

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

JOHN MAHELM BERRY SILL

(1886-1893)

In September of 1887, the local newspaper, describing the fall opening of Normal, presented a graphic picture:

The preliminary work of entrance was attended to with the precision and regularity of clockwork, and with more than the normal dispatch. Professor Sill, quick, nervous and administrative, was everywhere seen. Professor Putnam, calm, dignified and superb . . . Professor Lodeman, silent, knightly, a type of soldierly grace . . . Professor D'Ooge, brilliant, energetic, the hero of many languages . . . Professor George, active and businesslike . . . Strong, cultured and scientific . . . Bellows, tall and rhetorical . . . Miss King, fierce and resolute . . . At 1:30 the entrance examinations began with geography under Professor Goodison, who knows the earth as the hunter knows the trails of the forest . . . Wednesday morning the pupils filed in to their accustomed places. Professor Pease, ever graceful and chivalric, turned his back to us at the organ, and brought down the first crash of music. All sang two verses of 'Nearer My God to Thee,' after which Professor Putnam offered prayer . . . Wednesday evening the Students' Christian Association met under the leadership of President W. D. Hill. The hall was nearly filled and the meeting most earnest and enthusiastic; a propitious opening for the new year.¹

The brief glimpse of Principal Sill here afforded does not, of course, give an adequate picture. It does name some of the leaders of a faculty of exceptional quality that he inherited. J. M. B. Sill had, at an earlier time, been a member of this faculty. Indeed, his connection began with the very opening of Normal in 1853 when he enrolled as a student. He constituted a full third of Normal's first graduating class (1854).

Sill was another in the list of early principals of Normal whose origin was in the east, having been born in Black Rock, Erie County, New York. His parents were caught up in the Westward-moving tide and, at the age of five, young Sill was one of the coming generation in Jonesville, Michigan. His Jonesville schooling led him to the new Union School, probably first of its kind in Michigan to open its doors, founded and presided over by Adonijah Welch. He spent a year in Kalamazoo studying dentistry, then returned to Jonesville as Welch's assistant in the Union School. When Welch was called to Ypsilanti to head the new Normal School, he brought young Sill with him. For a year Sill taught Latin and English in Ypsilanti's new Union Seminary; then, upon the opening of Normal, enrolled. As a member of Normal's first graduating class he earned not only this distinction but also stood alone as the first male graduate. The State Board immediately appointed him to the dual posts of Director of the Model Department and Professor of English Language and Literature.

He left in 1863 to accept an offer to become the second head of the Detroit schools. He remained there, alternating as Superintendent of Detroit schools, head and proprietor of the Detroit Female Seminary, and again as Superintendent of Detroit Schools until called back to Normal by the State Board in 1886.

This Detroit interval saw important beginnings. He filled a position that had been vacant for some years. He held the position when it was finally given the legislative authority that is associated with the administrative power of a modern superintendency (as contrasted with the supervisory function). He is credited with humanizing public education in Detroit; with overcoming the opposition to high schools and starting the high school system; and is looked upon as the founder of Wayne State University's College of Education, having organized the Normal class (1881) that became known as the Martindale Normal Training School (1914), then the Detroit Teachers' College (1920), and finally the College of Education.² Sill's recommendation to the Detroit Board of Education concerning teacher training was supported by a committee report that contained the following interesting line of reasoning:

Your committee are well aware that the State Normal School is engaged in the work of training teachers and doing it well, and we have no doubt but that this Board could secure well-trained teachers by requiring every

inexperienced appointee to hold the diploma of this excellent institution; but such a requirement would practically exclude from our corps of teachers all graduates of our own schools who are unable to expend several hundred dollars in an effort to meet this condition. The drawing of such a line between the rich and poor could be justified only by a necessity which does not exist . . .³

Sill had to defend this step the rest of his days. As late as 1899, near the very close of his life, he was still justifying the Detroit Normal against the criticism that it was an unnecessary duplication of the work of the Ypsilanti Normal.

It was during the Detroit years that Sill was made a member of the Board of Regents of the University of Michigan. Though a Democrat, he was appointed to fill a vacancy by Republican Governor Henry H. Crapo.⁴ While serving in this capacity he was made chairman of the Committee on the Scientific Course and the Chemical Laboratory, and had the distinction of putting the motion supporting the request of two professors to establish a course in mechanical engineering. He was also a member of the committee of three that journeyed east to make inquiries concerning James B. Angell, and made the original reporting favoring Angell for President of the U-M.

