



*Miss Jacoby.*



**PROGRAMME**

**ANNUAL SESSION**

—OF—

**Choteau Co. Teachers' Institute**

TO BE HELD IN THE

School Building, Fort Benton,

MONTANA,

December 21, 22, 23 and 24, 1896.

All interested in education  
invited to attend.

MARGERY

CHOTEAU COUNTY, MONT.

**DAILY PROGRAMME.**

9:00—9:40. .... Primary Methods  
Synthetic Reading, Geography,  
Color and Form, Numbers.  
9:40—10:15. .... Arithmetic  
10:15—10:30. .... Vertical Writing  
10:30—10:40. .... Recess  
10:40—11:30. .... Grammar  
11:30—12:00. .... Algebra

**INTERMISSION.**

1:30—2:00. .... Elementary Science  
2:00—2:30. .... Physiology or Zoology  
2:30—3:00. .... Civics or History  
3:00—3:10. .... Recess  
3:10—3:35. .... Reading  
Intermediate (Class Drill), Phonics,  
Supplementary, Advanced.  
3:35. .... Pedagogics

**FRIDAY, OCTOBER 18TH.**

9:00—10:00. .... Number Work  
Miss Priestley and Prof. Young.  
10:00—10:30. .... Arithmetic  
10:40. .... Daily Work continued  
**AFTERNOON SESSION.**  
1:15—1:45. .... Brief Report of Denver Convention  
Prof. Young.  
1:45—2:15. .... Elementary Science  
2:15—2:45. .... Zoology  
2:45—2:55. .... Recess  
2:55—3:50. .... Geography  
Prof. Young.  
3:50. .... Pedagogics

**PROGRAMME**  
**ANNUAL SESSION**  
—OF THE—  
**Choteau Co. Teachers' Institute**  
TO BE HELD IN THE  
School Building, Fort Benton,  
MONTANA,

October 14, 15, 16, 17 and 18th, 1895.

The attendance of all persons interested in  
educational matters is earnestly requested.  
MARGERY E. JACOBY,  
Co. Supt. of Schools.

RIVER PRESS

20th CENTURY GUIDE

# 19th CENTURY EDUCATOR

by ALICE COWAN COLEMAN

While modern politicians rely heavily on the media to attract voters, they still use such events as barbecues and clambakes to provide personal contact with prospective supporters. The "common touch" still cannot be denied as a vote-getter, and plenty of food still attracts large audiences favorably disposed to persuasion. In the Autumn of 1894, however, less than a dozen registered voters, most of them cowhands, were all that could be crowded into a kitchen in Box Elder, in Northern Montana, to participate in a taffy pull and meet a diminutive 23-year-old woman who was running for Superintendent of Schools of Chouteau County, a subdivision so large that the states of New Hampshire and Vermont could be encompassed within its borders with room to spare. While helpful friends kept the coal-burning range hot enough to bring the mixture of sugar and water to a full rolling boil, the Box Elder community met Miss Margery Jacoby. Not only did she attract votes that evening, to be added to the total which won her the office she sought, but she attracted a husband as well.

As one of Margery Jacoby Cowan's four children, and also a teacher, I have explored her professional career through old letters, printed documents, family memoirs, as well as personal recollections, searching for the ingredients to her success as a teacher, administrator, wife, and mother. However, when we were growing up in Box Elder during the years when our father, William T. Cowan, was prominent in political and civic matters, we were more drawn to his newsworthy activities and failed to appreciate Mother's subtle but pervasive influences. Looking back to 1894, Margery Jacoby's constituency seems incredibly far-flung and isolated, her modes of transportation varied and slow, her qualifications for office unconventional although eminently practical. In a day when women seldom dedicated themselves to careers or politics, she was able to advance the status of education in Northern Montana and successfully make the transition to wife and mother, all the while quietly maintaining idealism and leadership in her home and community.

## RDIAN OF EXCELLENCE

SPRING 1978

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MARGERY JACOBY'S background determined her early and unexpected political career. She had spent the first twelve years of her life in Verona, Wisconsin, where she was born on May 30, 1871, to Pennsylvania-Dutch parents. Her beloved "Auntie," her mother's half-sister, Sarah J. Keller, had adopted five-year-old Margery when her mother died, two years before her father's death. In April, 1883, Auntie also gave a home to Margery's younger sister, Effie, who had been living with the girls' Grandmother Keller. Aunt Sarah sacrificed her personal ambitions to care for the two sisters she considered her own children. Somehow she managed to support herself as a seamstress and send Margery to a Catholic day school in nearby Madison.

By July 3, 1883, Sarah had saved enough to take herself and the two girls to Fort Benton, Montana Territory, to join her fiancé, Albert Francis Watkins. Mr. Watkins, whom the girls called Uncle Frank, had gone West in 1862. After a series of adventures as pioneer and vigilante at Bannack, Virginia City, and Last Chance Gulch (Helena), he had settled in the Upper Highwoods, where he built a log cabin for his bride and her two nieces.

Auntie took the two girls on their first train ride from Madison to Bismarck, Dakota Territory. Although the Northern Pacific Railroad went to Helena, the boat from Bismarck was the best way to get to Fort Benton, the colorful and still booming town at the head of navigation on the Missouri River.

