



## SCHOOL & EDUCATION:

### *“Education in the Small-Town View”*

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*In the fall of 1896, I entered the Lincoln school, little aware that I was starting on a road in formal education which would not terminate until 1929 when I finished courses at the Army’s War College in Washington, D.C. What I learned at the start would not remain static. In the third of a century between my first and last school was compressed a series of revolutions—political and economic, social and scientific—which were to transform the human environment of the entire globe.*

*--Dwight D. Eisenhower*

Going to school in a small Midwestern town 100 years ago was, in some respects, very different from today; in others, little has changed. The goal of public education was not to prepare young people for a career, as it is today. Rather, students labored to perfect their Spencerian penmanship and struggled to master the basics of spelling, reading, and “ciphering” (arithmetic)—what we term the “three R’s” today. Most members of the community agreed that common sense and hard work rounded out a “good” common-school education.

Religious education was well integrated into the public school curriculum. The school day generally began with the teacher’s reading a Bible verse to the class. *McGuffey’s Readers*, a popular textbook series of the time, were filled with stories and poems that taught religious and moral lessons. Another common theme was “civic virtue,” what we call good citizenship today. It was considered the parents’ duty to insure a “proper” education for their children, and, in turn, obedience and devotion to parents were important values that were emphasized in school. Classes began at 9:00 in the morning; however, before-school chores began much

much earlier than that—before daylight. Deane Malott, an Abilene boy born to a prosperous “north side” family in 1898, recalls cleaning the “clinkers” from the furnace; building a fire in the kitchen stove; feeding and currying the horses; feeding the chickens and gathering eggs; cleaning the barn and the hen house; feeding the dog; hitching up the horse; and practicing the piano—all before leaving for school in the morning! The first bell of the day rang at 8:30. A second bell, at 9:00, prompted students to line up in front of the school doors and march silently, single file, to their classes.

Classrooms were often dark and dreary places that buzzed with the steady hum of student recitations. The competitive spirit of a spelling bee helped to break the monotony of lessons, and a discipline problem for the teacher became lively entertainment for the class. Because school kitchens did not exist yet, students walked home for lunch and returned for the afternoon session. At that time it wasn’t considered proper for boys and girls to play on the same playground at recess.

In general, Kansans of 1900 were a literate population; however, relatively few completed a four-year high school education. In the early years of the twentieth century, an eighth-grade education was considered adequate, and it was certainly no disgrace to leave school after the fifth or sixth grade. High school was largely a female domain. Girls enrolled in the “normal” training program to prepare them to teach in the county’s one-room schools. For boys, it was far more practical to get a job and begin to earn a living. Farm boys rarely attended high school because their labor was needed at home. Boys who expected to become professionals, such as lawyers or doctors, finished high school and went on to college. For the majority of young people, however, high school was, quite simply, an impractical luxury.



A typical daily schedule of classes in 1900 included Latin or German, English, algebra, and geography. The teachers, and occasionally the school superintendent, took turns leading Bible devotions in a classroom called the “chapel.” From time to time, the superintendent visited classrooms as a highly visible deterrent to bad behavior.

High school students of this era participated in many of the same activities as high school students today. They wrote and acted in plays and musicals; worked on the yearbook; played an instrument; belonged to a variety of clubs; enrolled in debate; and competed in sports like baseball and football. Basketball was a new sport that was popular with the girls. Neither the school nor citizens took much interest in school athletics. Students who wanted to play a sport bought their own uniforms and personal equipment. Money for other sport-related expenses was raised through small membership dues and gate receipts.

Teaching wasn’t considered a real profession nor did teachers make much money. A college education and professional training were not requirements for common-school teaching, although high school teachers generally had a college degree. In addition to a basic proficiency in the three R’s, a teacher was expected to “. . . whip the bullies into submission . . . and hold his own against the district’s champion in ciphering and spelling matches.”<sup>1</sup> Teachers were expected to be upstanding role models in their communities—demonstrated by regular church attendance and a strict avoidance of card playing, dancing, or using profanity. Not surprisingly, in many communities, the turnover rate for teachers was very high.

<sup>1</sup>Lewis Atherton, *Main Street on the Middle Border* (Bloomington, IN: University Press, 1954), p. 25.

Dwight Eisenhower was an intelligent boy who sometimes found school to be dull. He didn’t take school as seriously as he should have, but he managed to earn respectable grades without trying very hard. In the Eisenhower home, getting a good education was a family priority. All six boys, from an early age, were encouraged to go on to college which was highly unusual for the time. The Eisenhower boys knew that their parents wouldn’t be able to afford to send them to college, and they began to plan accordingly.

