

The Dim Ages: Early Years at Hunter's College

by Ruth Limmer

This issue of *The Hunter Magazine* was to have carried the conclusion of Ruth Limmer's article about Thomas Hunter (part one appeared in the last issue), but Limmer is still reading Hunter's novels (in holograph) in preparation for writing it. Meanwhile, she has tossed off this elegant piece about education at the College during its first years.

Ruth Limmer founded *The Hunter Magazine* and was its first editor before becoming President Shalala's assistant for research and special projects. She is the literary executor of the estate of the poet Louise Bogan and has edited three books of Bogan's writings.

THE year was 1869, the school population of New York City had risen to 100,000, and the 2,500 teachers in the public school system were essentially untrained and incompetent.

To the rescue came a newly constituted Committee on Normal, Evening, and Colored Schools. The members reread the 1847 statute, "intended to extend to each sex, equal educational advantages," and at long last a teacher-training school for females was instituted. The "Normal" accepted its first class of students on St. Valentine's Day, 1870. And from then until he retired in 1906, its founding president, Thomas Hunter, was the guiding genius of the place. One senses that no step was ever taken, no change was ever made, without his initiating it.

But one could not have asked for a wiser, more humane leader. From the beginning, for example, Hunter insisted that prospective students be tested

anonymously. Each was given a number; the number was written on the test paper, and the test paper was graded. "It was best," he said, "that rich and poor, high and low, should be placed upon a common platform. . . ." Only thus could "uniform justice be secured for every individual candidate." But these firm words did not issue from an inflexible judge of right and wrong. Recognizing that the examination ordeal was "likely to create nervousness and embarrassment," he retested those who failed.

The entering classes — 1,068 girls who had passed the competitive examination plus 27 others whom the committee had forced the president to accept — were a mixed bag. Many of them presented examination papers that were "correct, beautiful, and creditable" to themselves and their previous instructors. All too many others were less than accomplished. Hunter noted a "general deficiency" in penmanship



Joseph A. Gillet and class. Professor of mathematics and physical science, Gillet started with the Normal School in 1870 and was acting president from 1906 to 1908, when he died in office.

and in the ability to organize (or as he grandly put it, they lacked "executive force in the arrangement of the subject matter"). He also observed "a curious indifference to capitals and periods . . . an indisposition to finish a thing . . . and an unaccountable habit of thinking that the *name* was equivalent to the *thing*." By that he meant that many of the Normal's first students— young teachers who had previously been enrolled in "supplementary" classes taught in the grammar schools by assistant principals— thought themselves better prepared than they actually were for advanced work at his new school.

He did not fault the quality of their instructors, many of whom he snatched away for his own faculty; the problems lay in the staffing of the supplementaries: the assistant principals were required to teach "and therefore to know nicely and critically" too many different branches of study. The same person was expected to handle instruction in arithmetic, algebra, geometry, astronomy, philosophy, rhetoric, grammar, geography, etymology, and history— and in some schools also Latin, French or German, and trigonometry.

There is evidence that President Hunter overworked his faculty, but at least they labored in only one or two cognate studies, not in more than a dozen. He, after all, was running a college, with professors (male) and tutors (female).

But in truth it was hardly a college when it began.

Its original name, "The Female Normal and High School," was much more accurate than the charitable designation it received a few months later. To begin with, the students had not attended high school. There *were* no public high schools for females in the City. For another, Thomas Hunter forthrightly admitted (but not until 1891) that from the start the Normal had been inferior to the Free Academy (later City College) because not until 1888 was it chartered to award bachelor degrees.

What Thomas Hunter provided, then, was essentially a *higher* school whose course of study lasted three years— introductory, sophomore, and senior. And a good part of the time, given the crowded conditions in the Normal's original location on Broadway and 4th Street, the students studied and learned at home. Sciences requiring "costly apparatus"— botany, chemistry, geology, mineralogy— and subjects like music, calisthenics, drawing, and penmanship were taught in classrooms; for the rest, a textbook at a kitchen table. Only in the final semester of the last year did the students always take instruction at the College.

Not for a moment did Thomas Hunter think the situation ideal, but he had to start somewhere or not start at all. Pragmatically, he began where and how he could, but all the while he was planning for more commodious quarters and for the gradual expansion of the program and the years of study.

By 1880, the Normal College had moved to Park Avenue, and a fourth year was in place for those who had the luxury of additional study. Hunter warned the Board not to expect "any great measure of success. As a rule," he wrote, "young people, in these days, study, not for the sake of knowledge and wisdom, but for some reward." And because there were no rewards, "they declined to study any more." When the fourth year would become compulsory in 1882, he expected it to "weed out the weak, the sickly and infirm of purpose."

