Rural schools of more than a half century ago belonged properly to the "horse-and-buggy" days. Communities were more or less set off from each other. Influence of city life was less than now. One would say that rural communities could develop high levels of distinction in being largely left to themselves. Alas, the rural schools were not geared to this higher development. They were poorly taught in most instances by persons who were not adequately prepared and lacked specific training for teaching.

2.

At Money Creek Station, Houston County, Minnesota, the community consisted of cultured families possessing adequate means. The district was number eight, indicating it was among the earliest organized. High school graduates from Rushford in steady succession, a new one each year, had been employed as teachers, all at the same uniform salary of $26.00 per month. Now there were many good teachers among them which was indicated by the attainments of the pupils.

The pupils who assembled the first morning were bright and interesting. They crowded around the desk to exhibit last year's report cards and promotion certificates. I had never even entered a rural school building until that morning. I was amazed at the number of classes, almost as many as there were pupils, which was twenty. They were all anxious to tell me how far they had gone in their book or that subject. Some gave evidence of being coached at home to insist on being placed in the highest class possible.

The beginner's class was my chief problem. The primer as the reading book used was called had hesitatingly included a few pictures, like cat, dog, boy, girl and apple, with word printed beneath. I started with that and was surprised how readily they got the idea. The pupils were helped at home. Besides they had natural curiosity and wanted to learn.

At about this time school text-book publishers were vying with each other in preparing sets of school readers embodying new ideas to facilitate teaching reading. I secured a copy of each of the new primers and first readers as they appeared. I must have acquired a dozen. These I distributed to my beginners. The books were full of pictures. An enterprising publisher of that period actually printed pictures in colors. Interest was aroused. The other classes presented no problem. The pupils were diligent. The parents were helpful. Soon the school was a going concern.

The young people of Money Creek were continuously having parties, dances, basket-socials and the like. There were many pretty girls and fine outstanding young men in the community. Soon my Rushford friends were invited to these social gatherings where there was a chance to have so much fun. Bidding at basket-socials soon established new "highs". Competition was keen. As much as five dollars was paid for a "basket" in one instance, an unheard of sum, but the buyer was in dead earnest. No other fellow was to get his girl.
3.

In April of 1896 I read a notice that a competitive examination was shortly to be held to select a candidate who would receive an appointment as cadet to the United States Military Academy at West Point. This was Congressman James A. Tawney’s method of selecting candidates. The winner would be appointed. I went to Winona and became one of twelve young men to take the examination.

On April 26th Congressman Tawney informed me I stood highest. He wrote, “I therefore take pleasure in offering you the appointment.” On May 5th orders were received to report at West Point, June 13, to take the physical and scholastic examinations. I did not note the numeral 13 at that time.

Problems involving money needed for the trip to West Point now came to the fore. I had no money and I could not ask my father to obligate himself. I wanted to go. I would require about $400.00. The citizens of Rushford were interested in having one of their boys attend West Point. They considered the appointment an honor to the community.

Fortunately for me John A. Hanson, of English descent, son of one of Rushford’s pioneers, was at home at this time. He devised a plan that proved to be successful. Leading citizens of my home city loaned me $200.00 on my personal notes, varying from $5.00 to $25.00, without interest. No security was asked. Father provided the balance. I still have those notes which I repaid within a short time.

4.

Preparations began for the journey to West Point. I had previously journeyed by train no farther than to La Crosse, Wisconsin, 35 miles away, so going east would certainly be a new experience for me. The first night on the train was via chair-car from La Crosse to Chicago.

The occupant of the seat beside me was a prosperous appearing person whose name was Wilbur, of Milwaukee. We talked half the night. He learned of my errand. He was well informed. He had a sound philosophy. He seemed interested in me and my prospects. I have never forgotten that conversation because I learned so much from him of what I needed to know.

I arrived at Highland Falls, New York, to enroll in Col. Braden’s National Preparatory Academy. There were 26 at the school, all preparing for the West Point entrance examinations. I soon discovered I was “short” in Algebra. Evidently my high school course had been too easy.

