

RACHEL OAKLEY

1837-1910



Picture a small shanty with wind blowing through the cracks. Shadows hug the corners of the dimly lit building and the air is heavy with smoke from the fire lit well before dawn to provide a small amount of warmth. Nineteen children ages 9 to 14, some barefoot, shift uncomfortably on wooden planks. Few, if any, are able to read or write. Some, like students of today, would rather be elsewhere and are engaged in typical student pranks.

At the front of the room sits a weathered desk, empty save one or two well-worn books and a piece of slate. There are no maps, blackboards, research books, or other learning aides for students to use. Next to the desk stands a woman plainly dressed in the Quaker style with a kind yet determined look upon her face. “Students, welcome to your school,” she says. It is spring of 1874, and it is the first official day of what will eventually become the Petoskey Public School system.

This image may not be exact because very few records remain about the school that started it all in Petoskey. Even the name of the teacher—Mrs. Rachel Oakley or Mrs. Rachel Alley (Allie) is uncertain. What is certain is that Mrs. Oakley (for sake of writing) had a determined spirit and a big heart, qualities necessary to get her foundling school started.

How did Mrs. Rachel Oakley, a twice-widowed mother of four daughters, find herself in the front of a humble schoolroom that she herself organized? It is a good question, with an answer that relies almost as heavily on supposition as it does facts.

Born in 1837, in Ontario, Canada, to Esil and Hannah (Brock) Terrill, Rachel came from a family of achievers. Her paternal grandfather, Anthony Terrill, held the position of governor general of the Bermudas. Her maternal great-uncle, General Isaac Brock, to whom



a statue is erected in Niagara Falls, was known as the “Hero of Upper Canada” for his role in preparing Canada for the possibility of American invasions during the War of 1812. Brock also commanded the siege on Detroit which led to British rule over the Michigan Territory. With her family and Quaker background, Rachel must have been raised with the belief that

all men, women, and children were created equal, and that everyone had a duty to help those in need. Years later Rachel’s obituary in *The Petoskey Evening News and Daily Resorter* would read that “*she always wanted to see the hungry fed and the naked clothed, and a great deal of her time was given to these ambitions.*”

Rachel married Arthur Oakley at the age of 16—scarcely two years older than the students she would teach in Petoskey 20 years later. While still in Canada, she began teaching school. At some point she became a widow and, in 1869, she moved to Grand Rapids and married Mr. Moses Alley. While in Grand Rapids she organized and contributed to a relief fund for destitute homesteaders who were hit hard by a famine. As for her husband, Mr. Alley, nothing is known of him. The obituary of Mrs. Elizabeth A. Chrysler, Rachel Oakley’s daughter, actually talks of a Mr. Oakley as late as 1874.

This is a point of confusion in the names. Both Rachel and her daughter are listed on the school roles with the last name of Alley, Allie or Oakley. Rachel’s marker includes the name Oakley but not Alley. Her inclusion in the role of teachers in Charlevoix County lists her as Rachel Alley. Mr. Alley is not mentioned in the obituaries of either Rachel or her daughter, Elizabeth although Mr. Oakley is mentioned as living after the marriage to Mr. Alley.

When Mrs. Oakley arrived in Petoskey, there was no school for the children to attend, the railroad was still waiting completion, and the first newspaper had yet to be published. She was one of 125 white settlers in Petoskey. The town itself was a typical rough frontier town. As luck would have it, upon Mrs. Oakley’s arrival at the

Harriet Kilborn, local historian recounted in one of her books that “Even the squirrel stew got thinner and thinner. In the spring of ‘77 fearful tales started coming into Petoskey—the Mossbacks were starving. Petoskey people scrounged their pantries for extra supplies. The word was relayed to Grand Rapids and the good people of that town hastily gathered supplies. On the heels of the relief train from Grand Rapids came the miracle, a great flight of the Passenger Pigeon, seeking a nesting area.” The people of Grand Rapids must have been benefactors to many areas. Rachel Oakley, while living in Grand Rapids, was involved in gathering supplies to help an unknown community sometime between 1869 and 1874. Miss Kilborn’s account is regarding a famine in Petoskey in 1877.

