
WHAT DID SHE LEARN AND HOW DID SHE LEARN IT: FORMATIVE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY EDUCATIONAL INFLUENCES ON URSULA SMITH BEACH OF CLARKSVILLE, TENNESSEE

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Ursula Smith Beach is currently recognized as a teacher, author, editor, and county historian. Born in 1900 and educated in Clarksville and Nashville, she received her baccalaureate degree from Southwestern Presbyterian College shortly after World War I and her master's degree from Austin Peay State University in 1956. Her teaching career spanned thirty years, the earlier part in Louisiana, Alabama, and West Virginia, the later part in Clarksville public schools as well as at Austin Peay.

Miss Ursula, as she is called by all who know her, achieved celebrity status with publication of her book *Along the Warioto* in 1964, a history of Montgomery County, Tennessee. Her monograph entitled "Rebecca Sevier, Child of the Frontier" was published in 1984. She has served as editor for the Montgomery County News and has contributed a weekly article for the past sixteen years. Her numerous articles have appeared in the *Clarksville Leaf Chronicle*, *The Tennessee Conservationist*, and *The Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, as well as in other publications.

Honors have come to Miss Ursula from outside her home town, too. She has been appointed to the honorary staffs of the governors of Alabama, Kentucky, and Tennessee. In 1980 she was named State Woman of the Year by the Tennessee Press and Authors Club. She is regarded as a contributor unsurpassed in research, evaluation, and understanding of the history of Clarksville-Montgomery County.

Ursula Smith Beach is the product of a unique turn-of-the-century environment in the South. She was born into an aspiring middle class family. Her family could not initially claim the prestige and social status of the area's landed gentry, nor could they easily co-opt the traditions plantation owners had perpetuated, except for one: the personal code of honor. Early family influence was important in insuring successful absorption of this code, but schooling had become recognized as an effective ally. Miss Ursula's educational foundation, therefore, rested on an implicit contract between her home with its early family instruction and resources and those emphasized by Miss Sallie Howard, a tuition school teacher who had begun her career in 1857. In significant ways this combination might be difficult to duplicate today.

Miss Ursula tells some intriguing stories of her early life in Clarksville. The pre-school years contributed in important imagination. Her father, Edwin T. Smith, along with his four brothers, worked for his father in the Clarksville Planing Mill. The grandfather was in partnership with E.M. Clark, and Ursula's father was in charge of the mill until 1909. From the time she was old enough to join her mother in the buggy to call for her father at the end of his day's work, Ursula was invited to play with the remnants from the milling machines. She gathered the papery curls and geometric pieces of wooden scraps along with heavy and blunt-edged colored glass bits, used in

transom windows, for construction games she played at home. She also learned to model shapes with some of the putty used in glazing windows.

Ursula learned self-discipline in those first years. Her father told her of a young boy's experience in a prairie fire and how his safe escape had depended on obeying the adult commands he had received. He emphasized the importance of obeying immediately and without question. She was spanked only twice in her life and both times occurred before she was six. One spanking was given when she was five and had slapped her baby sister for saying "ticky, ticky" when Ursula had instructed her to say "chicky, chicky." The second time occurred when she stepped between her napping father and the open fireplace. When she accidentally touched his foot and he awoke, he demanded to know how she dared to be between him and the fire when she had been expressly forbidden to take such a safety risk. She responded, impishly, "I'll do it again if you want me to," and suffered the consequences.

Ursula was early taught to respect the standards her parents had set for their children. Her mother spoke gently to her three young ones, and they could quickly recognize their errors when she looked disappointed. Ursula learned appropriate behavior through the desire to avoid hurting or disappointing her parents, therefore, rather than by admonition. She was expected to be present in adult company but not to be obtrusive until she could join in on their level. She learned to avoid discourtesy through the desire for parental approval.

The Smith parents instilled responsibility early in their children, too. Each Sunday evening they were given thirty-five cents as the week's allowance. They could spend the money any way they chose, but they were expected to have a nickel left for the church collection plate on the following Sunday morning. Thus, each time they made a decision to spend some of their money, they had to consider it in terms of having five cents left for Sunday morning.

