

When Father Was at Bunker Hill and Mother Was Sewing Flags, What Were the Children Doing ?

JUNE S. DELANO*

WHEN father was at Bunker Hill and mother was sewing flags, the children were practicing with their rifles and needles at home. Childhood in colonial America required as much fortitude and ingenuity as adulthood. The tasks of childhood, growing up, schooling, and playing, were all conditioned by the priorities of a new nation.

Early Child Rearing

"The child is father to the man"—Wordsworth.

The skills for survival had to be learned early by all members of the family. The child in 18th century Europe was emerging for the first time in history as different from a miniature adult (Rousseau and Locke among other philosophers were commenting on the different nature of the child). In America, the necessities of a new frontier and new kind of nuclear family forced the adults whether they lived on farms, in sea-coast towns, on plantations, or on the frontier to teach the child useful adult skills as early as possible.

The New World created tensions for the family which did not exist in the old world.¹ The older generation had to learn

¹ Bernard Bailyn. *Education in the Forming of American Society*. New York: Norton Publishing Company, 1970.

"The releasing of each child's intellectual capacity through language, creativity, and democratic living should be our memorial to the Bicentennial and our legacy to the children to come, at home, at school, and in their play."

to cope with the wilderness along with the children. No adult authority had ready skills to pass on to children in the New World. Except on plantations, parental prestige was further weakened by the economic necessity for nuclear families to live alone. The vast free lands offered economic independence which enticed young adults to leave their families. As a result, all colonies passed legislation which required obedience from children to their parents and which provided severe punishment if they did not obey. In the Boston Courts of 1740 it is recorded that a child of 16 could be punished with death for striking or cursing a parent. Ironically, by today's standards of child care, the same law prohibited cruel punishments or corrections of children.²

Children as soon as possible were taught

² Alden T. Vaughan, editor. *America Before the Revolution, 1725-1775*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967.

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to use the tools and skills necessary for survival in the New World. Hunting, fishing, surveying, seamanship, and agriculture for the boys; spinning, weaving, sewing, cooking, and homemaking for the girls. In our twentieth century enthusiasm for play as a child's work, eighteenth century life seems harsh and cruel. Brian Sutton-Smith³ has described current cultures where childhood play is extremely limited (Mauritius). Five year olds care for young children; seven year olds cook. And, of course, in lower socioeconomic groups in America, young children often carry adult responsibilities and perform tasks comparable to those of the Mauritius children. Clearly economic necessity was (and often is today) a greater consideration in determining child rearing than either previous custom or philosophical reasoning about the nature of the child.

Schooling Recognized as Important

"The end of education is more education"—Dewey.

If helping the family in its economic survival was important for the colonial child so was his schooling. As early as 1647, Massachusetts had a law, "Old Deluder Satan Act," which mandated public schooling:

It being one chief project of Satan to keep men from the knowledge of the scripture. . . . It is therefore ordered by this court and authority thereof, that every township within this jurisdiction, after the Lord hath increased them to the number of fifty householders, shall then forthwith appoint one within their towns to teach all such children as shall resort to him to write and read. . . . And it is further ordered, that where any town shall increase to the number of one hundred families or households, they shall set up a grammar school, the master thereof being able to instruct youth so far as they may be fitted for the university. . . .⁴

Schools proliferated in the New World.

³ Brian Sutton-Smith. "The Useless Made Useful: Play as Variability Training." *School Review* 83 (2):197-214; February 1975.

⁴ Massachusetts Colony Laws and Statutes, Section 1, 1647.

Beginning of the State University

"Concurrent with the Revolution there appeared a quickening of academic interest; in rapid order the existing colleges attempted to transform themselves, while at the same time many new ones were planned on the university model. British authorities had repeatedly refused to grant the people of North Carolina a chartered college. This caused bitter feeling among them. Grasping the very first chance in 1776 they placed in the constitution of the state a provision for 'one or more universities.' It was chartered in 1789 and began teaching six years later, and is the oldest state university. The first constitution of Vermont (1777) likewise provided for the creation of a state university."

Frederick Eby. *The Development of Modern Education: In Theory, Organization, and Practice*. Second edition. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1952. p. 404.