That westward journey became a legend in the Watkins household, but Effie Jacoby Bartlett was the only one who wrote about it in a series of sketches she called *Montana Stories*: "Our boat was the *Helena*. Margery and I, being the only children among the few passengers, received considerable attention. It was something like a happy family for a three weeks' journey. The pilot invited us to come up to the pilot house and watch him steer the boat with the great wheel. The colored laundress allowed us to come into her domain, lean out of the back window and watch the big paddle wheel . . . .

"Meanwhile, Uncle Frank had built a new, three-room log house on his beautiful ranch on Upper Highwood, 25 miles from Fort Benton. He made several trips to Benton to see when the *Helena* was to arrive. The *River Press* had a local item in its columns, saying that Mr. Watkins was in town waiting for someone on the *Helena*, and the river being low, 'What kin he do but wait?'

"As we were nearing Benton, a boat passed us going down the river and Uncle Frank got off and boarded the *Helena*. That afternoon we landed and Uncle Frank and Auntie were married in the evening,

July 26, 1883, at the home of Mr. and Mrs. O. W. Kelly, Rev. Jacob Mills of the Methodist church officiating . . . . The next morning . . . we boarded the lumber wagon and went to the Highwood home. It was a long, slow ride, but we didn't mind. Nig and Jim were the horses. As we drove down the hill onto the pretty Highwood country, Auntie said the clear running stream reminded her of Pennsylvania . . . .

"Auntie had brought her bedroom set, a little walnut table, a few chairs, carpets, and pictures. Uncle Frank provided other necessary things. I will never forget that home, not just a three-room, western, early day log house, but a *home* where four inmates lived, loved, and worked for each other's interests."

That old log cabin was torn down at least thirty years ago, but the peaceful valley in the Highwoods is still an idyllic setting, the tree-lined roads along the creek bed inviting picnickers as Old Baldy guards the rich grassland where cattle and horses graze. Back in the 1880's and 1890's, a trip by team and wagon or horse and buggy might take two days if the riders were not familiar with the rough twenty-five miles from Fort Benton to the Watkins ranch. Fortunately, the isolated ranchers were hospitable, even to unexpected visitors. The Watkins family often offered and accepted rides into Great Falls or Fort Benton, and checked with neighbors before taking a load of produce to market. Their wholesome daily life might include fresh trout and wild strawberries but few manufactured luxuries, for cash was scarce as indicated by a bill of sale to Mr. Watkins, dated October 27, 1897, for one pig and 159 pounds of oats, which was credited to the purchase of three cords of wood.

Auntie often sent requests to Margery, after she left home to teach school, for supplies like medicine, needles and cloth, and other household necessities. Although the mail service was usually reliable, snow sometimes blocked the roads during the winter and spring floods delayed crossing the river, making the last few miles into Fort Benton hazardous.

In spite of these obstacles, the Watkins home was a frequent gathering place for friends. In addition to close neighbors like the Harris family and the Thains, traveling ministers like Rev. W. W. (Brother Van) Van Orsdel were warmly welcomed, while friends from Great Falls and Fort Benton came for the summer holidays, sometimes camping on the ranch. One of their best friends, John Campbell, had come up the Missouri with them on the *Helena*; soon after he brought his bride, Alice, to the Watkins home. The Campbells, who became lifelong friends of Margery and Effie, visited often, bringing books, magazines, and other presents to help the young girls understand their heritage, rooted in Brooklyn, N. Y., and Hingham, Mass.

*Margery and Effie Jacoby posed for a Helena photographer in 1892, when they were students at Montana Wesleyan University, leaving behind the warmly hospitable Watkins ranch in the Upper Highwood, near Fort Benton. In the picture below, the ranch had grown to include a number of buildings and a substantial house, but both girls remembered with affection the original log house, built by "Uncle Frank" Watkins, as an ideal atmosphere for entertainment and learning.*



Among the Campbell's acquaintances was Canby Christianson, a young man with a law degree from Columbia University who became the teacher at Highwood for two years and took his meals at the Watkins home. Canby also taught German and physics to Effie and wrote amusing letters to Margery when she was Superintendent of Schools. The little three-room cabin, which Canby called Watkinsville, was a center for music and good talk. Margery played the pump organ with fervor and had a pleasant singing voice. The Watkins family of four became five when they adopted another child, Grover Keller, Sarah's nephew.

In spite of serious illness and limited means, this family had the rare ability of enjoying life at the moment. Auntie was bed ridden for seven years until Dr. R. P. R. Gordon, a Great Falls physician, performed a successful operation in 1891. During those bedridden years, Effie stayed on the ranch to help run the house. At the same time, Margery sought to increase the family income by teaching school.

**Y**EARS LATER, during the 1950's, Margery Jacoby (Mrs. William Cowan since 1899) described over a Havre (Montana) radio station her preparation for teaching: "School was held in the little log school house about one and one half miles away only during the summer months and only four to six months in the year. Miss Johnstone (then County Superintendent of Schools) hadn't many schools to visit though they were widely scattered; thus, since teachers were so hard to find in all that big county she accepted our school for a six months term.

"For part of the term Miss Johnstone made her home with us. . . . This grand teacher gave me nearly all her leisure time and much of it during school hours, for I was her advanced pupil in a school of perhaps fourteen or fifteen, all grades and ages. At the close of school Miss Johnstone persuaded me to try the examination for teachers as she claimed that I was better prepared to teach than the average of her teachers. These examinations were given in reading, which



gave glimpses of good literature, penmanship, spelling, geography, history of the United States, grammar with a little rhetoric, arithmetic (and some of the problems were stiff and impractical, I assure you) and theory and practice of teaching. There was a text book on this subject, and I had then or soon after access to a monthly magazine for teachers."