In simple ways Ursula Smith learned that her parents valued honesty and unselfishness. The children were encouraged to make gifts for others on special days, within their own limits of ability. In a significant way Ursula took on one responsibility her parents had not directly encouraged. When she was four her eleven-year-old sister died, and she overheard her mother wonder whether her husband would ever be able to accept this loss. Ursula determined inwardly that she would take Gladys's place in her papa's mind, and through the subsequent years she tried to please her father and bring him happiness.

The Smith family apparently was struggling economically during these years, but Ursula recalls early buggy trips to see special places of interest in the surrounding area. She also enjoyed her mother's story-reading from *Little Folks*, a monthly magazine the Smiths received. Each issue contained a story which featured a young girl, and young Ursula thoroughly identified with the independent yet responsible protagonist.

When she reached the age of seven, Ursula was ready for school. Her parents judged the early school environment a crucial one. Howell School, a public facility for the first six years of instruction, had been built in Clarksville in 1879, but the Smiths preferred the tuition school for Ursula because of its special advantages. She would be instructed in a private home with a small number of children of various ages. The environment would reflect the protection of home, yet she would be exposed to more than reading, spelling, and arithmetic with Miss Sallie Howard. The standards encouraged by the Smiths at home would be reinforced in the tuition school with individual attention. In contrast to Howell School's student/teacher ratio of twenty-five to one, Miss Howard limited her group to ten students. She charged five dollars per month per child, a considerable but justified expense for the Smith family at the time.

Whereas a considerable number of tuition schools had existed in Clarksville throughout the last quarter of the nineteenth century, by 1907 only a handful of these schools remained. Thus, the number of students who experienced this unique introduction to formal education was small. Probably no more than fifty students attended tuition schools the year young Ursula entered, about ten percent of the total number of students attending grades 1-7 in Clarksville at that time. If Miss Howard's was typical of tuition schools, the tuitioners concentrated on reading, spelling, and arithmetic. They received some instruction in cursive writing but none in printing. They needed a slate, a pencil box, pencils, and lined paper for their daily lessons. At this time, incidentally, all students, whether in tuition or public school, had to purchase their own textbooks.

On Ursula's first day, Mrs. Smith told Miss Howard, "Teach her to read if you teach her nothing else." The teacher lifted the young girl onto a table, facing her toward a large wall placard and told Ursula to study the three words on it until she was convinced she would always recognize them. Ursula dutifully and silently obeyed. The words were "ox, box, and fox." When she went home that first day she was convinced she could read and told her parents so. She recalls to this day the great sense of achievement she had when she made the announcement.

The Smiths were both interested in their daughter's progress, and it was an important event when Ursula was able to read a paragraph to her father from the daily newspaper. Thereafter Ursula read at home daily and soon began to explore the public library. Eventually she read four books a week during the summer and then systematically embarked on a reading program which included every book in the Clarksville library.

Each day at Miss Howard's began at 8:30 a.m. Students were encouraged to bring a small snack which was eaten at 10:00. The day's work ended at noon. The teaching system was ungraded, and students progressed at their own pace. Lessons were assigned to begin each day's study and Miss Howard reviewed and judged each child's slate as it was completed. She pointed out any errors on the slate and made suggestions, and the child eventually brought the corrected lesson to her for a second review. When the lesson was accurately represented on the slate, Miss Howard then instructed that it be copied on paper. She inspected it again on paper and if all was correct, she wrote in large letters "O.K." Thus, at each day's end Ursula took home a perfect paper to show her parents, and she developed confidence and pride in each learned lesson.

Miss Howard provided equally important supplemental instruction. Once Ursula was able to write words, she received an unexpected lesson in courtesy. Miss Howard had instructed her to write a letter on her slate to a relative and to write what she knew. She produced the following:

Dear Ant Anna,

I go to school. My teacher is Miss Sallie Howard. She wears a black dress. She is tall. She wears a wig. It is red. It is parted in the middle.