By the eighteenth century, private schools were advertising their specialties in the newspapers: writing, dancing, reading, navigation, fencing, and shorthand. Vaughan comments, "From the perspective of the twentieth century it is clear the education in pre-Revolutionary America made up in enthusiasm and diversity much of what it lacked in formality."⁵ The typical public school day began at 6:00 a.m. and stopped at 8:00 a.m. when the children returned home for breakfast. It resumed at 9:00 a.m. and at 12:00 noon the break for the midday meal occurred. This was the big, cooked meal for the day, as cold leftover food was served at the evening meal. The children returned to school for a final session from 3:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. Children who were tutored or went to private schools followed similar day long schedules.

Courses included French, Latin, Greek, Dutch (in New York), arithmetic, geography, speaking, reading, spelling, writing, navigation, geometry, trigonometry, astronomy, and Italian bookkeeping. The girls also studied

⁵ Vaughan, *op. cit.*

stitchery and French. The debate between classical and practical education started early in our history, with the practical—from economic necessity—usually winning or at least predominating in the curriculum.

Bookkeeping was taught all children as the women were expected to keep careful records of their household expenditures, and the men recorded their business transactions. In colonial America, as many books were published with blank pages as with printed pages. Business records were handwritten as well as the housewife's records of her household. The Italian bookkeeping method of separate books for receipts and expenditures required at least two books for each operation. Journals were also widely kept.

Whether in New England, New York, Pennsylvania, or the Southern Colonies, one would find in every room of the house a desk or writing table. Letter writing as well as journal keeping was practiced by everyone. Jefferson left 18,000 letters.⁶ The miraculous find of Professor Chauncey B. Tinker in Malahide Castle revealed a cache of letters and journals of eighteenth century biographer James Boswell and his contemporaries that have kept Yale University Scholars busy for 52 years and their job is far from completed.⁷ Not every Colonist or European, of course, wrote as prodigiously as Jefferson or Boswell, but write they did: letters, journals, records of money, descriptions of flora and fauna, descriptions of the seasons, and observations of scientific phenomena. Much of this written work has survived and serves to illuminate for us the spirit and minds of our freedom-seeking forebears.

Education was not neglected for children who lived in isolated areas. They were taught by their parents, older brothers and sisters, and friends. Reading was a predominant pastime of colonial America and many a patriot was self-educated as a child by reading widely, as Benjamin Franklin so

⁶ Fawn Brodie. *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1974.

⁷ Israel Shenker. "Boswell's Life a Thriving Industry at Yale." *The New York Times*, July 25, 1975.

vividly describes in his autobiography.⁸ Libraries and bookstores were an established part of the New World by the eighteenth century. Thomas J. Wertenbaker comments that the "rapid expansion of reading in the colonies in the third quarter of the eighteenth century had a profound effect in preparing ground for the American Revolution."⁹ Locke, Montesquieu as much as Coke and Blackstone influenced the thinking of the colonists.

Fawn Brodie in her biography of Thomas Jefferson states of him that, "None of our presidents had so prodigious a scientific curiosity; none read so much, no other 'improved himself' to the extent that he became one of the most learned men in American political history."¹⁰ Children growing up in eighteenth century America grew up in a world of books, intellectual searching, and literacy. Adults all around them were reading and expected the children to read, too.

Play: Preparation for Adulthood

"Play is child's work"—Erikson.

When school and chores were done, was there any time left for play? Not very much for Puritan and Quaker children. Children in less restricted environments and on the plantations had a bit more leisure time for play. With so little time for play, how did the eighteenth century child develop the intellectual processes and social relationships the twentieth century theorists believe children gain through their play activities? The play of the eighteenth century children helped them develop those skills needed in adult society. For children who were grown-up by age eighteen, their adult world was predictable. The boys would have to know how to use a gun, surveyor's tools, or navigation; the girls would have to know how to sew, spin,

⁸ Benjamin Franklin. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1969.

⁹ Thomas J. Wertenbaker. *The Golden Age of Culture*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1970.

¹⁰ Brodie, *op. cit.*

knit, and cook. Their play, by developing their physical prowess and handicraft skills, helped prepare them for their adulthood.

