

The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom.
Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.



Volume II

Lesson Eighty-Eight

William Holmes McGuffey

LESSON IDEA

To meet the man who wrote the *McGuffey's Readers*; and to see how his parents, his own family, and the events of his life influenced the production of the most popular textbooks in our history.

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ANNA HOLMES of Washington, Pennsylvania, was twenty-one years old when she married Alexander "Sandy" McGuffey, frontiersman. She was twenty-five and had three children when she followed her husband into the Ohio wilderness to pioneer a farm near Youngstown.

In every way Anna was an extraordinary frontier woman. From her Irish ancestors she inherited a warm heart, alive to beauty, poetry, and music. She was deeply pious — not with the "show religion" reserved for church on Sunday, but with the "down-on-the-knees" seven-days-a-week kind. When the roof caved in or the crops failed or the children had the fever, Anna took the problem to the doors of Heaven, confident that her Divine Father would deal with it. And she was as practical as she was pious and poetic. She believed in "book learnin'."

"No matter what came or went, nor how the housework piled up," wrote Alice McGuffey Ruggles, a great-granddaughter, "in season and out, Anna took time to give her children their first lessons in reading and ciphering, usually at night. In winter, by the dim light of a pine chip or the flickering fire, the children might be limp with sleepiness, but not Anna. Teaching waked her up. She loved to explain and exhort. The letters and

figures drawn in the clean ashes must be erased a score of times until they were absolutely perfect."

Anna taught them all she knew — which was little enough — and then looked for a schoolmaster who could take up where she left off. She was particularly concerned about William, her oldest son, who seemed so anxious to learn everything about anything. His memory was prodigious. He needed to read a sentence or a paragraph only once to know it by heart. His mind was keen, and Anna determined that none of its gifts should be wasted.

THE ANSWER to the problem of "more learnin'" came from the Reverend Mr. Wick, a Presbyterian minister who was well-educated and enterprising enough to open a small school in Youngstown. It was here that William and his older sister, Jane, learned to "speak proper" — to say *cow*, not *ke-ow*; *catch*, not *ketch*; *creature*, not *critter*. William, in particular, impressed the clergyman; and the older scholar lent the younger one all the books he owned — and then helped him find others to borrow.

McGuffey, in turn, memorized the important passages from his borrowed treasures and promptly returned them. Not that he set any particular value on memorizing for its own sake. He did it because, once a passage was memorized, it was as good as having the printed page to study. Then the author's ideas could be turned over critically, pushed from side to side, and poked for weak spots.

William studied with Mr. Wick until he was fifteen or sixteen (the records are not clear), then decided to become a teacher himself. Since there were no organized schools to which he could apply for a job, he roamed the woods and settlements looking for frontier families who were willing to pay to have their children taught "readin' and writin'." When a sufficient number were found, he set up school in a nearby cabin or smokehouse and taught as long as parental interest and money held out.

Frontier teaching under these conditions was definitely not for the weak or the meek. William's broad shoulders and tough muscles did as much to bring a cabinful of wild and unruly children into line as did his keen mind. The known troublemakers he thrashed soundly at the beginning of the term — if they were boys. The girls he subdued by glowering at them. If that failed, he expelled them. In short, McGuffey's discipline was strict. But his lessons were clear and interesting. Parents respected him, and the children liked him. "He was so terribly in earnest about their learning," wrote Alice Ruggles. "His most marked trait was his concentration. He had set his mind on certain definite goals for a career, and he never swerved from them. He was sincerely religious and, unknown to anyone but his mother, had determined to become a Presbyterian minister. But his aims went far beyond a country parish. He meant to educate as well as preach. . . . On his travels a passionate desire had been rising in his heart as he observed the ignorance and mental vacancy of the backwoods people. Crowded ten or twelve in a cabin, they were yet lonely and hungry for something beyond their daily grind. They needed books and teaching, something to feed their souls. William resolved to help them."

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

One of the little known facts of McGuffey history is that the *Fifth* and *Sixth Readers* were authored by William's younger brother Alexander. In 1841 Alexander, a brilliant scholar and lawyer known for his cultivated taste in literature, was asked to prepare an advanced *Reader* to introduce frontier children to the beauties of literature. More of this story and of William's later career are contained in two books we recommend: *The Story Of The McGuffeys* by Alice McGuffey Ruggles, and *William Holmes McGuffey And His Readers* by Harvey C. Minnich.