The boys at Col. Braden’s school had organized a “fun” club which was called, “The Ancient Order of Royal Hod Carriers.” The fun was for them at the initiation of new members. My turn came. Insurmountable difficulties had to be overcome before the initiatory tests were concluded. This initiation gave a hint of what would befall a “plebe” at the Academy. I had read Captain King’s book on “West Point Days” and was thus partially informed about hazing. I did not mind it. It was all in fun.

One question was, “What is the difference between this and that?” A ponderous query which required ponderous thought! I was ordered to sing a song. “Paradise Alley” was going the rounds those days and I sang it. The boys joined in the chorus. The initiation was soon concluded and I met all the members. Those who completed the course became members of the Class of 1900. I have the names of all of them. Those who lived up to World War II were Major Generals in that war.
The night preceding our entrance to the Military Academy’s examination rooms was spent in “high jinks.” Sutherland, of Virginia, led in singing, “Twinkle-twinkle, little star.” We were all very gay.

We attended graduation exercises the next day and saw the Academy in all its glory. Major General Nelson A. Miles gave the chief address and presented diplomas to the members of the class of 1896. It was an impressive occasion. Afterwards I met Cadet Captain Alvin C. Heiberg, whose brother was a physician in my home city. He lost his life in Italy in World War I. He made a brilliant record at the Point and in the service.

The candidates were lodged at the Academy’s barracks. It was rumored that the quarters assigned to Soliliac, Thompson and myself were used by General Sherman when he was a cadet. The story goes on to say that when he was Inspector-General of U.S. Army he entered this room. The two cadets stood at stiff attention. He approached the open fireplace and thrust his scabbard upwards. A shelf and various forbidden supplies, glasses and the like tumbled to the floor. The cadets were terror stricken. This meant instant dismissal. But General Sherman said not a word. He walked out, giving the indication of a wink to one of the cadets. He was on familiar ground. This was the end of the incident. Anyway, this is the story told to the three who now occupied that historic room.

During the days of the examinations the candidates were under military discipline. Sergeant Munro was in command of the squad of upper-classmen that had us in charge. Repeatedly, he asked me, “Who am I?” I did not know. How was I to know? I’d never seen him before. After inquiry I learned his name and his state. He was Cadet Munro, from Minneapolis. He, later, had a distinguished career in the Army. Sergeant Munro took pains to give me all the assistance he could but it was never disclosed that it came from him.

The candidates had their meals with the cadets in the Academy’s large dining room. The walls were covered with portraits of distinguished graduates. One injunction to candidates and plebes alike was, “Keep your eyes, right here,” pointing to a spot on the tablecloth directly in front. No candidate, or plebe, when admitted, was ever to set his eyes on the portraits during the plebe year. That was the law. I do not know to this day what possessed me but I did take a look once, and saw General Grant’s portrait. Immediately, the upper classmen at the table pounced upon me, “Keep your—eyes, right here,” they all hissed into my ears. I felt as though I was about to be led out and shot.

Other incidents happened during those exciting days. Cadet officers pounced upon the candidates at all times. “Thin out,” “Keep your—eyes to the front.” If “sir” was omitted in answering a question, the word would be hurled at one in a thunderous voice. This was hazing. Personally, I took it in good grace. It was a valuable means of making outstanding officers out of material gathered from all over the country.

There were excesses, of course, but hazing did not disturb me. Each examinee or plebe when admitted hoped for a chance later. Traditions had been instituted during the years. The nation is rightly proud of its Military and Naval Academies.

As I had expected when I learned at Braden’s School the nature of examination in Algebra, I found myself among the group that failed to gain admission. I was
disappointed, who wouldn’t be? But I felt I had gained a great deal during the summer of 1896. There was the spontaneous support given me by my home city’s leading citizens. The journey to the east vastly enlarged my field of interests and increased my determination to make something of myself. The experiences gained became a factor in my life. “To smile in victory is easy; in defeat heroic.” But I did not admit defeat. Youth is resilient. He stumbles or he is temporarily stopped, but a driving force urges him onward.

I joined a group of “busted candidates” for several days’ sightseeing in New York. Life still was of absorbing interest.

7.