To make her success in obtaining a teaching certificate at the age of fifteen more credible, Margery usually mentioned the excellent training she had received at the Wisconsin convent. She often spoke fondly of the nuns and referred to them as scholars who encouraged her love of books and music.

Margery Jacoby's first teaching years were difficult. In the spring following the examination she secured a little school on lower Belt Creek and taught in the home of people who had three children of school age—eight pupils in all.

She described some of her early problems in these words: "Because I had been wearing short dresses as was the fashion for young girls, I lengthened all my dresses to reach my high shoe tops, and instead of wearing braids or curls, I did up my hair just as near like Miss Johnstone's as I could. Miss Johnstone had worn a small hoop skirt so I did, which even on a side saddle . . . was easily lifted around the horn of the saddle . . . I rode to and from school, fifteen miles, every weekend, but I always had an escort. The next summer I taught the same school . . . and had some girls of about my own age to teach. And I had boys older than I at our home school the next year, but fortunately I found them a help and I had only one or two troublesome ones to discipline . . . All this time I was learning, believe me, and when I taught at Upper Sand Coulee, a long day's drive from home, I had almost a model school . . ."

Years later Margery confessed that when her salary included board and room, the ranch style cooking sometimes upset her stomach. Of course she hid her discomfort from her well-intentioned hosts, but she did reveal her determination and idealism in a fanciful, third person sketch called *Experiences of a School-Ma'am*, written as an English assignment when she attended Wesleyan University in Helena between 1892 and 1894. The half-mocking style of the popular McGuffey Readers indicates Miss Jacoby's ability to be objective about her own development as a teacher:

"On a bright June day a young girl, the heroine of this relation, left her humble, though very dear home in the mountains to commence battling with the world, in one sense, and also to try what might be accomplished in the attempt to teach young ideas how to shoot. She had had no special training for her work, having just completed the year before the course of

common studies in the district school near where she resided. This, with a little reading and reflection upon the work she was undertaking, was her only preparation for it . . .

"Though of a sensitive disposition, which was ill-adapted to endure, with grace and patience, the criticisms sure to be passed upon her, and not possessing even a moderate amount of self-esteem, she had, from childhood, thought that she would like to *teach*, and would be able to do it just a *little* better than some of the teachers who had instructed her. Then, she thought, how beautiful it would seem, to be and appear so dignified and learned as some of her acquaintances, and to have the respect and love of many little folks. These she had no doubt she could win without any trouble or inconvenience.

"But alas, for her dreams and aircastles! By the end of the second day, although having but eight scholars, she found no little trouble and inconvenience in arranging her program and in assigning pupils to their proper classes. Thoughts of this kind began coursing through her mind: 'I guess I *shall* have to do a *few* things like Miss J-- did them. Probably hers *is* the best method.' I began to think there is really a good deal of *work* before me, instead of mere pleasure in exercising my authority.

"What shall I do with that boy in the Third Reader who can't or won't learn to spell those words,—such as *elephant*, *proboscis*, etc? And what is to be done with that stupid big girl of sixteen, who knows *almost* nothing about books, and who does not seem to have much ambition to know? Then, there is that little, but very stubborn boy. He is a puzzler. I am afraid, perhaps I do not possess the requisite tact to manage him. The Third Reader boy was conquered by a little kindness and firmness. The big girl's health soon became too delicate to endure the long ride of five miles on horseback . . . The obstinate little boy was never fully subdued. An application of the rod *might* have proved valuable, but our school ma'am had serious doubts as to whether this was a proper mode of punishment . . .

"The Third Reader boy, Johnny, and the obstinate boy, Charlie, who were brothers, made quite rapid progress in writing and composing, so that they were able to write short, intelligible letters before the term of four months closed. This pleased the fond parents and proud grandmother so much that on the last day of school, when they came and heard them read and spell, they made little speeches to show their appreciation of the efforts of our school ma'am, who had not been so happy for four months as on that sunny October day, for she thought that she had had a fair measure of success. And above all, she was going home.

"A year or two after this, when she was teaching

in the same district, she took an opportunity to show Charlie, who was still our stubborn boy, that she could control him . . . . It was after a week or two of unusual ill-behavior, and our school ma'am's patience was nearly exhausted. Affairs reached a crisis when she requested him to read a paragraph in the reading lesson the second time. 'I don't *want* to,' he said with a scowl and a snarl. The school ma'am quietly picked up a willow switch, which she had in readiness and commenced applying it vigorously; but the boy had a thick coat on, and, in her eager desire to be thorough, and being perhaps a little excited, she struck him, horrible to relate, once or twice upon the head!

"Charlie could not be reconciled by his mates, during recess, and all afternoon he was very quiet and obedient. The next morning, however, he came with a good deal of his old importance and a sort of new and injured air: 'Here is a note mama sent you.'

"The school ma'am opened it and read: 'God made another place to whip beside the head. Please find it and oblige, Mrs. E.' . . ."

THESE EXPERIENCES clearly parallel her own, for Miss Jacoby, like the school ma'am she wrote about and her Pennsylvania-Dutch forebears, never stopped improving herself and her environment. Fortunately, this drive to better the world was tempered by her ability to recognize the humor in most situations. At any rate, after a few years of successful teaching, her friends and the parents of her pupils decided that she would make a good County Superintendent.