When Miss Howard inspected Ursula's work, she picked up her sponge and, with a grand gesture, wiped the slate totally clean, saying "Do not be personal." Then she calmly instructed Ursula that the spelling of "aunt" was "a-u-n-t." Ursula knew she had overstepped important bounds and dutifully wrote a second more appropriate letter for her teacher.

Another significant aspect to Ursula's tuition school experience emphasized responsibility beyond her own performance and behavior. Her sister Agnes entered the same schoolroom two years after Ursula had begun. Agnes apparently rebelled against the reputation of her older sibling by taking a more relaxed attitude toward learning. She found opportunities to cut out and play with paper dolls in the space under her desk top but she was always

eventually caught by Miss Howard. Ursula would then receive an instruction to take Agnes's paper dolls away from her and to see that she got busy with her lesson.

Another practice which Agnes indulged in was to tear off tiny pieces of paper, roll them up tightly and then stuff them up her nose. Miss Howard's practical attention would become involved when Agnes's nose would begin to bleed; then she would instruct Ursula to take her to the bathroom and clean her up.

The ultimate extra-curricular responsibility for Ursula occurred when Miss Howard delayed giving Agnes permission to visit the bathroom and an accident resulted. Ursula was of course then instructed to remedy the situation and bring Agnes back to the classroom. The other children would tease Ursula about this, and she would feel devastated. These kinds of responsibilities were unique, aside from the problems they caused for Ursula. As the older sister, she was expected to resolve the problems Agnes created and then to see Agnes embarked on studying again before she could resume her own lesson. In a graded classroom setting she would never have had similar responsibilities.

Another kind of independence was encouraged by the Smith parents in this period when Ursula and Agnes were invited during summers to spend one week each with two aunts in New Providence, a community then located a short distance beyond the Clarksville city limits. The girls were expected to be courteous guests but to contribute as they could to the household chores. The Smith parents telephoned daily and came to visit by buggy on Sunday afternoon during these weeks. Ursula recalls entertaining herself with making leaf and clover chains as her mother had showed her to do, and instructing Agnes in creating them, too. Ursula recalls taking books with her for these visits, and in her free time she especially enjoyed climbing up into a large dogwood tree for private reading sessions.

When she was ten, Ursula's parents decided she was ready to transfer to the public school environment. Howell School consisted of three floors. Students began on the first floor and were promoted to the floors above as they completed the required grades. Now the teacher/student ratio was very different, yet Miss Ursula recalls that she experienced no difficulty in being at the top of her class in each of her grades there. She is convinced that she had been given a thorough grounding in the basics by Miss Howard. Indeed, when she entered Howell School she had tested as superior in reading and in mathematics.

While Ursula apparently did very well in fourth grade, she recalls meeting an outstanding teacher in the fifth grade, Miss Carrie Boyd, who was successful in inspiring her students to excel. Ursula wrote a play about squirrels and nuts which was imaginative and lively, according to the teacher's comments. Ursula also was exposed to extensive study in English grammar. Miss Boyd first taught her class the grammatical parts of speech. Then students learned to put the words from a sentence into the columns according to grammar, gender and number. Once the students mastered this, they began sentence diagramming. To this day when Miss Ursula lies awake at night, she diagrams sentences in her mind.

Homework was assigned regularly, but it consisted usually of fifteen problems or so, and Ursula did not find them demanding. However, occasionally she had a project which she had to create at home, and her parents emphasized the importance of producing a good job. She made a contour map of the United States which gave her a feeling of pride. She recalls carrying it to school, "hoping not to fall down and break up the nation or have an earthquake."

In another instance (perhaps a formative one for the future Montgomery County historian), Ursula was given a homework assignment to write about the history of Clarksville. When her father learned this, he said she must do it

well or not at all. He showed her a copy of *Picturesque Clarksville: Past and Present*, an 1887 publication by W.P. Titus, which contained photos and facts about the city's development. Ursula wanted to please both father and teacher, and this experience apparently was a critical one for her: she became an achiever from this point in her education.

There seem to have been few discipline problems in Howell School. One which Ursula experienced (she is reluctant to admit) was called "loitering in the lobby." A student earned demerits if he or she spent too much time in visiting the restrooms, and the punishment was to stay ten minutes after school.