There was another journey east that summer. Congressman Tawney offered me an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy and I set out for Annapolis, hoping that my “jinx” had departed. There was no time for adequate preparation for the examination. In fact, I was ordered by telegraph to report at the Academy, September 1. I suffered there the same fate as at West Point. I took this second failure more to heart.

The Cuban Revolutionary Junta had emissaries at Annapolis offering opportunity to join General Funston to help the Cubans gain independence by aiding the militant revolutionists who were at this time very active. The opportunity appealed to me. I felt, however, I must ask my father’s advice. I had debts to repay. If anything happened to me those debts would fall on him. I wrote him painting in glowing colors the service I might join. I minimized the dangers, but his telegram stated, “Best to come home.” After seeing the sights in Washington I returned home. Another defeat for me.

Congressman Tawney was persistent. Perhaps that is why he rose to prominence as a Congressman, heading the powerful Committee on Appropriations. He offered me a second appointment, effective in June next year, provided I would attend a Naval Academy preparatory school. This letter from him was dated November 17, 1896. My fervor, however, had left me. I wrote him I deeply appreciated the opportunity but declined the appointment. My father had been a seaman but I was not particularly interested.

8.

It was to be country school teaching again. I had a richer background now and felt surer of myself. New ambitions were budding. I would continue teaching and eventually graduate from the University of Minnesota. In the meantime, home-study and do a good job teaching.

Vinegar Hill school, on Irish Ridge, six miles northeast of Rushford, needed a teacher. Would I accept? I did. The school was rumored to be a “tough” one but that only aroused my curiosity. I was nearly 6 feet tall, was physically fit and strong. I had no misgivings. The pupils were nearly evenly divided between Irish and German families. There was no love lost between them, as I was to learn. The school had been named after William Sandrock, farmer and apple-grower. His specialties were cider and vinegar.

My first test came when I stepped between Willie McCormick, as large as I, and Will Cordes, shorter but tough as hickory, who were set to fight. “No fighting on the school grounds, nor on the way to or from school.” I had laid down the law on opening day. “Absolutely, no fighting.”

Both of the lads nearly as old and perhaps hardened by farm work, stronger, looked at me. They appeared to be surprised. I told them, “The first one who strikes
will have to fight me.” They decided to call it a day. Years afterwards, Will McCormick said to me, “You will never know how close you were to receiving a blow between your eyes, that noon period. I liked you and my father and mother liked you. I just couldn’t do it.”

His mother, dear soul, has gone to her eternal rest. Several times during the school term she sent word by Willie to ask me to come home with him to stay overnight. We were good friends. Her husband liked to play “euchre” and especially enjoyed the games which he and I won over Dan and Will. He would roar with joy. “We licked them cubs again. They’ll be learning to play soon. Give ’em time!”

A nice hot soapstone to warm my bed, a breakfast like those you read about, a cheery “Come again” from them both, left me with pleasantest memories.

The next fall I taught in Fillmore County for the first time. The salary was a new high for me. I read and studied a great deal during that term. On February 15 came the fateful message that the U. S. battleship “Maine” was sunk in Havana harbor. That was enough for me. I decided then and there to join the U. S. Army if war was declared. At the close of a spring term at Bratsberg, Minnesota, I went to Spring Valley to offer my services as a member of Co. F, Twelfth Minnesota Volunteer Infantry.

PRIVATE CONRAD G. SELVIG

“Nine volunteers from Rushford in this company.”

I was a minor. Captain Roy Viall informed me I had to secure father’s consent. I returned home to get it. He was not disposed to grant it. I informed him I was determined to enlist and that I did not want to misstate my age. He finally signed the letter. I still have it.

There were nine volunteers from Rushford who served in Co. F. The regiment reached Chickamauga Park, July 1. We soon received uniforms and were dismayed
to find we were issued heavy blue woolen shirts, and heavy, blue trousers. Only the blouse was made of lighter weight material. The khaki uniforms were not issued until in September. This meant two daily drill periods and dress parade wearing these so unsuitable clothes in Georgia where the temperature in the shade often was 116°. We had to wring the water from our clothes as we returned from drill or parade. Nearly all the days were insufferably hot.