BUT FIRST he needed more schooling himself — college training, perhaps. Money to pay for more schooling was the big stumbling block. He had none of his own, and his father had none to give him. The lack of "ways and means" discouraged everyone except his mother. Didn't the Bible say, "Ask and it shall be given unto you?" Yes, of course it did. So Anna marched off to her garden, a favorite prayer spot, and asked and asked and asked again. Her prayers were answered in a startling fashion by the Reverend Thomas E. Hughes, President of Greensburg Academy.

Mr. Hughes had been travelling in Ohio, seeking scholars for his Academy, when he passed Anna's garden and overheard her prayer. The next morning he visited the anxious mother with an offer to waive William's tuition and let the young teacher earn his board and keep by "choring" for the Hughes. Can you guess what "choring" means? Have you ever had prayers answered in this way? [*Encourage family discussion.*]

"Choring" meant doing every necessary chore from shoveling coal to carrying wood and water, to digging a garden, to fashioning furniture. William did all of these in exchange for his bed and three meals that never varied. Breakfast was coffee, bread, and butter; dinner was bread, meat, and fruit "sauce;" supper was bread and milk. Sometimes his father sent a barrel of apples. But William never received any pay or even an allowance. He did not have a penny to call his own, but he was accomplishing his purpose — he was learning.

By 1820 McGuffey felt qualified to apply for the job of schoolmaster in Warren, Ohio. It was time to interrupt his learning with some earning, he thought. Unfortunately, two of the Warren town fathers, who were graduates of Yale, asked questions that were far beyond his limited education as well as the school's needs. The rejection by the Yale men was a bitter disappointment, but one that fired McGuffey's determination never again to be found wanting in education. He resolved to get a thorough grounding in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, ancient history, and philosophy before he attempted anything else. Thus it was that he became a student at Washington College in Pennsylvania, paying for books and tuition by interrupting his studies, whenever necessary, to teach frontier children their three R's (reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic).

The McGuffey plan of pay-as-you-go education worked well. By 1826 he was approaching graduation and had such a good record that the president of the college began hinting there might soon be an "opening" on the faculty at Washington for a young man named McGuffey. With that pleasant prospect in mind, William set out for Kentucky to find "subscription students" for a frontier school which would finance his college expenses for the final year.

HE WAS TEACHING in an old smokehouse, which still smelled faintly of hams and hickory, when Robert Hamilton Bishop walked in and sat down on a back-row bench. Bishop, the new president of the University of Miami at Oxford, Ohio, was scouting the frontier for professors; he had already announced that his faculty would offer a curriculum as wide as any in the United States; and having heard of McGuffey's excellence he wanted to hear the young man teach. Liking what he heard, he offered William the professorship in ancient languages at Miami and a salary of six hundred dollars. McGuffey, taken by surprise, said he would consider the offer very carefully. An income of six hundred dollars was an important consideration, of course; it would make life much easier. But accepting the Miami professorship would also mean leaving Washington College without graduating — a goal McGuffey valued more than his physical comforts. It was a hard decision. Miami was one of the frontier universities; its campus consisted of three buildings fenced off from the main road of a crude village in the woods. It might be short-lived. Washington, in Pennsylvania, was older and better established.

If the decision had been yours, would you have accepted the Miami offer? [*Encourage family discussion — especially consider the importance of "job security."*]

McGuffey decided to accept Robert Bishop's offer. It was the newness of Miami that appealed to him. "They've nothing to do with there in the backwoods," he told his mother, "all's in the making. I've my own ideas about teaching, and I've a chance to pioneer. Can you understand my feelings?"

She did, of course. "To start things, to be the first on the ground, that is in our blood," she assured him. "Only promise me, William, that

sometime you will be ordained, so that when the way opens, you may use your learning to preach God's word."

IT WAS SEVEN YEARS before William Holmes McGuffey could fulfill that promise to his mother. Anna was dead, but she would have been proud of his ministry. "He preached regularly in the college chapel," wrote his grandniece Alice Ruggles, "and the attendance had never been so large. The students were required to come; but when William preached, the villagers came too. Soon he was in demand by congregations all over the states

"In belief he was a Fundamentalist, but in preaching he laid emphasis on character rather than dogma. He waked people up, made them think, never talked down to them nor over their heads. His figures were simple, his anecdotes homely and pungent, and he spoke in a natural conversational voice which was unusual in an age of Fourth-of-July oratory. He used no notes, so though he preached more than three thousand sermons in the course of his life, none of them survived in print. Prepared script hampered him.