In contrast, according to Sutton-Smith, "Today we are confronted with the necessity that all children, not just upper-status, must be prepared for a world of constant informa-

"Schools proliferated in the New World. By the eighteenth century, private schools were advertising their specialities in the newspapers: writing, dancing, reading, navigation, fencing, and shorthand."¹¹

tion explosion and role shifting. They must be reinforced in that type of adaptation that maximizes their capacity for variability. And that is play."¹¹ The longer and more elaborate play of the twentieth century children prepares them for an uncertain future where ingenuity, inventiveness, and creativity will be required. While the Puritan children were more restricted than their southern cousins, they were allowed to perfect skills needed for adult life. The boys could hunt and fish, practice imitating sounds of wildlife, or whistle whistles, tops, and attractive household items; the girls could sew for their corn-husk or wooden dolls, practice stitchery on samplers, knit socks, and weave.

Southern white children living on plantations and frontier children had fewer restrictions on their play. Puzzles, marbles, stuffed animals, shuttlecocks, chess, board games, cards, water colors, jump rope, and music were available for them. Dancing and music were forbidden in Puritan New England as was gambling. Both the latter two activities were popular among adults in the other colonies and on the frontier.

Play of adults is only possible in the more complex, more sophisticated, more economically secure societies. Play in this sense refers to the aesthetic activities and products of a culture: art, drama, literature, and philosophy. Eighteenth century Europe was

¹¹ Sutton-Smith, *op. cit.*

flowering with the work of Mozart, Newton, Reynolds, Blake, Defoe, Hogarth, and Goethe. American culture was, of necessity, derivative of the parent cultures.

While no great literature, no great art, no great scientific discoveries (except those of Benjamin Franklin) emerged from eighteenth century America, two major contributions were made by the colonists. What has been called "aesthetic pragmatism" emerged and was reflected in the excellent craftsmanship of this period: furniture, architecture, silverware, pewter, crewel work, carving, and stitchery. The handicrafts of the eighteenth century were one contribution; the other was "the genius of the people expressed . . . in *statecraft*."¹² Influenced by the writing of the European philosophers, Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau, who were expressing ideas about the dignity and rights of the individual as opposed to the Divine Right of Monarchies, the colonists put those ideas into law in their new world and eventually fought and won the right to maintain these freedoms for the individual.

Bicentennial Reflections on Curriculum

What in 1976 should we teach our children about their unique heritage?

First, children should acquire as large an information base about our nation's beginning as they can learn at their appropriate age level and through all the curricular techniques we now have available: books, films, filmstrips, games, and toys (George Washington and Thomas Jefferson both played marbles!), drama, dance, and music. As early as possible, students should read and discuss primary sources from the eighteenth century: the Bill of Rights, the Constitution, treatises, journals, and letters.

Second, pragmatic aesthetics are probably still the Americans' greatest contribution to the culture of the world. Sculpture, weaving, stitchery, carving, music, dance, drama, filmmaking, wood working, space exploration, and the skills of occupational

and vocational training must have a secure and legitimate place in American education from kindergarten through high school. All children need to develop ways of expressing ideas and feelings, of communicating with one another in different and creative ways. These areas, too, are *basic* American education.

Third, to continue American "genius" in statecraft, American school children need to learn early that each person is a respected individual with dignity and potential. Then problem solving and skills of self-determination can follow. Every classroom, every school must, of course, model the precepts of democratic life and hold inviolate those rights guaranteed in the Constitution. Due process begins in the kindergarten.

Fourth, a return, a recapture of eighteenth century intellectualism and literacy should be a goal of all educators. What are our 1976 goals as educators if not to make ourselves and our students aware of the potential that exists in all of us to be expressed in language and thought intelligible to others? A great painting may exist without words; but it exists in a vacuum if the non-painter cannot comment in words about its imagery, its richness of color, its symbolism, or lack of these. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in an article on Watergate and what teachers can tell their students about it, draws dramatic attention to the corruption of *language* in the Nixon administration by comparing it with the "lucid, measured, and felicitous prose, marked by Augustan virtues of harmony, balance, and elegance" of the eighteenth century.¹³

Our task as educators is to make our language communicate our ideas and thoughts as clearly, as precisely, as beautifully as we can. That—the releasing of each child's intellectual capacity through language, through creativity, and through democratic living—should be our memorial to the Bicentennial and our legacy to the children to come, at home, at school, and in their play. □

¹³ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. "Thoughts after Watergate." *School Review* 83 (2):179-95; February 1975.

¹² Wertenbaker, *op. cit.*

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