During the summer of 1894, after attending Montana Wesleyan for two years, Margery taught school at Shonkin Creek and boarded with the Heydt family. Mr. Heydt, who was a delegate to the Chouteau County Republican Convention, secured Miss Jacoby's nomination for County Superintendent of Schools without consulting her. The incumbent, Miss Finnegan, who had held the office for eight years, was quite easily defeated, for the voters were ready for a change.

By studying the Chouteau County 1894 election returns, we learn that the total number of voters in the twenty-four precincts was slightly over one thousand; all successful candidates were Republican; the only woman candidate ran for Superintendent of Schools; the three towns with the largest number of voters were, respectively, Fort Benton, Havre, and Chinook. Nor should it be forgotten that women in Montana did not receive the franchise until 1914 and that to be eligible, voters had to be landholders.

In 1894, Chouteau included what is now Hill, Blaine, Liberty, and Chouteau counties and part of

Toole and Phillips. The boundaries east to west extended some 240 miles from Exeter, near Malta, to Conrad, and 180 miles north to south from the Canadian border to Highwood and Arrow Butte. Much of the terrain was rolling grassland, before the days of dry-land farming. Arctic winds and sudden chinooks swept across the prairies with slight protection from the Sweet Grass and Bear Paw Mountains or the Highwoods and Little Rockies. Native willows, cottonwood and box elder trees grew along the bottoms of the Missouri, Milk, and Marias Rivers as well as along the banks of countless creeks. The Fort Belknap Indian Reservation occupied a large chunk of the eastern section. Although the heavy Missouri River traffic had slacked off with the coming of the railroad in 1887, Fort Benton was still the largest town in the county. Most of the settlers were ranchers who seldom came to town except for supplies and a little entertainment. Saloons were more common than churches or schools.

MARGERY JACOBY managed to cover most of this vast territory and to meet a great many of the qualified voters. The taffy pull, referred to earlier and only one of many gatherings attended by the candidate during her campaign, had been organized by Mrs. David Cowan, an old friend of Mrs. James Thain of Highwood who had accompanied Margery on many of her campaign trips. Miss Jacoby was meeting the Cowan family for the first time.

In 1888 David Cowan had brought his family to Cypress, Montana, a temporary settlement near Fort Assiniboine at the end of the newly opened St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Manitoba Railroad. Eleven years earlier they had left the established Cowan farm in southern Ontario to spend a few years in Winnipeg.

After David Cowan had made and lost a fortune, he explored the Canadian Northwest before deciding to make a permanent home in Montana. Soon after moving from Cypress to Box Elder, some twenty miles to the south, the head of the family donated a building for the first school. At the time of the taffy pull, the firm of Cowan and Son was the center of the small community, and David's son, William, served as the clerk of School District No. 13.

The taffy pullers gathered in the Cowan's living quarters above the old frame store building, later destroyed by fire. Several cowhands tied their horses to the hitching rail before climbing the outside stairs to greet the two good looking Cowan girls, Minnie and Grace, as well as the popular local school teacher, Miss Nellie Brough. Margery Jacoby, at least to begin with, was not in the limelight. Some of the oldtimers had come to watch and crack jokes while the young



people showed off their ability to pull the sticky mass of sugar, water, and vinegar. If fewer than half the eighteen men who voted at the Box Elder precinct attended, the cooking facilities would be crowded. As the coal-burning range cooked the syrup, large crockery plates coated with home-made butter and a splatter of vanilla were kept cold on the open porch. Before entering the sport, each puller would take a turn at the wash basin to scrub his hands, grimy from horse leather and coal soot.

The vivacious little candidate, slightly over five feet tall and weighing less than ninety pounds, had energy and enthusiasm enough to pull a large hunk of taffy until it looked like sculptured ivory. At the same time she could carry on an animated conversation. Perhaps William Cowan, who wrote her a letter of congratulation after the election, enclosing a newspaper clipping of the Chouteau County returns, was more than joking when he wrote, "taffy did this."

**B**ESIDES HER ABILITY to pull taffy and engage in lively conversation, Miss Jacoby had other qualifications for the office of County Superintendent, although they seem limited to a reader accustomed to the standards of the 1970's. At that time, state requirements were based on the candidate's reputation as a teacher, which depended upon performance in the classroom rather than on advanced college degrees. The new Superintendent had received little formal education—no more than five or six years of elementary school in Wisconsin, including special training in music, before she moved to Montana. At the neighborhood school in Upper Highwood, James Thain had taught her for four months and Miss Johnstone for six. Encouraged by Miss Johnstone, Margery studied on her own until she was able to obtain in 1886, at the age of fifteen, a teaching certificate, a first class one, indicating a high score on her examinations. During the next seven years she taught several months each year in five different schools; she changed schools as new opportunities developed, not because her teaching was unsatisfactory.

By 1892 Auntie was able to manage the ranch house alone and Margery had earned enough money for both her and her sister, Effie, to attend Wesleyan University in Helena, founded by the Methodist Church in 1890. Since the Jacoby sisters were ardent Methodists, they felt fortunate to study college level subjects in a congenial environment. In addition to learning in a systematic way, they made life-long friends. For the first time they flourished in an academic community.

The calendar, curriculum, expenses, and other information about Wesleyan University appear on the

back of a letter which Professor Templeton, president of the University, wrote to Margery on December 14, 1895. Although the entire University was housed in one four-story brick building, the course of study needs no apology. Professor Templeton mentioned his wife's ill health and the prevalence of *la grippe* at the University before he answered her request for studying independently the poetry of Robert Browning. Although Margery was beginning her first two-year term as County Superintendent, she was determined to continue her academic training. Professor Templeton not only encouraged her to continue her literary studies, but systematically listed several editions of Browning poems as well as introductions and guides, complete with publishers and prices.