As Principal (at age 55) of Ypsilanti Normal for seven years, Sill made a significant and lasting contribution. With regard to the curriculum, he took the baton from the hands of Mac Vicar and widened the distance from the old Bellows-McLouth formula that called for elimination of the academics. He established a four-year program at the college level (over and above the traditional two-years of high school level and review). Thus he definitely broadened the concept of the school's function. Also he encouraged the upgrading of the three and four-year programs to the status of college-level work, thus eliminating the college preparatory courses.

In 1889, the State Legislature passed an important act revising and consolidating the laws governing the State Board of Education.⁵ Section 5 gave the Board authority to grant "such diploma as it may deem best—

and such diploma when granted shall carry with it such honors as the extent of the course for which the diploma is given may warrant and said board of education may direct."

Under this authority, and based on the expanded curriculum which now provided four years of work at the college level, the Board established its first college degree, the Bachelor of Pedagogics. It was awarded for the first time in 1890. Of this degree, Putnam said:

It is . . . intended that the degree of Bachelor of Pedagogics shall indicate scholarship equal to that required for the degree of B.A. from a reputable college . . .

At the same time a graduate degree of Master of Pedagogics was adopted. This degree was to be based on five years of teaching experience and the presentation of a thesis "acceptable to the faculty of the school upon some subject connected with the history, science, or art of education."

In the area of professional education, Sill introduced courses in advanced psychology, comparison of educational systems, advanced practice teaching, and methods in the teaching of history, science, and the ancient and modern languages. He also upgraded the work of the Training School by providing a supervising ("critic") for each of the grades, adding a ninth grade, and, at long last, establishing a kindergarten (1888). Later, there was a course in kindergarten methods applicable not only to the kindergarten but also the work of the first four grades.

At about this time, too, Sill undertook to introduce into the curriculum both "general education" and flexibility. He complained that the trend of Normal had been in the direction of more and more specialization, that a student was offered only a choice between specializations.

This ought (he said) to be corrected, and to this end I recommend that the courses be arranged with certain necessary Normal School work common to all the courses required; and that there be freedom of choice in enough complementary studies to fill up the requirements for a four years' course.

In short, Sill's emphasis was on expanding and upgrading the curriculum and, at the same time, relying on the high schools for college preparatory work. By 1891, he could say that this had been accomplished.⁶ He also urged that some provision be made for teachers in service so that, by offering brief professional courses, they might have the benefit of further training—a prophetic glance in

the direction of a later day when, by means of summer school, extension courses and evening classes, this need was recognized. Also he made proposals for the inclusion of work in manual training and in physical education.

But Sill, having been so instrumental in developing a college-level curriculum, was not in sympathy with adopting the name "College." He looked at the matter from the standpoint of maintaining student discipline, asserting that the younger students at Normal would be encouraged to think of themselves as college students and "to ape college tricks and manners and to duplicate college noise and disorder." And he inveighed against "a tendency on the part of some teachers to promote the idea that a normal school should consider and call itself a college . . . some, whose ambition outruns their judgment . . ."

A Normal School (he added) differs most essentially from a college. Its students come from schools of all kinds and conditions. Many of them have never seen a well-ordered school. Their idea of proper discipline and order will come of their own experience in this school . . . My experience teaches me that the propagation of the college idea makes against such proper order and piles up difficulties in the way of the executive. I believe that the best interests of the Normal School demand that you, as the controlling board, set your faces seriously against this particularly injurious manifestation of ambitious folly.⁷

Only six years later, under another principal, this "ambitious folly" was committed. But not for three-quarters of a century, under the impact of a world in turmoil, would the full fury of his prediction be realized.

Something should also be said with reference to the physical expansion of Normal during Sill's administration. In his final report to the State Board he stated it in percentage terms: library volumes up 70 per cent; school apparatus, including musical instruments, 83 per cent; value of furniture, 32 per cent; additions to buildings, 84 per cent of value in 1887.

