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Reminiscences of Early Days

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OCTOBER 4th, 1876, seems a long time ago, does it not? But it was a red letter day to me and therefore never to be forgotten. On the morning of that day my mother took me to the new school for the deaf which opened for the first time in a modest building at 70 South Saint Paul Street, corner of Court Street. This place, long since torn down, was ever after referred to as "Number 70."

I was eager to go to the new school, for I knew that I should find there three dear friends whom I had known in the school which I had attended in New York City, known as Fanwood. These friends were Mr. and Mrs. Z. F. Westervelt and Miss Hattie E. Hamilton. The last named had been my teacher at Fanwood and she stood to me for all that was loving, kind and beautiful.

My mother rang the door bell, and who should open the door but this dear friend herself! Immediately the new school became the right place for me and remained so through thirty-eight years. Entering the reception room that morning I found there quite a number of the boys and girls I had known at Fanwood, and this served to make me feel still more at home.

The quarters which housed the new school were small and simply furnished. Our only amusements were playing ball in the back yard and going to walk around the block across the bridge. Nevertheless we were a very happy family for we were surrounded by an atmosphere of love and good cheer.

Three years were spent at Number 70. Then the school had increased so greatly in numbers that it became necessary to look for larger accommodations. The buildings which the school now occupies had been used for a truant school, but truancy was evidently on the wane, for the buildings stood empty. There were only three, the main building, the laundry and that one now occupied by the carpenter shop, the printing office and kitchen.

Mr. Westervelt succeeded in securing these buildings, and later he added the schoolhouse, kindergarten and dining-room. We were more than pleased with our new school home, for here we had plenty of room on the premises and when we wished to go abroad, instead of city streets, we had woodland and meadows and the river banks to explore in summer, and in winter there was Emerson's Pond for skating and the slopes for coasting. Then, too, Mr. Westervelt purchased a small farm a short distance north of the school and this proved a source of delight to us.

It contained an apple orchard and rows of grapevines which bore fruit that seemed to us more delicious than any we had ever eaten. A trip to the farm after school was a treat to look forward to and we would return laden with snow apples, spies and russets.

At the time that Mr. Westervelt secured the empty buildings of the truant school he found them in charge of a young man whom he engaged as engineer. This was no other than our Mr. Diemer. He became quite a hero in our eyes when we learned that he had fought in the Franco-Prussian war and had

been left for dead on the field of battle. The supervisor of the older girls was Miss Mary Palmer, beloved of us all because of her wise and kind control of us. In time it became evident that Mr. Diemer and Miss Palmer were very good friends. Later we were told that there was to be a wedding at the school, they being the contracting parties. This created a state of agreeable excitement, the more so that the older girls and boys were given the agreeable task of decorating the dining-room where the wedding was to take place. It was mid-winter, and the boys gathered evergreen boughs and, with the help of the girls, arranged them so effectively that the room presented a most festive appearance. This was the first wedding that many of us had ever attended and naturally it was an event in our lives.

I cannot bring this short sketch of the early days of the school to a close without mentioning the important change which took place in the method of teaching during the third year. Up to that time Mr. Westervelt had followed the generally accepted method of using signs as a means of communication. He was himself a graceful and expert sign maker.

Some of the teachers whom he had employed were also familiar with the sign language and those of the pupils who had attended school at Fanwood and other institutions had been taught signs. So it meant a great and radical change when signs were forbidden and all were required to use English spelled on the fingers or spoken. For a long time it seemed as if signs could not be done away with. The pupils were desirous of complying with the new order of things, but habit was strong, and again and again good resolutions were broken and the forbidden language brought into use. But Mr. Westervelt and his co-workers were not the kind to give up. With wonderful patience and courage they labored to bring about the desired change. The struggle was long and hard before victory over sign making was won. "But 't was a famous victory!" and all who have profited and are now profiting by it owe a great debt of gratitude to the good friend who won it for them. This debt can best be paid by steadfast and unswerving loyalty to the Rochester Method which won out in the face of as great opposition and ridicule as was ever met by any new departure from the old and established order.