Rose House the very first meeting of the Petoskey School Board was being held. Mrs. Oakley attended and applied for the job, receiving it when Dr. Little said, “*Anyone who can teach in Canada is good enough to teach the first public school in Petoskey.*” Mrs. Oakley was eager to get started and soon had men carting timber to build her little shanty school. Not only did she occupy the first school built in Petoskey but, according to her obituary, “*for a long time she lived in a small house on Petoskey street, which was the first structure erected by white hands.*”

Mrs. Oakley’s school closed in 1875, so a larger one could be built. There is some question as to whether she remained in Petoskey or left for a brief time. Her daughter’s obituary states that Mrs. Oakley and her family returned to Grand Rapids for two years for Elizabeth’s schooling, then made their way back to Petoskey. Mrs. Oakley’s obituary states that “*since she first came here Petoskey has always been Mrs. Oakley’s home.*” Upon the closing of her school, Rachel remained recorded in the list of teachers for Charlevoix County. She also sold musical instruments out of her home and became an agent for Steinway Piano and Burdett Organ.

As a single woman forced to work to support herself it is doubtful that Mrs. Oakley had time to take part in women’s



Mrs. Rachel Oakley Alley
First teacher of Petoskey’s
first public school.

organizations such as the Ladies' Benevolent Society, but it is certain that she helped those in need as her religious beliefs had taught her. Her obituary states that she was involved in *"philanthropic work her entire life"*.

It must have been a proud moment for Mrs. Oakley when the Petoskey Schools celebrated their first graduation in 1885. Rachel Oakley witnessed many more graduations and improvements in the school system until she became sick in 1909. Daughter Elizabeth returned from missions and educational work in Alaska to care for her mother until Mrs. Oakley's death Dec. 24, 1910.

Throughout the late nineteenth century schools were making huge advancements. As people realized the value of an education, more and more schools were established. Students learned the four R's—reading, writing, arithmetic, and recitation—often through stories that provided moral and religious values. More girls attended school, however a high school education would still be reserved largely for boys until the early 20th century. As Rachel Oakley was introducing the most basic of education to Petoskey, major cities throughout the United States were introducing novel approaches such as graded levels of instruction, similar content to be taught in all schools, and, the fastest growing innovation of them all: kindergarten.

Not as much is known about Petoskey's first teacher as some of the other pioneers we studied. We do know she was of strong stock—raising children by herself in the 1800s, she built a love for learning into her daughter Libbie. She lived out her beliefs by doing "philanthropic work her entire life" and she loved Petoskey. She was 37 years old when she first arrived, and even though she had lived in other areas, Petoskey "has always been Mrs. Oakley's home."

THE CHILDREN IN RACHEL OAKLEY'S FIRST
SCHOOL WERE:

Rose, Abigail	Born 1862, Age 12
Bunnell, Jennie	Born 1865, Age 9
Oakley, Elizabeth	Born 1862, Age 12
Krusel, Hannah	Born 1861, Age 13
Tracy, Jennie	Born 1864, Age 10
McMillan, Sarah	no dates
Petoskey, Hattie	no dates
Niles, James	Born 1865, Age 9
Tracy, Will	Born 1864, Age 10
Tracy, Jessie	Born 1862, Age 12
Ingalls, Hazen	no dates
Ingalls, Byron	Born 1862, Age 12
Dixon, John	no dates
Knight, Frank	Born 1860, Age 14
McMillan, William	no dates
McMillan, Colin	no dates
Petoskey, Robert	Born 1864, Age 10
Petoskey, Peter	Born 1861, Age 13
Petoskey, David	Born 1865, Age 9

The youngest children were nine and
the oldest was 14. There appears
to be 11 boys and 8 girls.

OBITUARY

MRS. RACHEL OAKLEY PIONEER RESIDENT PASSED AWAY FRIDAY.