Hunter sounds tough, and was certainly firm, but further along in this same report he says that "some of the best and most sensitive" of the first-year students "retire voluntarily" from the College lest they not earn the 75 percent required on the first examination. He recommends to the Board that those students who score between 50 and 75 percent be conditioned rather than dismissed. Another examination the following June would be set and only then would their fates be sealed.

The fourth year would also, he noted, "give an additional year of maturity and experience which will be a blessing to the little children for whose welfare the school system was founded." The age at which teachers could enter upon their professional tasks was of continual concern to him. Before the founding of the Normal College, teachers began their work as "monitors" at the age of 13 or 14. With the establishment of the Normal, which by 1872 had fixed 14 as the minimum age for entrance, the age of beginning teachers rose to an "immature" 17. This fourth year of Normal education produced 18-year-old teachers.

It is worth examining what this extra year of education held in the way of studies:

Latin: Horace, Tacitus, Agricola

French: the completion of grammar, letter-writing and composition, literature of the 19th century, La Fontaine and outlines of the history of pedagogy in France.

German: history of German literature, translations from German into English and vice-versa; composition, especially letter-writing

English: writers from the Queen Anne period to Burns (inclusive) and elocution

Physics: radiation, spectrum analysis, energy

Ethics: "as the basis of School Government"

Intellectual Philosophy and Theory of Teaching: (undescribed)

Drawing: free-hand blackboard drawing; foliage and historic ornament in sepia; elementary design, plane geometric figures, perspective and its applications; theory and practice of teaching

Music: harmony (continued), chords of the 7th and

9th and inversions; reading and writing music; methods and practice teaching.

(Solid geometry and quadratic equations had been covered in the second year; astronomy, botany, and physiology had been completed in the third.)

The only way we have of judging the depth of the studies is to look at the final examination. In his annual report for 1886—the first year that all seniors were fourth-year students—Hunter printed the exam in full; what follows is a sampling from each one-and-a-quarter-hour segment.

Describe the characteristics of Bryant's poetry and name his translations. Give an account of Longfellow's literary career and tell the reasons of his popularity. What can be said of American women in literature?

Define acquired perception. State the principal ways in which we estimate distance by the eye.

Welches war die gute, und welches die schlechte Wirkung der romantischen Schule nach Schiller's Tod?

Give a brief sketch of the physiography of Manhattan island.

In an arc circuit there are 12 lamps of a resistance of 5 ohms each. What electro-motive force would be required to maintain a current of 15 amperes, supposing the resistance in the circuit outside the lamps to be 4 ohms?

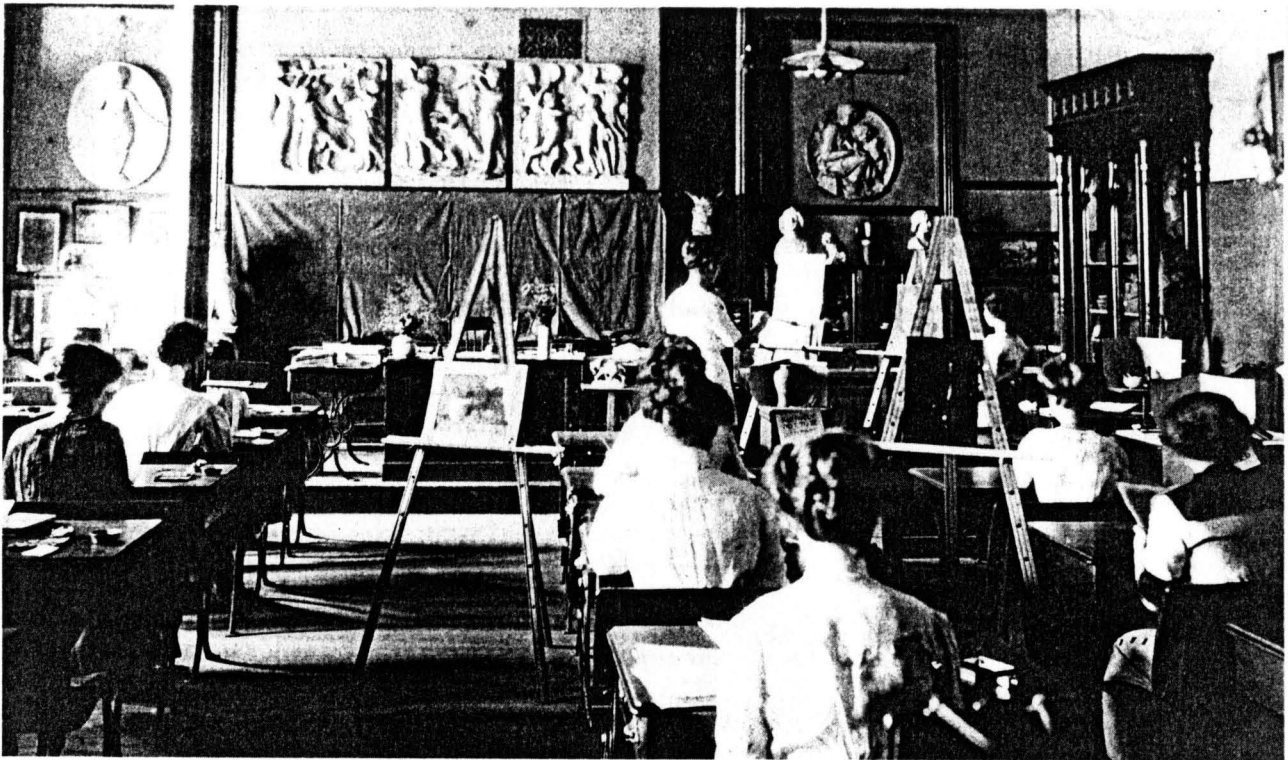
On demande pour la bibliothèque du collège normal une histoire de France et une littérature française: que recommanderez-vous?

Conjugate, profici, excidere, orsus, coercuit, as-cire. Write the imperative mood passive of first verb. Compare primum, minus, saepius, and give the genitive plural of noun from which precibus comes.

Write a full plan of a lesson the point of which is to develop the definition of an *isthmus*. (Introduce items of interest in reference to Suez and Panama. Draw blackboard illustrations.)

By the year of this examination, 3,479 students had graduated from the Normal College, and nearly two thousand were at work in the schools. They were not profoundly educated, but it appears they knew many things. And if the student magazine, *Echo*, first published in the 1889-90 academic year, reflects a general condition, they were high-minded young women with much to be proud of. It is hard, for example, not to delight in their prose style. In 1891, we have a paean to Central Park that opens:

What is more distinctly American in our city than Central Park. Its ample grounds, its unstinted luxuriance, its alternation between



primeval grandeur and the cultivation of today, its half-natural, half-artificial spots of verdure, are they not typical of our country?

Often we feel tempted to hang our heads in shame at the mention of the faults of New York City. We feel scarcely a throb of that pride of native place, which so marks many of the greatest ancients and moderns. Yet if we stand at the side of our Park. . . can we not feel a thrill of pleasure in the possession of this priceless gift?

A year later, having heard Paderewski play ("he is the poetry that sways the will suddenly, uncontrollably. . ."), *Echo* tells its readers:

The death of Walt Whitman takes away one more landmark of a past generation — one of the silver-haired poets of whom so few are left. We feel the loss of his personality with a strength that surprises us. We had not known that he was drawing so near to the life of the people — as a man.

This same issue also provides a brief table of foreign current events for the month of March: "an infernal machine" is thrown at the Czarina in St. Petersburg; the Russian Ministers urge the arrest of Count Tolstoi because of his influence over the peasants; a new cabinet is formed in Chile; in Vienna fighting breaks out among the starving poor; in Hungary, many die of starvation.

We may assume that the editors of *Echo* were like Miss Brodie's students: *crème de la crème*. But pre-

sumably they were writing to interest their school-mates, and their range of concerns and their (mostly) mature styles suggest an education of considerable quality.

By 1888, Hunter had extended the Normal College program to five years for those students who wished to work for a degree (as against a diploma), and "for the first time in the educational history of America, a class of girls will be graduated with the degree of A.B., from a college supported at the public expense."

It had to be a moment of deep pride for Thomas Hunter and his faculty, but because he surely had this final step in mind since 1870, Hunter did not call up the trumpets and banners. He wrote little more than: "It was expected that [the bachelor-degree candidates] would excel in the study of languages. Our fears were for the mathematics; but these fears have been completely removed. Being two years more mature than young men of the same age, they have 'wrangled' with the higher mathematics in a manner to command the admiration of their professor."

The Normal College had come a long way since Thomas Hunter observed (the year was 1879), "Intelligent *reading* — the reading that will enable a child to close his book and tell, in his own language, that which he has read — is an accomplishment not generally found among the candidates admitted to the College." A long way to come; a long way to go. □