

## CHAPTER TEN

# ADONIJAH STRONG WELCH

1851-1865

The State Board of Education (of which Isaac E. Crary was president at the time) was fortunate in its first appointment of a principal for the Normal School.

Adonijah Strong Welch was 31 years of age, small and frail in stature but possessed of abundant and restless energy. Born in East Hampton, Connecticut, he had come to Michigan at age eighteen with his parents who settled in Jonesville. He entered the sophomore class at the University of Michigan in 1843, was appointed the following year as the first principal of the Preparatory Department of the U-M, and graduated with the class of 1846.<sup>1</sup> He went at once to Detroit where he studied law in the office of Lothrop and Duffield and was admitted to the bar. Instead of practicing law, however, he returned to Jonesville and organized a Union School. This school was one of the first of its kind on Michigan. In 1848, he joined a group of men from Jonesville and set forth for the west—a '49er. Upon his early return, he became active up and down the State in pleading the need for a normal school.

The problems that faced this first administration were many: the assembling of a faculty, organization of a curriculum, adoption of policies that would shape the character of the young school for generations to come. Just two years after its opening, the function of providing instruction in agriculture and the mechanic arts was taken from the Normal and assigned to the new Michigan Agricultural College. Six years after its opening, Normal lost its building by fire (1859). In its eighth year, the Civil War burst upon the nation.

The eagerness with which the new principal approached his assignment was evident in his inaugural address. He said:

It may savor somewhat of enthusiasm, yet in my humble judgment, this day's work will form a prominent item in the history of western progress. This side of the Empire State it is the first experiment of a similar character made under the auspices of legislative enactment. Who will venture to predict the influence which its success will exert upon the educational interests of the entire Northwest?

His attitude was both scholarly and infused with concern for the effectiveness of the educational process. In his address before the Teachers' Institute, held at Normal just prior to its opening, he said:

No amount of text book knowledge, as such—no memory of straggling undigested facts or details—no skimming of the area of knowledge of whatever, can make the scholar or the independent thinker. It is rather by investigating the relations of *facts* and *things*—by a close scrutiny of the reasons on which opinions are founded—by a right analysis of every subject brought before his attention—that the student, at last, attains a genuine cultivation of the intellect.

With obvious horror, he described his own early school days:

I trammelled my memory with a multitude of words, of whose significance I knew little and cared less. I sang with perfect readiness, a host of numbered rules, whose principles were a profound secret, and of whose application, I had not the remotest suspicion. And it was not until years afterward that I knew a preposition from a pronoun.<sup>2</sup>

That he was serious in his pedagogical concern is evident by the fact that during his incumbency he produced two books: "An Analysis of the English Sentence" and "Treatise on Object Lessons."<sup>3</sup>

Two who were students at Normal in the Welch era, and later became outstanding members of the Normal faculty, have left their impressions for posterity to read: C. F. R. Bellows, mathematician and for a year Acting Principal, has given us a rather grim view of the administrative atmosphere.

My recollections of the work of the school concern rather the strict discipline that was maintained by the Principal, than the excellence of teaching. Professor Welch's idea of a school was one in which first of all existed a condition of perfect system and order. He was the most rigid disciplinarian in the school room that I ever knew. His compressed and quivering lip was to the luckless transgressor an omen of impending calamity not to

be mistaken or misunderstood. It was a fearful foreboding of vigorous corrective treatment.<sup>4</sup>

This picture is supported by the story that went the rounds that, when Normal's janitor rang the bell calling classes to order for the day much longer than the prescribed five minutes (out of sympathy for certain laggard students), Welch suddenly appeared and hurled a book at his head, thus terminating abruptly that gentleman's service to the school.

Austin George, later to become head of the Training School, commented on Welch as a teacher, as well as administrator:

As a teacher he was . . . deliberate yet intense in thought, measured and careful in speech, he held the wrapt and undivided attention of all who were before him . . . His power to develop and help young men and women was remarkable . . . and he was so just and wise that his decisions and acts received the approval of those affected by them . . . He was a man of dauntless courage and immovable firmness. He had keen insight as to men and affairs . . . He had a great executive ability, and was a disciplinarian of phenomenal power.<sup>5</sup>

As mentioned earlier, twice during his incumbency Welch suffered failing health. The first time, in 1859, he was restored by a leave of absence while he toured Europe. The second, in 1865, was given as the reason for his decision to resign. The State Board, in accepting his resignation with regret, said:

Your intercourse with the Board of Education, has ever been of the pleasantest character. Although questions of the gravest moment relative to the interests of the Normal School have often arisen, and questions at once revealing the fact that there were decided differences of opinion, yet their discussion has been conducted with great candor, and the conclusions reached have been most satisfactory to all.

Welch thereupon became a carpet-bagger in Florida, staying for a short time in Pensacola, then moving to Jacksonville where he engaged, with a brother-in-law, in the lumbering and orange-growing business. He also taught in a Negro school.

He assumed an active roll in the Republican party and was made State chairman. In June, 1868, the Florida legislature elected him to the short term in the United State Senate. Just prior to this action he

had received an offer of the presidency of the newly-authorized Iowa State Agricultural College (now Iowa State University) at Ames. Since the short term would end the following March, Welch was able to come to an understanding with the governing board.

It should be noted here that the governing board, in electing Adonijah Welch president of the college, secured also an important bonus in Mrs. Welch, a woman of strong personality and wide culture, who from the first gave instruction in home economics, and in 1875 was appointed teacher of composition and domestic economy.<sup>6</sup>

As might well have been expected, however, of a man of strong conviction and dauntless courage, Welch was in the course of time caught up in a heated controversy among alumni, faculty, and farmers' organizations over the function of the college. Through a decade, the argument grew more and more heated and finally, in 1883, by the narrow margin of 3 to 2, the Board—in the face of protest by the entire faculty—removed him. He remained on the faculty, however, until his death in 1889.

The historian of Iowa State University, Professor Earl D. Ross, describes Welch as the strong executive type, "every inch a president within and without the institution . . . engaged in a great work, and he knew it and did not propose to have it interrupted by dissentiate or distracting counsels and projects."

In Ypsilanti, it was noted that "Professor Welch had the distinguished privilege of starting three educational institutions which were new in their states, namely, the Union School at Jonesville, the Michigan State Normal School, and the Iowa Agricultural College; and the great success of each is a triple monument to his transcendent ability."<sup>7</sup>