"Asked once how he could memorize a long sermon or lecture, William replied, 'I do not memorize, it is not necessary, for if you have thoroughly thought out your subject, it is like a ball of wool you wind, leaving the end to come out of the center. You start to pull, and it simply unwinds naturally as you go along.'"

His classes were as exciting as his preaching. Mrs. Ruggles tells us: "In Miami in 1830 William's course [*in philosophy and religion*] was the most exciting in college. Textbooks counted little, and a student who recited from them parrot-fashion would be promptly held up to scorn. Using the Socratic method, the professor promulgated, the students questioned, and the discussion wandered wherever their combined minds led. Though this was an age of academic stuffiness, no one was ever known to nod in McGuffey's classes."

But it was not only philosophy and religion that interested the young professor; he had his own ideas on primary education as well — especially after his marriage to Harriet Spining in 1827 began to produce little McGuffeys in need of an education. To try out his unique theories on teaching the three

R's, William opened an elementary school in his home on the Miami campus. His pupils were the children of his friends and later his own daughters, Mary and Henrietta; the classroom was often the McGuffey's backyard. The daily lessons he planned for his pupils gradually took shape as a book. The exercises and some of the stories were original; others were selected and adapted from other authors. By 1833 he had polished his elementary reader to the point where he considered it worthy to print. Thus, the first McGuffey *Primer* was born.

IN 1836 TWO important honors came to Professor William McGuffey: He was asked to be the president of the newly formed Cincinnati College, and a publisher named Winthrop B. Smith proposed that he write a series of elementary readers that would be suited to the demands of the frontier. The first honor, which seemed to be of major importance at the time, was forgotten three years later when the school closed for lack of funds. But the second honor, which seemed to be only a side issue in 1836, made McGuffey one of the most famous names in America. [*Discuss these results with your family, as an example of how often history reveals our human shortsightedness.*]

Winthrop B. Smith's interest in a set of readers designed for frontier schools was probably strictly dollars and cents; he was not only a competent publisher but also a good salesman who sensed a growing demand, hence a good market and a good income, for schoolbooks of this type.

McGuffey, on the other hand, had little interest in the money to be made; in fact, his business arrangements with Smith allowed him ten cents per book royalty with a thousand dollar maximum, after which McGuffey received nothing and the publisher everything. So while many men made millions either publishing or selling the *McGuffey's Readers*, the author only received a total of one thousand dollars. But it never seemed to bother him. He said, when pressed on the subject, that "the time, labor, worry, expense of the introduction and distribution of the books fell altogether on the publishers, and they were entitled to all the pecuniary profits . . ."

It was not money or fame but the problem of ignorance and mental vacancy — particularly among the backwoods people — that drew McGuffey to the

reader project. He dreamed of creating books that the entire family could use — a series that parents could study with their children. He was well aware of the European immigrants who were constantly filtering into the western lands — most of them only half familiar with the language of the country they had adopted. He wanted the *Readers* to lay the foundation for correct spelling, pronunciation, and usage. But most important of all, he wanted his *Readers* to have a moral influence — to build character — not with dry or gloomy sermonizing, but with lively narratives about everyday country life, the blessings of industry, thrift, temperance, kindness, and patriotism. McGuffey, like his mother, believed very strongly in emphasizing the practical rewards of virtue.

All of these purposes he combined in the four *Readers* he handed to Smith, along with the already published *Primer*, in 1837. The publisher and the public were quick to recognize the unique value of the *Readers*. In schools all over the West and South, the *McGuffey's* soon were preferred over all other schoolbooks. Edition followed edition, until more than 125 million *Readers* had been printed. Revisions were made; new illustrations added; the color of the cover changed from the original green; but the magical appeal of the McGuffey methods and stories remained — and still do until this day. Those Americans who were brought up on the *McGuffey's Readers* still remember with pleasure the stories, poems, and pictures which taught them the value of work, education, and character. The frontier schoolmaster-author had learned his lessons well; and the way he taught what he had learned left a lasting impression on the nation.

DURING THE WEEK

As a family, go through one or more of the *McGuffey's Readers*; study it together as the author envisioned. The *Readers* are available in paperbound (\$15) or in hardbound (\$24.75) at most American Opinion Bookstores, or directly from American Opinion, Belmont, Massachusetts 02178.

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