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World of Words

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THE BATTLE OF MOTHER'S KNEE

Last week I visited Science and Industry to see their display of antique samplers. (a sampler is a square of linen on which little girls learned embroidery stitches and the alphabet during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) There were many fine examples, each beautifully stitched with alphabets, birds, poems and animals. It was easy to admire these bits of immortality and I wish that I had something equally lovely to leave behind when I go to that GREAT MAIN LIBRARY IN THE SKY.

I dismissed the outing from my mind until I picked up the new "American Heritage". If you are not familiar with this publication I urge you to read it, for it is a fine one. It deals exclusively with subjects pertaining to our country. Anyway, on page twelve a picture of a sampler caught my eye and the sentence "Learning to Read was the First Feminist Triumph."

Educational establishments were flourishing in our country long before the American Revolution, ranging from Harvard and Yale to grammar schools. These schools were attended exclusively by young males. Girls were thought to learn all they needed to know at their mother's knee.

In the year 1818 Emma Willard introduced her "Plan for the Improvement of Female Education". This caused a furor in the New York legislature. The way the senators carried on, mother's knee was better than Harvard or even Oxford. What those girls learned at home could be put on an eight by ten square of linen.

Girls who desperately wanted to learn often sat outside the school or on the steps listening to the boys recite. Strangely enough the girls on the steps and porch suffered from pleurisy and other respiratory problems.

This only proved to the Colonial Fathers that girls were too frail mentally and physically to be taught anything.

After the War for Independence, the New England states became slightly less rigid in regard to the education of females. Here and there a town council might vote to allow girls in the school building from five to seven in the morning or from six to eight at night or a few weeks in summer when the boys were working in the fields or shipyards.

By the 1830's most states had begun some program of primary public education. With the Western Expansion the shortage of teachers became acute. Men were not attracted to the profession because of the wretched pay and lonely living conditions. Suddenly women teachers were in demand. The first teachers were amazingly hardy, able to withstand every rigor of frontier life. Evidently teaching arithmetic and fighting the Indians proved stimulating. Teaching became a woman's profession by default. They would work for a half or a third of the salary demanded by men.

After years of struggle it became economically expedient to let girls go to school. It seems unthinkable to us that children were denied the right to learn to read, that the whole world of knowledge, beauty and phantasy could have been denied to so many. We take our privileges so for granted.

What remains to remind us of that long hard struggle? A lovely bit of needlework requesting "Think of Me When This You See".

Go to Science and Industry and view the samplers. They will be there until August. When you look at them the over-worked phase "You've Come A Long Way Baby" will spring to your mind. The battle of mother's knee is almost over.