After a long illness, the latter part of which contained much suffering, Mrs. Rachel Oakley, an Emmet county pioneer, passed away Friday afternoon at three o'clock, having reached the age of seventy-three years. For two years she had been in delicate health, but a fall resulting in a broken thigh, which occurred last August, so weakened her that she was obliged to be confined to her bed after leaving the hospital, making her home with her daughter, Mrs. Walter Chrysler, at 909 State street. She was thought to be improving, however, until three weeks ago, when she developed a severe cold which greatly impeded her progress to recovery, and which ultimately resulted in heart failure. Although it was thought during the last few days that she would not be spared a great deal longer, the end was not looked for so soon, and was a great surprise and shock to all. Knowing that her mother was in a critical condition, however, Mrs. Chrysler had sent for another daughter, Mrs. Prouse, wife of Dr. Edwin Prouse, of Windsor, Ont., who arrived Thursday evening and was at the deathbed of her mother.

Mrs. Oakley was born in the year 1837, on her father's country estate in Ontario, Canada, seventy miles east of Toronto. Her father was Esli Terrill, son of Anthony Terrill, who was governor-general of the Bermudas. Her mother was Hannah Brock, daughter of Captain William Brock, and a grand-niece of General Isaac Brock, of the Canadian army, to whom a statue was erected on the Canadian side at Niagara Falls. At the age of sixteen, Rachel Terrill became the wife of Arthur Oakley. In 1869, they moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan, at which place Mrs. Oakley made her home until the year 1874, when she came to Petoskey, then a small settlement. There were then no schools for white children in the region, but Mrs. Oakley organized and taught such an institution in a small board house, which the men of the neighborhood prepared, hauling the timber from a long distance.

Since she first came here Petoskey has always been Mrs. Oakley's home. For a long time she lived in a small house on Petoskey street, which was the first structure erected by white hands, and for the last several years she has occupied this building at times, her daugh-

ter, Alberta, having been her companion until her marriage to Walter Chrysler in the year 1903. In 1904 Mr. and Mrs. Chrysler moved to Chena, Alaska, where they lived until Mrs. Chrysler came home a year ago last September to care for her mother, who was sick at that time. Since then Mrs. Chrysler has been constantly with her, caring for her in the best possible manner.

Although Mrs. Oakley had never been directly identified with any of the religious organizations of Petoskey, she was a member of the Society of Friends, but in conformity with the wish of relatives reared all of her children in the church.

During her entire life the deceased was engaged in philanthropic work. Her friends said of her that she always wanted to see "the hungry fed and the naked clothed," and a great deal of her time was given to these ambitions. While in Grand Rapids, during a famine, Mrs. Oakley was the first to learn of the destitute condition of the homesteaders, and she at once organized a general relief fund, giving her own time and money for the cause. Her death occurred in a very peaceful manner and she was conscious up to the last moment, passing away in a very beautiful way after so much suffering.

Mrs. Oakley is survived by four daughters, Mrs. A.M. Hickok, of Pasadena, Calif; Mrs. Frances Omstead, of Chicago; Mrs. Prouse, wife of Dr. Edwin Prouse, of Windsor, Ont., and Mrs. Walter Chrysler, of Chena, Alaska. In addition, there are two brothers, Anthony Terrill and Esli Terrill, both of Wooler, Ont.; and two sisters, Mrs. Edward Morrier, of Ft. Thomas, Ky., and Mrs. Morden, wife of Dr. M.R. Morden, of Adrian, Mich., Wilkins Wheatley, of Pasadena, and Miss D. Isabelle Prouse, of Windsor, are the only grandchildren living.

Mrs. Chrysler has not as yet definitely decided as to her future, though she will remain in Petoskey for some time, many duties of various kinds demanding her presence here. Relatives, with the exception of Mrs. Prouse and her daughter, will be unable to arrive in time for the funeral.

The funeral services will be held from Emmanuel Episcopal church on Tuesday, Dec. 27, at two o'clock p.m., with Rev. Charles F. Westman in charge.

The friends are kindly requested to omit flowers.

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