At Lincoln Elementary School, Dwight’s favorite subject was spelling, followed closely by arithmetic. His worst subject was penmanship, and throughout his life he was famous for his indecipherable scrawl. During high school, he excelled at plane geometry, so much so that his teacher allowed him to develop his own propositions and solve the problems in his own way. Dwight’s real passion was reserved for reading history, especially ancient history and biographies of famous military men. As a boy, he needed no encouragement to read. In fact, his mother Ida finally resorted to locking his history books in a cabinet—which he unlocked at his pleasure once he found the key—because he neglected his chores.

Dwight loved sports and excelled at them, especially football and baseball. When he was a freshman, he fell and scraped his knee. The small wound quickly developed into a medical crisis that threatened his life. Dr. Tracy Conklin declared that the leg would have to be amputated, but Dwight refused. He would rather have died than be unable to play his sports. Miraculously, he recovered and repeated his freshman year because he had missed so much school. He graduated in 1909 from AHS.

Dwight’s burning ambition for a college education led him, eventually, to apply for and receive an appointment to West Point. With it, the direction of his life was changed forever.

Recommended Reading from *At Ease: Stories I Tell to Friends*: 36-37, 39-43, 68, 77-82, 93-102.

## LELIA GRACE PICKING ORAL HISTORY, 1965

MISS PICKING: The city building stood at the site of the present Municipal building at the corner of 5<sup>th</sup> and Broadway Streets in the town of Abilene, which in later years was to become famous as the home of President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Dwight's class was large in numbers but not great in morale, as we knew we would be dubbed "greenies" by the upper classmen. The accommodations the building afforded were not the best but we managed. There was a large room on the east on the second floor used as a recitation room and study hall combined. In it we met for Chapel. On the southwest was a recitation room and another on the northwest. In this room from a cupola housing the fire bell the boys of A.H.S., Dwight among them, responded immediately by skipping classes to help man the old two wheeled hose cart—a far cry from our present truck with its snorkel. If Dwight didn't get to the hose cart he was among those who sprinted to the store to buy treats for the girls. On the first floor one room was used by History classes. Here Miss Pauline Sleeth taught Dwight. The city Marshall's family occupied the east half of the first floor. In the basement were the jail cells. One morning on arriving at school we found a prisoner had tried to dynamite his way out, the damage was not great enough to warrant a holiday. Dr. F.S. Blayney who often substituted as a teacher remarked that we received our education midst the howling of the dogs, the wailing of the prisoners and the odor of the onions being cooked for the Marshall's dinner. Dwight was a boy who worked and had a little time for parties and social gatherings, at least, during the Freshman and Sophomore years. He spent two years in the old city hall and two years in the new high school, erected in 1907. This building, facing the south on 7<sup>th</sup> street at the end of Spruce has since been torn down. In Junior and Senior years, Dwight took a lively interest in athletics. The Yearbook of 1909, the *Helianthus*, gives the statement "D. Eisenhower sticks around the left and center gardens. He works to keep the team together and in good spirits." This characteristic as a youth followed into his military career. He was an individual of action. He was ever mindful of the welfare of his soldiers. His D-Day was the outgrowth of his early idea of cooperation. Another statement in the yearbook says "Dwight is our best historian and mathematician. His interests in History is one of his outstanding traits as a scholar." Mrs. C.D. Wetzel, a classmate, who was Winifred Williams, makes this remark: "I remember that whenever the teachers called on Dwight he could always recite. I never heard him say 'I don't know'." My most vivid memory is of his reciting in Miss Dickinson's English Class.

THE SECOND READER  
 Appleton's School Readers, © 1886

10                      SECOND READER.

LESSON III.

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dâred	dârt'-ed	sau'-gy	wrën
a-way'	gâr'-den	mûs'-lin	tî'-ny

THE WREN.

The wren is a tiny bird, but it is a bold one. And it is so busy and so merry!

Once a lady sat in her garden, with a book in her hand. She had on a muslin dress with gay spots upon it.

A wren came hopping about her. It wanted to find out what those spots were, so it dared to come very close to the lady.

The lady kept still, and soon the saucy bird gave a peck at one of the spots, and then it darted away.

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*Copy these sentences, and put words in place of the pictures:*

A bird can make a pretty  .

