

IOWA HISTORY



A typical female graduate in 1896

High School Graduation in 1896

“As usual, this year’s class was the best in history.”

The newspaper reporter who covered the Centerville High School class of 1896 must have been a cantankerous, but seasoned writer. And he certainly had attended more graduation ceremonies than he cared to in his lifetime.

Seventeen youngsters—11 girls and 6 boys—filled the stage in the school assembly room. Decorations were so elaborate that it was difficult to see all the students as they sat on the stage. Yards and yards of sheer bobinette fabric formed a wainscoting around the room to hide the blackboards. A narrow border of arbor vitae had been placed along the top of the fabric.

Arbor vitae and flowers had been artistically arranged over the doors and white point lace curtains hung over the door openings.

The class colors—purple and white—were evidenced in the streamers that floated from the gas jets in each corner of the room to the center chandelier, which was adorned with evergreen and more bobinette. The stage where the graduates sat was bordered with palms and stands of potted plants. A huge American flag hung prominently in a corner of the room.

The female students were described as looking “unusually sweet and girlish” dressed in their apple blossom pink and white frocks and even the “lads” were “not without points of beauty.” However, the reporter noted that the audience consisting of friends and relatives couldn’t resist the occasional “critical whispered remarks.”

The disgruntled old reporter was happy to note that the student speakers had given “a rest” to their usual biographical sketches of George Washington and Ben Franklin and “other long suffering patriots” in favor of personal musings about life in general.

James K. Boyle reviewed the advantages of a “commercial training for the affairs of life” in his talk “For the Public Good.” Frank Weston delivered his “thoughtful production” titled “The Chief Defense of a Nation” in a slow, low tone of voice. Katherine Lockman, dressed in dainty white swiss trimmed with white ribbon and lace, talked about “The Influence of Ideals.” Miss Nellie Brough, attired in a “dainty white wool dress w/ lace and ribbon trimmings shared her thoughts about the “New Woman.”

Not all went well with the speeches. Ethel Kingsbury spoke too low and most of the audience missed her talk about “The Spinner and the Singer.” But they admired her white organdy gown, gloves, and white carnation corsage. And school board president C.W. Lane made a “somewhat lengthy” address to the class before handing out their diplomas.

According to the cynical old reporter, the audience of 500 were more than ready to file out of the room to the sounds of the student orchestra; and they were “willing to await until next year for the coming out of another ‘best class that was ever graduated from the Centerville High School’.”

Sources

Daily Citizen, Centerville, May 16, 1896.

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