The expansion in buildings included the appropriation of 1887 which Sill's predecessor, Willits, had vigorously urged upon the Legislature, and which resulted in the erection of the north and south wings of the main building. In the north wing were placed the library, four student society meeting rooms, and a "gentleman's study hall." The south wing contained several classrooms, a "ladies'

study hall,” and a room for the “Drawing Department.” Reporting a year later Sill said:

We are now well equipped with a capacious and beautiful hall for morning exercises, lectures, etc.; adequate study halls for our students; convenient recitation and lecture rooms; a fine library and reading room; and excellent facilities for progressive instruction in Natural and Physical sciences, Geography, Drawing, Mathematics and History.

Sill’s percentage statement also included a legislative appropriation, passed in the very year of his retirement, for a gymnasium, yet to be constructed. It was built the following year.

Student enrollments in the Normal department had, during these seven years, risen from 675 to 922, a 37 per cent increase.⁸

In this connection it should also be noted that Sill persuaded the State Board to furnish free textbooks. Commenting on this move, he made a broad statement of principle that our present age has translated into scholarships:

Our students are working young men and women who earn their little money by the hardest toil. The cost of books is often “the last straw that breaks the camel’s back.” I shall be glad to see them relieved to this extent. I also believe that the State will find it to its advantage to make the way as easy as is possible for those who are preparing for public service in the schools. Many other states go still further in this direction, even to the extent of furnishing free transportation to the students of their normal schools.

Sill retired (at age 62) as principal of Normal in 1893, and moved to Ann Arbor. He gave no reason, saying only that it was a personal matter and involved no conflict with the State Board. His final report to the Board indicated, however, that his move was made at their suggestion.⁹

Whatever the Board’s motivation, Sill left accompanied by sentiments of great respect and affection. Henry R. Pattengill, always open and outspoken wherever criticism was involved, expressed the general feeling well in his *Michigan School Moderator* when he commented:

. . . his kindness of heart, and genial manners have endeared him to all who have become acquainted with him. Mr. Sill’s administration has been

one of comparatively little friction, and without detracting in the least from the good work of previous administrations, it is safe to say that the Normal is today doing the best work it has ever done.¹⁰

President Grover Cleveland had plans for him, however, and promptly appointed him Minister Resident and Consul-General to Korea. He served from 1894 to 1897, then retired, in poor health, to spend his last few years in Detroit.

As minister to Korea, he found difficulty in disassociating his strongly sympathetic feelings for the Koreans from the objective attitude that the State Department required of his official position. He found the country in the midst of a rebellion which was quickly followed by a war between China (Korea's suzerain) and Japan. On one occasion Secretary Olney cabled him: "Intervening in political concerns of Korea not among your functions and is forbidden."

J. M. B. Sill was a man of great personal charm and broad human interest. As superintendent of the Detroit schools, one of his early efforts was to bring about a better relationship between teachers and pupils, especially with reference to school discipline. He was popular with his fellow citizens in Detroit, becoming a well-liked member of the exclusive Prismatic Club. One of the records of this fun-loving organization shows a crude drawing of a cornucopia and pictures him entering the large end carrying a book entitled "The Story of the Three Scavengers." He will emerge from the small end. The accompanying ditty, in the vein of Old Mother Hubbard, ran:

The gallant Professor he went to the dresser
And brought to the Club a new tale.
When he got there, he was filled with despair,
For he found that his story was stale.

A contemporary said of him that "he read and recited beautifully and sang many songs, comic and otherwise, to the delight of all who heard him." A song that was published, written to his small daughter, Allie, ran in part as follows:

Would that I thy coming fears,
From thy life could borrow;
Would that I could weep thy tears,
Carry all thy sorrow.

Come, come, sit upon my knee,
Brown-eyed laughing baby;
And I will ask of the Fates for thee,
What thy future may be.

Sill was the author of two textbooks on English grammar, one written shortly after his graduation from Normal and while a member of the faculty, the other during the Detroit interlude.¹² Though he possessed no earned degree, he was the recipient of two honorary degrees, an MA from the University of Michigan in 1871 and an MPd from Normal in 1890. In the latter year he was ordained a Deacon in the Episcopal Church, and thenceforth exhibited considerable missionary zeal.¹³

When he died in 1901, at the age of three score and ten, it was said of him at Normal:

He was an educator of the older school, and his pupils, going out into the primary, grammar and high schools of the state, carried with them the ideals and aspirations that he had imparted to them. In consequence there is hardly a city or village of the state that has not felt Mr. Sill's influence, exerted through the media of its schools.¹⁴