concerning education was expressed in his inaugural address when he said:

The time is coming when we must choose between the policeman and the moral sense. In all ages the best policeman has been a well-regulated conscience—with moral sense . . . An education that includes only intelligence may foster crime . . . The education we want must include the moral sentiments as well.

During his brief administration at Normal he dealt vigorously with two problems of considerable consequence. One was an attempt by the University of Michigan to secure passage of a bill by the State Legislature giving it the same authority to grant teaching certificates as that possessed by Normal. The historian of the School of Education of the U-M, Dean Allen S. Whitney, makes this brief comment

A bill to this effect was presented to the Legislature at its session of 1884–1885, but it was defeated by the forces of the Normal School which felt that this action would be an interference with their own private domain.<sup>11</sup>

The other problem was one of classroom space. In 1882, Old Main had been enlarged by construction of a rear addition. Just two years later, Willits made an urgent request for further enlargement. He repeated this in more urgent language the following year. The Legislature finally, in 1887, responded and by 1888 a north wing and south wing had been added.

His stay at the Agricultural College, too, was short. After four years, he left to accept an appointment by President Harrison to the newly-created post of Assistant Secretary of Agriculture. Five years in this position, and he retired to practice law in the city of Washington, but only for two years. He died in 1896.<sup>12</sup>