Margery's literary ambition was genuine, for she was always fond of reading, especially poetry. Furthermore, this knowledge helped her professionally, because one of her duties as Superintendent was to make and grade examinations for prospective teachers, as Miss Johnstone had done for her. It was an awesome task for a conscientious administrator after only two years at the University, for an 1883 law required that the County Superintendent submit her questions to the State Superintendent for revision and approval. Later the State Superintendent's office prepared a state course of study and uniform examinations for students at the end of the eighth grade, in the tradition of the New York Regents. In a letter from State Superintendent E. A. Carleton, dated April 19, 1898, to Miss Jacoby, he not only recognized her quest for professional advancement, but discussed parts of the current examinations and mentioned lectures of interest to teachers. Small wonder that Margery's sister and Auntie begged her to get more rest; they worried about her exhausting duties and frequent headaches.

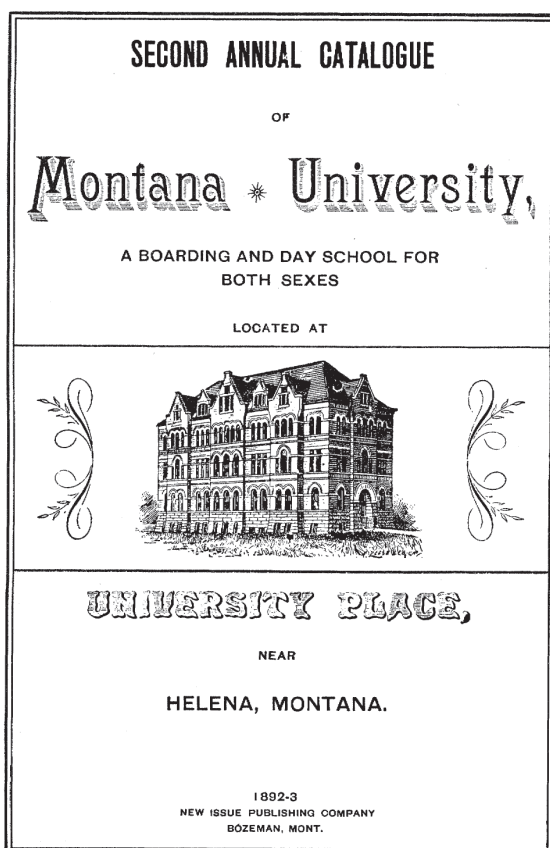
By the time Miss Jacoby took office, she could reach the larger schools by train, but she still used horse transportation for many outlying districts. Since her salary included no travel allowance, she welcomed a friendly ride. Her pleasure was doubled when her suitor, William Cowan, offered to drive his team to Eagle Creek and Birch Creek schools, conveniently located near Box Elder. Toward the end of her term, she shocked some of her constituents by riding a "wheel"—a bicycle which, she recalled, cost nearly \$100—and required wearing a divided skirt.

In later years, she described some of her school visitations: "I traveled once by spring wagon and team to Landusky in the Little Rockies, 50 miles from Harlem, only to find that school had closed the week before. I made the 50 mile trip with the Deputy Sheriff of the County, Charles Howell . . . Mr. Howell was supposed to be looking for the Curry gang, who were

wanted for murder and train robbery. I do not know how hard he tried to find them and I don't know why I had no fears about going with him on this trip. At noon we had a lunch and rested the horses miles from any habitation, but the trip was pleasant. I was startled, however, when a year or two afterwards, Charles Howell himself was arrested for holding up a train . . .

"There were no high schools in Chouteau County at that time but three departments in Fort Benton, Havre, and Chinook. All the rest were one room

(Text resumes page 44)



In its literature, Montana Wesleyan offered full college courses, with many added advantages: "Thorough instruction. The best moral influences. The home feature—the Faculty reside in the same building with the students and eat at the same tables. Elegant building heated with hot water and well furnished throughout. Thorough parental discipline. Freedom from the distracting and pernicious influences that pertain to a school in a city." Tuition was \$12 to \$18 per term, or \$32 to \$50 a year, while board, room, lights and heat added up to \$6.50 per week or \$192 for a year.



The Jacoby girls, dressed in springtime finery, posed (above) for a Helena photographer with their friend, Ina Craven, seated at the right. Like Effie, she was enrolled in the "Seminary Course" at Montana Wesleyan in 1892. Margery, standing in the center, was listed as a "College Preparatory" student. Margery and Effie thoroughly enjoyed the friendships they made at the Helena institution and the climate for learning they encountered. They are seen (below) in the right background, with other members of their class.





schools and my principal job in visiting them seemed to be to give teachers a little encouragement and inspiration. The people in each neighborhood were most hospitable and glad to have you talk and eat with them and furnish you with a bed if need be . . . . I made several trips by horse and buggy with my uncle to visit Big Sandy, Box Elder, Havre, Chinook, and into Warrick, Clear Creek, and People Creek country. The most eastern point was a little school I could reach on my train route, 15 miles beyond Harlem at Savoy."

**A**NOTHER DEMANDING duty for the Superintendent was to organize and preside over the Annual Teachers Institute, a mandate from the legislature since the 1880's. All teachers were required to attend because they were paid during the sessions, which lasted several days. Even so, several teachers wrote Miss Jacoby asking to be excused. Toward the end of her second term she was given a budget to secure leaders for the Institute. Friends like Professor Templeton and Minnie Riffenwrath from her Wesleyan days were a great help and inspiration, but the job was difficult as shown by surviving printed programs from the Chouteau County Teachers Institutes for October, 1895, and December, 1896.

As coordinator, Miss Jacoby planned workshops on specific subjects at every grade level, as well as programs for administrators and management, not neglecting inspirational music and recitations. Topics included *Synthetic Reading*, *Elementary Science*, *A Brief Report of the Denver Convention*, *Relation of Teachers to Parents and Pupils*, and a lecture on the Golden Age of Greece.

Miss Jacoby attended her own institutes and others, although her personal life was shadowed by Uncle Frank's unexpected death from "wasting of the muscles." The previous summer, in spite of anxiety for the health of her beloved guardians, Margery participated in a teaching conference in Milwaukee and visited some of the Watkins relatives in Grand Rapids. She also took the opportunity on the same trip to explore Chicago, and considered continuing to Toronto, Ontario, for an Epworth League convention. As soon as she heard the sad news about Uncle Frank, however, she rushed back to Highwood.

At the beginning of the next school year, Margery and Effie arranged for their brother, John, to take over the Highwood ranch, so that they could rent a house in Great Falls. Auntie was looking forward to this change, especially since Effie, who was teaching in Great Falls, and their friend, Ina Craven, would live with her. Half jokingly she suggested that they bring a cow and some chickens to town with them. Unfor-

tunately Auntie again became seriously ill, and this time, Dr. Gordon could not perform another miracle. The beloved Auntie died on November 28, 1897.

Yet Margery's professional life never slackened. Along with her routine commitments, she encouraged two of her nieces to come to Montana and become successful teachers. In December, after Auntie's death, she attended the Montana Teachers Association in Helena. She left a handwritten list of the participating County Superintendents—fourteen names, all women, except Mr. McDonald, and all unmarried, except Mrs. Kerr. In the 1890's dedicated women from the teaching profession who were willing to postpone marriage and work hard professionally could advance as far as the office of County Superintendent of Schools, not to mention the proviso of winning the election every two years.

Yet the responsibilities of the office were heavy and the rewards ephemeral. Miss Jacoby's office in Fort Benton did not provide secretarial service. In a letter dated August 9, 1897, she had written Auntie: "I have been doing a good deal of work on the typewriter in Mr. Boyle's office. Have had two sets of letters to write to each clerk in the county. Can make 6 copies at one time and can work the machine pretty good now—not rapidly of course, but looks pretty well."

Another perennial irritation came from teachers concerned about their pay. In those days they received warrants which could not always be redeemed promptly. Often teachers wrote asking for financial assistance. Of course they complained about the lack of books and supplies and poor living conditions. On the other hand, constituents felt free to instigate charges against objectionable or poor teachers, even to the point of consulting the State Superintendent and getting legal advice. In spite of these frustrations, Margery Jacoby worked energetically to improve teacher morale and excellence. She served on several state committees, among them the "Reading Circle," which selected books intended to cultivate professional knowledge and to provide material for both teacher and student examinations.

**I**N 1898, AT THE AGE of twenty-seven, Miss Jacoby decided to give up her professional career at the end of the second term, for she had become engaged to William Cowan. Following the custom of the times, she never considered combining marriage with a career. Even if she could have solved the transportation problems, the social mores of 1898 not only frowned on but forbade a married woman with a husband to work outside the home.



*Mr. and Mrs. William T. Cowan posed in front of a resort hotel at Boulder Hot Springs (now the Diamond S Ranch) south of Helena in 1899, following their marriage on January 18. Margery Cowan then became a full-time wife and mother in the town of Box Elder, in north central Montana, where her husband was a merchant, civic and political leader. The town, pictured in about 1911, benefitted from the quiet strengths of the former teacher and superintendent of schools as she supported the activities of her husband and saw to the rearing and education of her children.*



Chouteau County's loss was Box Elder's gain, when Margery Jacoby became Mrs. William T. Cowan on January 18, 1899, for she added a new dimension to the small community. Her mother-in-law, Mrs. David Cowan, who had organized the taffy pull, was jubilant, for now there was competent help for the one-room school and the struggling Methodist church.

The change in the young bride's daily routine was revolutionary. The newlyweds now occupied the quarters above the store, for the senior Cowans had moved into a substantial new house. Years later, Margery confessed that she shocked her mother-in-law by spending morning hours, when her mind was fresh, reading the latest copy of the *Outlook* or *Harper's* rather than doing the expected housework. Indeed, although she became an exceptional homemaker, she did not naturally enjoy routine household chores. Nor did the hoped-for babies arrive until after four years. However, when the young couple moved to a house on the ranch the routine was quickened with hired men to feed and inadequate kitchen help.

It was on the ranch that Margery gave birth to her second child, a son named after his father. The occasion went down in family history. After waiting many days in Great Falls for the baby to arrive, Margery grew lonesome and returned to the ranch. It was mid-November, just before an unusual cold spell. As the thermometer plummeted, labor pains began. William took the good team to fetch the doctor from many miles away. David, left with only a team of broncs, managed to transport his wife, Jenny, from town to the ranch a few miles away in spite of a snow-storm and unruly horses. The resourceful Jenny served as mid-wife. By the time the doctor arrived, the mother was comfortable and the baby swaddled inside the oven, for the temperature had dropped to 50 below zero.

Fortunately such drama was rare. By 1911, dry-land farmers were flocking into the county, so Margery and William thought it best to move the family back into town where all the action was. They renovated a house near the store which had once been a small hotel and planted a hedge of cottonwood trees around the picketed yard.



# THE FAMILY OF MARGERY AND WILLIAM T. C

**JEAN KELLER COWAN CROCKETT:** A gifted teacher of music, Mrs. Crockett has maintained a private studio in Helena for the past eighteen years. She holds B.A. and M.A. degrees from the University of Montana with a double major in history and music. Her M.A. thesis, written in 1957, is a compilation of the memoirs of William T. Cowan. She married John M. Crockett, a teacher from Vancouver, Washington, and they are the parents of four children. The family now includes ten grandchildren. For a number of years, before coming to Helena, Mrs. Crockett taught music in Chinook, near the Cowan family home in Northern Montana.

**WILLIAM ELLIOT COWAN:** The only son of William and Margery Cowan was killed in an automobile accident in 1959. Holder of a law degree from the University of Montana, he served in World War II as a captain, and after the war entered the family business with his father. He married Annabel MacKenzie of Havre, and their son, William, has continued the firm of Cowan and Son near Box Elder, now exclusively devoted to ranching and farming. His son, William, who is married to Barbara Browning of Ogden, Utah, has a son and a daughter, the former being the fifth William Cowan.

**MARGERIE VIRGINIA COWAN CARLSON:** Carrying on the family tradition of education, with emphasis on music, the second Cowan daughter took her B.A. from the University of Montana, followed by an M.A. in music education from Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester, New York. For a number of years, she taught in Havre Public Schools and at Northern Montana College before her marriage to the late John Carlson, long-time president of the Union Bank and Trust Company of Helena. The two met at Intermountain College in Helena, a new name for the old Montana Wesleyan which Margery Jacoby had attended. Their daughter, who lives in Greeley, Colorado, teaches cello at Northern Colorado College.

**ALICE FERN COWAN COLEMAN:** The author of this article earned her B.A. at the University of Washington and her M.A. in English from San Diego State College. She taught for two years in Box Elder before marrying Francis F. Coleman, a physicist from Portland, Oregon, who earned his Ph.D. as a Rhodes scholar. Now residents of San Diego, the Colemans have two children and three grandchildren. For a quarter century, until her retirement in 1974, Alice Coleman taught English in the San Diego school system. In 1964, in collaboration with John Theobald of San Diego State, she wrote a textbook *Introducing Poetry*, published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston. She has also written for *English Journal* and other educational publications, and for many years has worked with the College Entrance Examination Board on the local, state and national levels. In 1975 *True West* magazine published Mrs. Coleman's article "A Sense of Justice," based on the memoirs of William T. Cowan.



ALICE FERN COWAN COLEMAN  
at age three



*The three oldest Cowan children, photographed in 1910: Jean Keller Cowan Crockett, Margery Virginia Cowan Carlson, and their brother, William Elliot Cowan. As indicated in the biographical sketches published here, all came under the strong influences of their parents to respect education and excell in chosen fields.*



WILLIAM T. COWAN  
circa 1899



As the children grew older—the three girls and young William—Margery had more time to share her husband's activities. What gave her life depth and variety was her wholehearted acceptance of his many ventures. Although William Cowan became known as the "father of the Marias River Irrigation Project" and one of the founders of Northern Montana College in Havre, his interests extended from exploring the oil, mineral, and natural resources of his locality to corresponding with James J. Hill about opening up Montana acres to dry land farmers or to arousing the editors of the *Saturday Evening Post* to the dilemma of periodic drouths. As postmaster for twenty years and U. S. Land Commissioner for twenty-four years, Mr. Cowan took an active part in current political and community events. One of his proudest appointments, and one that particularly pleased his wife, was his membership in later years on the State Board of Education. When he was late for dinner, which happened quite often, he might be filling out the tedious forms for a homesteader who was "proving up" his contract for land or he might be engrossed in conversation with a political colleague like Judge C. B. Elwell from Havre or John Survant from Malta. Or he might suddenly arrive at the house with a visiting dignitary whom he had impulsively invited to dinner.

Margery never found life with William Cowan dull. If he was not called upon to help with a local crisis, he kept his mind and conversation lively through eclectic reading of books, magazines, and newspapers. The family always responded to the leisure time during and after a dinner party when the head of the family felt expansive and entertained the guests with a favorite yarn or discussed some promising business or community project. He was full of schemes for us four children, like poisoning gophers or grasshoppers, or exploring the Bear Paw mountains for quartz crystals, or experimenting with the Indian method for drying service berries.

Whatever his current enthusiasm, Margery was ready to enter the fun. She gave her entire mind and body to any activity—as one friend used to say, "There is Margery washing dishes from her knees up." Best of all, she had the rare gift of listening sympathetically, and she knew how to make positive suggestions, like a good teacher, without giving offense, whether for a change of action or to improve a letter or speech. Moreover, she would take a courageous stand when the situation demanded. It was her influence, for example, which discouraged the sale of alcohol in the Cowan general store, and her leadership in the church which stimulated attendance at the Sunday School, choir, and Ladies Aid. Never one to seek credit, she worked unobtrusively to improve the community,





*William Cowan's interests in irrigation included the wooden dam and spillway on his own ranch but extended far beyond, to the federally funded Tiber Dam on the Marias River, which he did not live to see completed. An enthusiastic, though nostalgic, participant in the ground-breaking ceremony for the project on September 30, 1952, was his widow, Margery Jacoby Cowan. Still spry at 81, Mrs. Cowan stood next to President Harry S. Truman as he touched off the first earth-moving blast. Others in the picture are, left to right, Congressman Mike Mansfield, a candidate for the U. S. Senate that year; Interior Secretary Oscar Chapman; Montana Senator James E. Murray; Montana Governor John Bonner, and Willard E. Fraser of Billings, who was running for a Congressional seat. Truman, who had already announced he would not seek another term, was vigorously campaigning for Adlai Stevenson during his western trip, remarking, as he lowered the plunger, "This is what we are going to do to Eisenhower." During the ceremonies, Judge C. B. Elwell of Havre welcomed the visitors to the site of Tiber Dam and in his remarks credited William T. Cowan as the moving force behind the project. "I am sorry," Elwell said, "that Senator Cowan cannot be here to witness the culmination of his dream."*

not an easy job when the settlers were often plagued by dry years, insects, hail and dust storms.

Margery and William complemented each other, for during these same periods of economic reversals—and, in fact, during the more than fifty years of their residence in Box Elder—William Cowan boosted morale by developing ingenious techniques for farming and ranching, especially through irrigation. Even before his marriage he had written Margery on April 18, 1898, about the earthen dam he had built on the Cowan ranch on Big Sandy Creek. He had supervised a gang of workmen stacking sandbags all Easter night to keep the dam from washing out. On June 12 of the same year, after he had spent several nights patrolling levees following continued hard rain, he wrote again: "Everything is very good so far and as the water is receding I guess we are all right. We have had eight teams working every day for the past month and have everything built up big and strong. The ditches work good and we have the water spread over more than half our ranch. It is too bad there are no soldiers at Assiniboine to use the hay."

When the earthen dam finally washed out, he built a large, concrete dam on the same site. As he grew older he escaped less frequently from his desk jobs to supervise the irrigation of the ranch where he grew wheat as well as alfalfa and other pasturage for cattle and even, for a brief time, sheep.

**A**S EARLY AS 1902, William Cowan's lifelong passion for spreading water on the fertile but dry Montana land grew into the Marias Irrigation Project. After the disastrous drouths of 1917, 1918, and 1919, he prevailed upon Big Sandy and Havre businessmen and farmers to send him as part of a nine-man delegation to Washington, D.C. to activate federal aid through Secretary of the Interior Lane and Senators Walsh and Myers. At this time, the fall of 1919, Washington congressmen had more pressing problems. Two years later, as State Senator from Hill County, Mr. Cowan developed a bill to bond the State of Montana for twenty million dollars for constructing its own project, similar to the plan in Colorado. Unfortunately, although the legislature passed the bill, the Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional. But William Cowan continued to work for federally supported irrigation in Montana throughout the 1930's and 1940's. At last, a year after his death, Congress passed a bill in 1952 appropriating two and a half million dollars to begin construction of Tiber Dam on the same site which its founder had initiated for the Lower Marias River Project.

During the last twenty years of his life, because of Margery's consistent support, William Cowan never despaired, even when the farmers who would benefit most from the project opposed it after the years when the crops were good. In spite of opposition and indifference, he never gave up his belief, expressed in a speech to the Havre Chamber of Commerce in the fall of 1937 that "there is nothing which will build up our country [Northern Montana] faster and is of more importance to all of us than the construction of this [the Marias Irrigation] project." Development of the Tiber Dam facility indicates that William Cowan's vision was in advance of his time. Surely Margery Jacoby Cowan would have thought so. At least she had the satisfaction of witnessing the dedication of the Tiber Dam in the fall of 1952, when President Harry S. Truman and Governor John Bonner gave official recognition.

Yet on this momentous occasion, she must have thought of those many years of hardships and heard her husband's voice again when he said: "Life is like a game of cards. It does not consist in having a good hand, but in playing a poor hand well." He often credited his rugged Scottish ancestry with providing stamina to fight disputed causes like irrigation or the establishment of a college in Havre. Cheered by this kind of rationalization, he could joke about family pride. Ever since his Pennsylvania-Dutch wife had received a copy of the Jacoby genealogy tracing the arrival of her family from Germany before the American Revolution, William began thinking more about his own ancestors. After some research he learned that the first Cowan who came to the New World fought the American Rebels, and consequently was granted land in Canada by the British government. It was high time, he declared, that after 200 years the two families should fight on the same side. Whatever the reason, the Jacoby-Cowan alliance endured for fifty-two eventful years.

These two pioneers always fought side by side, especially if the family honor was at stake. Other firms resorted to bankruptcy after the extreme drouths, but Cowan and Son stubbornly left its buildings unpainted, drove old cars, and resisted all luxuries.

Margery's loyalty never wavered; her attitude was always forward-looking. As she aged, she appeared frail, but she never lacked determination. At eighty her black eyes still flashed; she refused to dwell on the past because the future held so much promise. During the darkest years of the depression, Margery and William sent four children through college and helped educate several relatives. Both firmly believed in the importance of education, formal education, the kind they never had themselves. The petite school ma'am pulling taffy in 1894 presents a nostalgic picture, but the Jacoby-Cowan support of education remains an enduring ideal. ■