

*The Burial Plot of the West Virginia Schools for the Deaf and Blind
at Indian Mound Cemetery, Romney, West Virginia
A Tribute to the Students Based on the Research of Dan Oates*

Since 1870, the West Virginia Schools for the Deaf and the Blind have been an integral part of the Romney community. Over the years, Romney has been supportive of the school, staff, and students and the school has always played a role in Romney's past.

Since I can remember I was always involved in activities at the school. Boy Scouts, 4-H club, and church youth groups landed me on campus many, many times. My Uncle Bill Oates was a houseparent at the secondary deaf boy's dorm and my mother, Anne Oates's, last job was the secretary to the superintendent. She always encouraged me to work there as she loved the school and the students. I, on the other hand, didn't like the idea as I had other ideas about my future. Fate has an interesting way of making a mother's wish come true. In 1980 I accepted a substitute position at the school, which led to a master's degree and a 30-year career at the school. I retired in 2012 and continued my interest in local history.

I have found the school's history to be extremely interesting and in the process of learning about it, I have discovered the wealth of information nestled in the pages of the West Virginia Schools for the Deaf and the Blind Tablet. Published weekly, monthly, and sometimes, "fortnightly (every two weeks)" from 1880 to 1988, it captures the life of not only our school but the network of other schools for the deaf and the blind around the nation.

When the first students arrived on campus in September of 1870, the school became the home for thousands of West Virginia students with sensory impairment over the years. Not until the 1970's and 1980's were there other options for families. In the later part of the 19th century and into the early part of the 20th century, students arrived on campus in September and didn't return home until June of the following year. The school was responsible for the educational, health, social, emotional, and spiritual growth of the students. The campus for the most part was a self-sustaining community that maintained a farm, bakery, tailor, shoe shop, hospital, furniture, and printing business.

The school began soon after the end of the Civil War through the efforts of Howard Hille Johnson, who worked to create a place for the blind children of the state. Blind himself, Johnson, petitioned the state legislature to find a property within the state where his dream could take root. Many cities and towns wanted the school, but Romney was one of the few that offered a physical building to house the school. As legislation progressed toward passage it was determined the school would education blind students as well deaf students.

Students at the school lived their lives there until skills were learned to assist them in the life at home. They were an integral part of the school, participating and working in all of the vocational areas aiding in the operation of the campus.

During their time they may have lived through the Spanish American War, World War I & II, the Vietnam War, and countless epidemics and diseases that swept the nation in the days before modern medicine.

The hospital on campus provided top quality care for the day and did all they could do for the students who were sick during their stay. In reading the Tablet, some children were even sent to the school who were already ill and needed medical care in addition to their deafness or blindness. Unfortunately, not all the students survived the ravishes of pneumonia, typhoid, scarlet fever, and the Spanish Influenza Outbreak in the early part of the 20th century. In total, dozens of students passed away during their years in attendance at the school. I know the reader must think this is a tragedy that students died away from home, but life was different then. Transportation was limited to horse and carriage until the train came to Hampshire County in 1884. Even then some had to travel long distances on the train with many transfers. There was no penicillin or other drugs to fend off the diseases, which we take for granted today. Educational options for deaf and blind students to learn skills were severely limited. The school provided not only education, but a loving and caring family, which is very evident within the pages of the Tablet.

As early as 1874, the school saw the need to have a resting place for those students who did not survive their sickness. Two plots were secured at the Indian Mound Cemetery on the western side of Romney, overlooking the South Branch Valley. Articles in the Tablet, the school's admissions records, county records, the South Branch Intelligencer and the Hampshire Review provide documentation of their deaths and subsequent burial at home or in Romney. Most of the students were transported home, or the bodies secured by the parents and returned home to the family burial plot. But remember, just as today, some children did not have a home for which to return. For those children, the school provided not only a loving, secure environment but also a final resting place. The death of Lulu Arbogast as detailed in the pages of the Tablet in June of 1915 shows the care and love afforded this student. "The remains were accompanied to their final resting place by the entire student staff and pupil body of both departments. The service was conducted by Mr. Alkire, an officer of the school, and 'Rock of Ages' rose gently on the evening air from the lips of her schoolmates and friends." Imagine, if you will, the march of close to 200 staff and students down Main St. toward Indian Mound, to lay to rest their beloved Lulu.

Equally sad was the death of a deaf student, Effie Brannon, age 21. Her home was only temporary in Nicholas County and "it was decided to bury her in Romney where there are several of the pupils at the school already buried; and in the calm beauty of the an October evening we laid her to rest, but we do not think of Effie as being there, but as a spirit at last released from perpetual silence joining in songs of praise before the Redeemer." Effie was the only student who had a stone placed on her grave.

There are other accounts of students being laid to rest at the school's plot at Indian Mound until 1929. Through research and records the plots have been located. Lost in the passage of time, no one knew of these graves and to this day, with the exception of Miss Effie, they remain unmarked and uncelebrated.

The West Virginia Schools for the Deaf and the Blind provided for their students in this life and the next and continue to do so today. The Bible verse of Isaiah 35:5 says it best, "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped".

The memorial marker is now in place at the cemetery. During the 150th Anniversary celebration of the school this fall, a ceremony will be held to dedicate the stone.

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