When Ursula was promoted to grade six, she moved to the top floor of Howell School where the space was divided into a study hall and two classrooms. Spelling and math were done in the study hall; English, history, science, and art were studied in one of the classrooms with a special teacher. Ursula recalls that a "grown-up atmosphere" existed on the third floor. Periodically a student near the piano would be designated to play a march. This was the only signal to students that a new period was to begin. They all lined up and marched in time with the music to the new study area.

Howell School had only one male teacher during Ursula's years there. Professor O'Neil taught math and therefore presided throughout the day in the study hall. Each morning he would carry a large bottle up and down the rows of desks and fill each of the inkwells. He was strict and challenged students to excel in math, but he conveniently allowed a lapse in rules when the jonquils began to bloom each spring. Students would bring in flowers, put them in the inkwells where they would absorb ink by capillary action, and at the day's end students would leave with lovely green flowers. Not a word would be spoken by teacher or student; the conspiracy was a silent one. Ursula came to recognize that order and decorum were necessary to a good learning environment; she also enjoyed the periodic "freedom" from rules.

Ursula's ability to remember what she studied was exceptional. She learned all the bones of the human body under her science teacher, Miss Agnes Nicolassen, in the seventh grade, and she can still recall every one of them at age 88. She also received comprehensive instruction in English composition and rhetoric as well as an introduction to Bullfinch's *Fables and Myths*. Her assessment of each phrase of her early schooling is that she was thoroughly instructed in each subject and that the next phase directly built upon that foundation.

At home during Ursula's elementary years of schooling, the Smith family provided an enriched setting, though the family was not considered to have had exceptional advantages for the period. Important reference books were available. Ursula read in the fifteen volumes of *Stoddard Lectures* about every country in the world. She learned about nudity by studying the Greek statues. She read of historical events in the twenty-volume series of novels by E.P. Roe. A volume entitled *Poems and Stories Every Child Should Know* answered her questions of what, where, why, and when. Her parents read with her the four Gospels and the book of Acts in the family Bible; then she was on her own. There were other favorites, such as *The Little Colonel*, *Anne of Green Gables*, *Stepping Stones to Literature*, books by Kipling, Mary Mapes Dodge, Jack London, Bret Harte, and other adventure story writers.

The Smiths also had a collection of Perry Penny pictures. Each of these featured a reproduction of a famous art work or an outstanding author. Throughout the Smith home there were alabaster art projects which had been obtained from a local man who ordered them, packed in cork, by the barrel from Italy. Music was part of the daily environment, too; the Smiths had a piano, phonograph, and mandolin.

Finally, an additional enrichment source existed outside home and school. Clarksville boasted an 800-seat opera

house, built in the 1870s by John S. Elder. Clarksville residents, including the Smiths, took full advantage of its programs. Prominent speakers of the day, such as Booker T. Washington and many others, appeared on its stage; the traveling circus, concert programs, and amateur play groups all came through town on the Louisville-Memphis route. Chautauqua programs were scheduled, also, for a week every summer, and Ursula remembers attending

them, particularly between 1911 and 1915. Morning activities were participating events, and once, for the edification of an audience, with other Girl Scouts, Ursula demonstrated on "injured" boys that they knew how to provide emergency treatment for broken bones. Afternoon programs were planned for children, and evening programs were for adults.

By 1917 the Clarksville opera house had burned down and the Chautauqua had ended; public schools had proliferated throughout the city, and the tuition school as an institution had disappeared by the 1930s. Ursula Smith Beach thus lived through a period unique in Clarksville's history in which she developed a code of honor, forthright honesty, self-discipline, a sense of responsibility, an intellectual curiosity, and a standard of excellence -- all of which epitomize her today. She undoubtedly possesses unique traits in intelligence and memory capacity, but the early and formative influences that came from family, school, and community environment have played a crucial part in producing the adult she became.

NOTE

This essay is based on interviews conducted at Miss Ursula's antebellum home during the late fall and early winter of 1986-7. A videotape documentary on Ursula Smith Beach's life is being prepared by the writer and a colleague at Austin Peay State University with funding provided by a variety of Clarksville community organizations.

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