The  is a tiny bird.

SECOND READER.                      11

LESSON IV.

*Words to be spelled by sound and by letter.*

ä

fär	äre	ärm	därk
eär	stär	yärn	lärge
jär	härđ	farm	märked

â

bäre	fäir	teär	eäre
späre	fäir	beär	päir
stäre	stäir	weär	peär

a

<i>call</i>	<i>ball</i>	<i>fault</i>
<i>straw</i>	<i>salt</i>	<i>wai-ter</i>
<i>want</i>	<i>talk</i>	<i>drawn</i>

—————

*Copy these words, and mark the vowels and silent letters:*

här	haul	harm	dare
b-ärn	chair	hawk	bear
	cart	warm	part



"ATHLETICS" BY DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER  
1909 AHS Yearbook, *Helianthus*



# Athletics

By Dwight Eisenhower



**L**EARLY in the fall of 1908, the High School boys organized an Athletic Association for the year. After electing Dwight Eisenhower president, Harry Makins vice-president and Herbert Sommers secretary and treasurer, we proceeded to do business.

Deciding not to play any base ball in the fall, we started on football at once. Bruce Hurd was elected captain, and soon a large number of candidates for the squad were out working. After two weeks of hard work, Captain Hurd decided on the following team:

- Left end..... Huffman
- Left tackle..... Ingersoll
- Left guard..... Pattin
- Center..... Funk
- Right guard..... Weckle
- Right tackle..... Hurd
- Right end..... D. Eisenhower
- Quarter..... Merrifield
- Left half..... Makins
- Right half..... Sommers
- Full back..... E. Eisenhower

We were deprived of our coach, but nevertheless, turned out a very creditable team. Unfortunately, however, only four games were played during the season, not giving the team a chance to prove its ability. But for the games that were played, the students supported the team loyally, and time and again the boys surmounted great difficulties, cheered on by the fierce enthusiasm displayed by our rooters.

After the football season closed, we had to spend the winter dreaming of past victories and future glories, for A. H. S. boasts of no indoor gymnasium, and basket ball was never played here. But we improved the condition of the Association itself, by drawing up a constitution, which makes the organization a permanent one, and each year it will be simply a question of electing new officers.

Thanking the citizens of the town who have taken such an interest in the High School Athletics, and also our fellow classmates for their loyalty to us, we are yours for future victories on the gridiron by teams of dear old A. H. S.

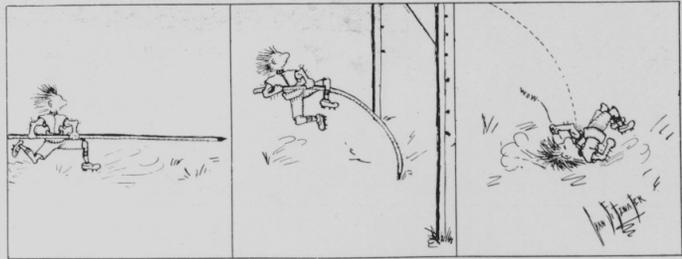
**FOOTBALL SCHEDULE**

**Abilene vs. Junction City at Junction City.**

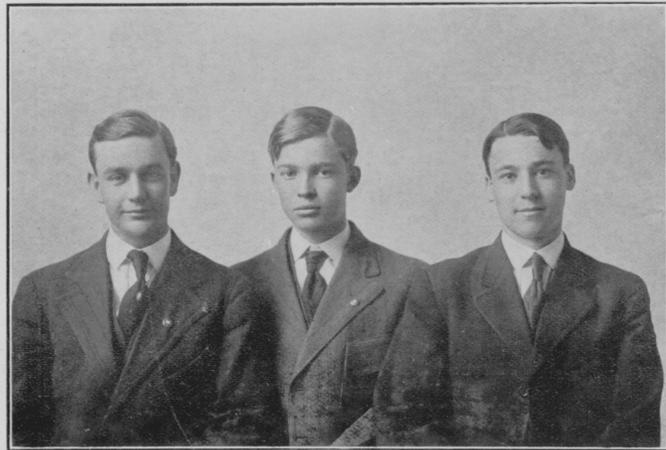
**Abilene vs. Junction City at Abilene.**

**Abilene vs. Chapman at Abilene.**

**Abilene vs. Agricultural College at Abilene.**



OFFICERS:  
ABILENE HIGH  
SCHOOL ATHLETIC  
ASSOCIATION



OFFICERS ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION