

SPARTANS IN THE CIVIL WAR

COMMENCEMENT, it seemed, might never come. Michigan State had been founded in 1855 and two years later opened its doors: two brick halls in a stump-filled clearing. But the three professors put most of the sixty-three new students into a preparatory class. None were upperclassmen and only a few were Freshmen. Diplomas were four years away.

Attending classes almost continuously for eighteen months, those Freshmen completed their second-year studies by Thanksgiving, 1858. At that point the faculty moved to a nine-month year, running from late February to late November, to coincide with the farm year. Thus students could apply in the field the scientific theories developed in classroom or laboratory; and they could earn up to eight cents an hour toward expenses.

At the close of their Junior year, in November, 1859, that class offered a program in the chapel (chemistry-lecture room) of College Hall (where Beaumont stands). Commencement was a year away.

Most of them taught country schools in the long winter vacation and local papers carried unsettling news. In the previous spring the Board had fired President Williams, in part because he and his faculty insisted upon four years of science and liberal arts. He hoped to educate men for rural leadership both as scientific farmers through the science two-thirds of the course, and as educated men through the study of philosophy, English, history, psychology, and economics.

Williams had gone in March and now his curriculum was to follow. In its place the Board set a two-year program in agricultural practice and applied science. The professor of English and history, Theophilus C.

Abbot, became professor of rural engineering, shifting his attention from Shakespeare and slavery to surveying and road design.

In February, 1860, the Seniors could return to the two-hundred acre clearing in the forest but there would be little point; for alma mater no longer welcomed them. They had completed three years in a school that offered only two.

There were few underclassmen, too. Some had not come back, others came and left. A few stayed on in the dormitory. Unwilling to attend the new practical courses, they studied the old textbooks and slipped over to College Hall to recite to lenient professors. In time the Board relented enough to permit a compromise curriculum for the year. In November, 1860, the second Junior Class delivered orations, but there was little hope of their becoming Seniors. The Board was determined to move firmly into the new program.

Now the leaders of the State Agricultural Society, the body that had lobbied for a college in 1855, returned to Lansing insisting that farmers' sons were as entitled to a true college education as were the sons of doctors and lawyers. They found many friends, among them the presiding officer of the Senate, Joseph R. Williams, who had returned to politics after leaving the college.

The liberal and scientific curriculum was restored and a new board was created (now the Board of Trustees). Abbot became once more professor of history and English; and there was a senior class of seven to study analytical chemistry, animal physiology, and political economy. Allen and Prentiss of the class were foremen in farm and garden, Beebe kept farm records, and Dickey taught rhetoric

to the "preps" for twenty-five cents an hour. In June they took the Seniors from Lansing's women's college by wagon for a day at Pine Lake (Lake Lansing). In November they would be graduated Bachelors of Science.

But the South fired on Fort Sumter and President Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers in April. Samuel Alexander, a Junior, was excused a week later to enlist in the Third Michigan Infantry. In his knapsack he carried Gray's *Manual of Botany*, identifying plants wherever the fortunes of war took him. By August other underclassmen were leaving and only the prospects of graduation held some of the Seniors.

Professor Thurber organized a militia company, the "Plowboy Guards", drilling them twice a week on the field where Administration stands. He had served as botanist and commissary on a military survey of the Southwest. Senior Albert Prentiss, Thurber's garden foreman, captained the Guards as they marched in purple-gray and black in Lansing's Fourth of July parade. In the evening 5000 visitors came to the campus which was alight with hundreds of Chinese lanterns in the trees. The Guards fired a salute, set off fireworks, and provided a program in which Junior Oscar Clute spoke on "Patriotism."

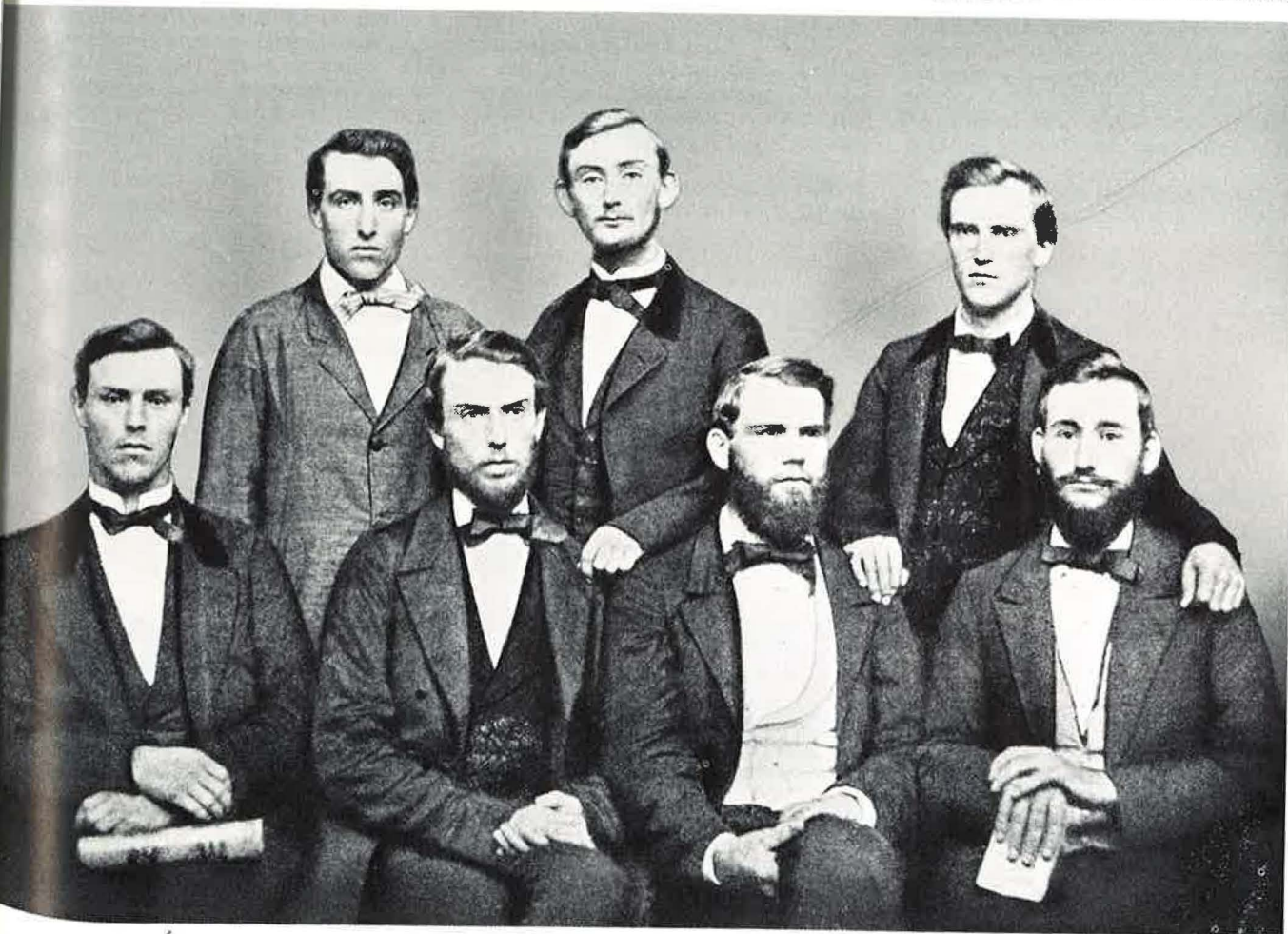
On the eve of final examinations in November, the Guards gathered in the woods across the Cedar (beyond Shaw Hall) to demonstrate their skill in musketry. "The ranks loaded, fired, laid down arms in succession," Professor Abbot wrote in his diary. "The guns were the government muskets, and there could be no great trial in skill. Still we had prizes, I putting up my pocket edition of Bryant."

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WE ARE indebted to Dr. Madison Kuhn, MSU's historian, for this article on State's participation in the Civil War, which opened a century ago. Frank Hodgman, who enlisted with the Class of 1862, wrote a poem 40 years later, marking the class reunion. A verse related, "Then came the weary, evil days of civil war and strife; and some of us went marching out to save the Nation's life; and some came back with honors crowned, and some were stricken low; they've lain at rest in Southern ground since 40 years ago; We've sung for them a requiem, since 40 years ago."

THE ENTIRE CLASS OF 1861 was excused to enlist in the Union Army. From left, standing, are: Larned V. Beebe, Gilbert A. Dickey, Adams Bayley; seated, Henry

D. Benham, Albert N. Prentiss, Albert F. Allen, and Charles E. Hollister. Benham died of illness in Beaufort, S. C. in 1864. Lt. Dickey was killed in action at Gettysburg on July 1, 1863. His commanding officer said of him, "... a young man full of intelligence, veracity and integrity, discharging every duty acceptably. He has the glorious honor of falling nearest the rebel lines of any soldier in the Union Army. I picked him up myself, as he lay farther advanced than any of his comrades." Nine other Spartans gave their lives in the war. They were Sidney M. Abbott, Isaac B. Bailey, James C. Birney, A. W. Carr, Charles T. Foster, William M. Green, Cornelius Paulding, John D. Skinner and William A. Smith.