Major T. C. Clark, chief medical officer of the 12th Minnesota Regiment wrote about the conditions. He said, “The weather was hot and the food was heavy. The water supply was poor and sanitation inadequate. The first night at camp the only water obtainable was from the creek and it must have been contaminated, as it drained an area on which there were hundreds of typhoid cases. The principal causes of infection, however, were flies and dust. The flies and dust were everywhere and sinks were uncovered.”

Hospital facilities were woefully inadequate. Veterans in state of coma were moved from the cots they occupied to make room for new cases. Hundreds died. “These men were just as dead as any of the men who were killed in action,” Major Clark said, “and they should share no less in the honor that comes to the soldier who dies for his country.”

There were camp incidents, of course. When one asked, “How far to Chattanooga?”, the reply almost invariably would be, “a smart ways,” “three-and-a-half looks” or “it is a right - smart number of miles.” On the night of July Fourth, following the news of the surrender of Admiral Cervera’s fleet, pandemonium broke loose. Our Brigade had held a joint celebration during the day. Col. Tillman spoke for the First Carolina Regiment, Lt. John Lind for the Twelfth Minnesota and someone for the Fifth Pennsylvania. The main theme was the reunion of the North and the South. All night long there was shouting. The sound would momentarily be stilled and then as the regiments nearer ours took it up the sound would grow in a wild crescendo. Suddenly it would stop and then begin again. It was an unforgettable night.

Beauchamp, who was called Bush by everybody, hailed from Rushford. We served on fatigue duty as bread detail early the morning of the grand review of all troops at Camp Thomas. We returned to camp too late to be with our company. Instead, we donned our smartest uniform and took our places on a knoll to the rear of the reviewing stand. I was inspired by the showing made by an army numbering nearly 60,000 troops.

It is always thus. The glory of war is uppermost in men’s minds. Its ravages are ignored or forgotten.

When peace was declared our regiment was ordered to a new camp near Lexington, Kentucky. Later, we were furloughed for a month, preceding mustering out. This took place on November 6, at New Ulm, Minnesota, which was the home city of the 12th Minnesota’s commander, Colonel Joseph Bobletter.

10.

Soon after returning home from this experience in the southland, I, again, became a rural school teacher, this time in the township of York, in southwestern Fillmore County. I was there two years. I boarded at the farm home of Mr. and Mrs. Henry B. Knapp. He had been a logger at a lumber camp on the St. Croix River. His stories were original and his sayings quaint. I could have gathered material for a book. We
could never know when he just now-remembered some interesting incident. "The sheep are the darndest hogs to eat punkins," he said on day. "Those kind of oats people—the Quakers," was his ingenious way of recalling the word Quakers. He was a source of enjoyment every day. Time passed quickly.

During the Christmas holidays I made inquiry regarding the scholastic requirement for a professional state teacher's certificate which would enable me to qualify for a school principalship. The list astounded me. It appeared as if an impossible barrier was in my way. Here is the list: chemistry, trigonometry, geology, zoology, botany, English literature, general history, political economy, intellectual philosophy, moral philosophy, logic, astronomy, civil government, history of education and theory and art of education.

"Fools tread where angels fear to go," came to my mind. Of course a systematic grasp of all these subjects could be acquired only during a lifetime of study. I noted, however, that such certificates were issued from time to time. What others could do I, at least, could attempt.

So I went to work. I expected to attend summer sessions at the University to secure credits in some of the subjects. The others I would tackle through home study. I therefore set myself the task of putting in three hours of study six days each week. If I missed an evening or two, I would make that up on Saturdays and Sundays.

I held to the home study project for several years. Do not let anyone say it was a light task. It was not. The flesh tempted. So did the moon-lit evenings. It was a hard fight but I had to win. The self-discipline did me good. I enjoyed social gatherings all the more because their number was limited. There are always two bests: the ideal best and the best possible. I set out to follow the latter and liked it.

During April, 1899, I was employed as railway mail service "mail-weigher" between Austin, Minnesota, and Calmar, Iowa. The school board kindly deferred opening of the spring term to accommodate me. I was still repaying my expenses occasioned by the West Point and Annapolis trips and, as the saying goes, I needed the money.