Civil War Echoes

(Continued)

Final examinations followed and the time for Commencement had come; but once more there was no Senior class. Two months earlier an officer had appeared seeking college-trained recruits for a company of engineers. General Frémont had asked E. P. Howland of Battle Creek to assemble men capable of technical work in surveying and signalling. The Seniors had studied surveying and mechanics with Abbot, chemistry and physics with Fisk.

"It was hard to cut them off before their time," Abbot wrote to a member of the new Board. Only the realization "that their education might fit them for posts hard to fill" induced the faculty to consent. And the anticipated scientific experience would, it was hoped, compensate for studies missed.

At the last moment one Senior could not go, but the other six (Albert Allen, Leonard Beebe, Henry Benham, Gilbert Dickey, Charles Hollister, and Albert Prentiss) were joined by George Haigh, a former classmate frozen out in the 1860 reorganization, his brother Thomas, a Freshman, and Junior Oscar Clute.

November 13 was the date set for Commencement and the diplomas had been prepared; but for lack of Seniors there were no exercises. In western Missouri they and their fellows were drilling as a signal company, constructing movable towers from which to telegraph with wig-wag flags. They even developed a method of night-signalling with charcoal-point electric lights. Electric lights were confined to the laboratory; but they had been taught to carry the lesson of the laboratory into the field. A student diary of 1858 recorded: "Prof. passed a

current between two charcoal points . . . Hollister said the sun never thought of shining so bright as that did." Hollister was one of the Seniors repeating Fisk's experiments for the Army.

But their work was ahead of its time and when their patron General Frémont was removed, an inspector came to investigate their expenditures for mysterious materials that engineers had never needed. Whereupon Howland's Company of Engineers was mustered out of the Army and shipped home.

Five of the nine joined other units. Gilbert Dickey and George Haigh enlisted in the Michigan 24th and were a part of the Iron Brigade which, at Gettysburg, bore the brunt of the first Confederate attack. Lt. Dickey was killed in crossfire, the first officer to fall in a regiment that was all but destroyed. Sergeant Haigh received a battlefield promotion and was made Captain in November.

Sergeant Henry Benham, in the Michigan Seventh Cavalry, was a part of the mounted troops with which General Custer on the third day repulsed Stuart's Confederate Cavalry and rendered Pickett's Charge hopeless. In the following winter Benham became First Lieutenant in Michigan's First Colored Infantry. On duty in South Carolina, he died of disease on the first anniversary of Gettysburg.

Leonard Beebe joined the hospital staff of the U. S. Sanitary Commission. Thomas Haigh studied medicine, reentered the Army as a Surgeon, eventually having charge of a hospital of over a hundred wounded men at City Point, Virginia.

Commencement in 1862 was only a little better than that of 1861. Some members of the class, like Samuel Alexander, had gone early to war. Charles Jewell and Frank Hodgman enlisted in August, 1862, when their November graduation was assured. Diplomas followed them to the battlefield. Three men appeared at the graduation exercises in November, one of whom was Oscar Clute who had returned from the Army to complete his studies.

In 1863 there were no Seniors; in 1864 there were five, with an average age of twenty-six. In 1865 there was again no class to graduate.

In 1858 Justin Morrill urged Congress to grant lands to state colleges such as ours in Michigan, promising that, as in the schools "of ancient Sparta," their "graduates would know how to sustain American institutions with American vigor." Michigan State had fulfilled that promise. ◀

A Child Led Them

(Continued)

Plumb believes still can hold its own against many of the modern hybrids.

The old Reo won by Mrs. Plumb was in regular use by her family for several years and then was stored in a barn on the Folks farm.

When World War II began the alumna decided that the touring car would be useful in the war effort, particularly because of its heavy brass trim. In 1942 she donated the car to a scrap drive in Jackson.

For years afterwards Mrs. Plumb believed the car had been melted down and used for American defense, but in recent years she has learned that the auto might still exist, the word being that it was quietly slipped away from the scrap pile and stored by a Jackson resident.

While Mrs. Plumb has lost her prize car, she can be certain that the corn variety grown by herself and her father still exists.

Professor E. C. Rossman of the MSU farm crops department reports that a number of years ago he obtained Folks Whitecap seed from Mrs. Plumb's father. It is still in use to develop new hybrid parents in the University's corn breeding program.

"We don't know of anyone using the variety in farming now," Dr. Rossman says, "although there might be an isolated case where someone is using it. We have seen to it that the United States Agricultural Plant Introduction Bank at Iowa State has seed of this variety."

Professor Rossman explains that the plant bank keeps seed from all over the world. This way a variety will not become extinct if the only source of the seed is lost.

Because corn seed will lose its viability in a short time, every few years the original Folks Whitecap is sown at MSU to maintain a seed stock for the experimental program. ◀

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