On my twenty-second birthday, October 11, my brother, Will Knapp, Bert Buck and I went to Minneapolis to witness the return of the 13th Minnesota Regiment from the Philippines. Chauncey Olcott was playing, "The Romance of Athlone," at the Metropolitan Theatre, where we spent the first evening. We heard him sing, "My Wild Irish Rose" and the lovely "Lullaby." For country boys this was a delight.

The next day we journeyed to St. Paul to watch the regiment arrive. We gazed with unabashed admiration at their bronzed features. We were proud Minnesota had such stalwart and sturdy sons. We hurried back to Minneapolis and saw President and Mrs. McKinley alight from their special car. We were out to see everything.

An imposing triumphal arch had been built on Hennepin Avenue. Beyond it was the reviewing stand. We were lively and soon found space in the jammed crowd opposite the Presidential stand. We took turns in hoisting each other to view the passing soldiers. Who can adequately describe our emotions at the moment? Hysterical women wept. Oldsters furtively wiped away their tears. Men called huzzas and all was excitement.

On the stand right before us were the President; Governor John Lind; the Secretary of the Treasury, Lyman Gage; the Secretary of War, John D. Long and many others. I do not recall whether Mrs. McKinley was there. I saw the President plainly.
He appeared weary but was visibly happy. Later we attended the mass meeting in Exposition Hall, across the Mississippi River, and heard his address which is one of our country's principal state papers to this day.

The school term closed. My younger brother was elected to teach there the next year. I attended summer teachers' training school at Rushford and there met Miss Marion Wilcox of whom more anon. After this session I became a participant in my first political activity. It was a contest for nomination for county auditor. Alfred Kingsford and I were anxious to have J. F. Jones secure the nomination. The Republican county organization supported the incumbent. Here were two young neophites presuming to battle the old guard. We gave them a close run in Rushford but lost the city, 69 to 51. At the county convention our man was nominated.

During April I had been elected to teach at Granger, Minnesota, during the next school year at a salary of $55.00 per month. Fifty-five pupils were enrolled, classified from beginners to the ninth grade. What was I to do for this multitude? I was baffled. One person could not possibly teach classes in all those grades.

A solution was found. School for some classes would open at 8:30 and close at 4:30. That helped somewhat. Among the ninth grade pupils were two young women who were willing to take the primary grade classes during the day, by holding their classes each in a separate corner of the room while I had my class in front. It worked. Absolute quiet was demanded and attained. All the pupils were cooperative. This was something new. The pupils wanted to help. This schedule was continued throughout the school year.

I was carrying a heavy home-study schedule. "We never see the professor (as I was called)," said many. "He is too busy." I did find time to take long walks. The valley surrounding Granger presented wondrous colorings in the fall. The scene was inexpressively beautiful.

There were dinners and social gatherings. The year was happily spent. Then came Christmas eve and day at home. I recall that Christmas vividly. Candlelight, songs, hearts carefree, pure spirit of devotion and thanks from grateful hearts to the One on High. Thus our family spent Christmas together.

Following the Christmas holidays I attended my first meetings of the Minnesota Educational Association, St. Paul. Here I met Dr. Richard Burton, Congressman J. Adam Bede, Dr. David L. Kiehle, Dr. Sarah Brooks, Dr. J. F. Millspough, Dr. Weir Mitchell and formed many new acquaintances with Minnesota educators. It was like coming into a new world. At last, I felt I was on my way but I had still a long, a very long distance to go.

Evenings during the convention were spent with Marion Wilcox who was a student at the University of Minnesota. Rosy prospects loomed before me. The tempo of life had been accelerated during the past year, but I was impatient over the slow progress. During the following summer, I attended the summer session classes of the University where I studied chemistry and botany receiving credits in both. The next summer, University algebra in Dr. Bauer's class. My grade was 85% which consoled me no end. It was my lack of preparation back in 1896 that aborted my attempt to enter West Point and later Annapolis. I was glad it was not inherent dumbness in mathematics. "The wheels of the gods grind slowly," I thought, "but they grind to powder."