

NORMAN J. COLMAN AND THE FLOYD COUNTY SEMINARY

An unusual Floyd County educational venture was beginning its brief career 108 years ago in Greenville. The Floyd County Seminary, a cross between a modern high school and a junior college, had opened in January, 1850. In March the first quarter of studies was drawing to a close. Students were busily preparing for final examinations and Norman J. Colman, the Seminary's young principal, was making plans for the second quarter which opened on April 1.

In the mid-nineteenth century school teachers often began their careers at an early age – often in their teens. And when the Floyd County Seminary, an institution of higher learning, opened in 1850 Principal Norman J. Colman was only 22. The school was welcomed by the citizens of Greenville who hoped their town would reap many benefits from the new institution. County seminaries then were common in Indiana and were set up under a special State law providing for the accumulation of a Seminary fund from tax revenues. Plans for the Floyd County Seminary were made as early as 1839, but it required 10 years to accumulate \$2,000 for the Seminary fund, and then Greenville residents subscribed an additional \$800 to secure the school for their town.

For this sum it was possible to erect a large 2-story brick building on land donated by Isaac Redman. One of the trustees appointed to oversee the new school was John B. Ford of Greenville who was later to achieve fame with his glass works in New Albany.

As young Norman Colman sat at his desk planning the academic courses of the school he probably harked back to the time not too long before when he had attended a similar school in his native New York State. Colman had been born near the town of Richfield Springs and after graduation had come to Louisville to teach school about 1846. While in Louisville he also took time to attend the law school of the University of Louisville. Then had come the opportunity to be principal of the new Floyd County Seminary.

But the new educational venture, despite all the high hopes which attended its founding, proved to be short-lived. The Hoosier legislature in 1852 approved the first laws establishing the public school system as we know it today. This spelled the end of the older county seminaries for the new law provided that they be closed and their assets be turned over to the new public school systems. So scarcely two years after it was opened, the Floyd County Seminary closed its doors. Some 100 students had been attending the school, paying tuition of \$4 to \$8 a semester and finding board and lodging in Greenville homes at \$1 a week.

The closing of the Seminary proved to be the end of Colman's teaching career, for he now turned to the practice of law and joined forces with a rising young New Albany attorney, Michael Kerr. Kerr and Colman both were Democrats and Kerr was to become speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives shortly after the Civil War. Colman, too, was active in local Democratic politics, and New Albany newspapers of the 1850s contain many references to Colman's speeches at Democratic rallies. He became well known in New Albany and was elected prosecuting attorney for the Court of Common pleas, a legal division no longer in existence.

But there was one ambition burning bright in Colman's mind and it was neither teaching nor the legal profession. In his youth Colman had eagerly looked forward to each issue of "The Albany Cultivator", a farm paper to which his father subscribed. He determined then that some day he, too, would publish a farm newspaper. And when the opportunity came shortly before the Civil War to join the staff of "The Valley Farmer", published in St. Louis, Colman snatched at the opportunity. He resigned his elected office and set out for Missouri.

But it was not long until the booming guns at Fort Sumter signaled that the political storm clouds which had become blacker and blacker had let loose the storm of civil conflict. Colman, a staunch Unionist, served his country with distinction as a lieutenant-colonel in the 85th Missouri Militia regiment. But as soon as the war was over he was back in St. Louis, this time as owner of "The Valley Farmer" which he changed to "Colman's Rural World". The paper became a vigorous spokesman for the Midwestern farmer during the turbulent days of political debate over the gold standard, over the growth of the Grange movement and over other problems facing the farmer.

In 1875 Colman was elected lieutenant-governor of Missouri and in 1885, because of the reputation he had built for himself as an expert on farm affairs, he was named U. S. Commissioner of Agriculture by President Grover Cleveland.

Old New Albany friends sent congratulations and cheered him on as his capabilities brought new dignity to the post he occupied. There still were personal ties in Floyd County, too, for Colman. His wife was the former Clara Porter whom he had married before he went to St. Louis. She had been a student at the Seminary, not much younger than Principal Colman. During his term as commissioner, Colman was able to secure Congressional legislation setting up the first agricultural experiment stations, forerunners of the experiment stations which are found today in all parts of the nation.

Because of the outstanding accomplishments which Colman achieved during his work in Washington, the post of Commissioner of Agriculture was elevated to cabinet status and on February 11, 1889, President Cleveland named Norman Colman as first Secretary of Agriculture. It was the climax of the career of the former principal of the Floyd County Seminary.

Colman's agricultural paper survived his death in 1911 and today the "Missouri Realist", direct descendant of "Colman's Real World", continues to spread the message of agricultural progress.

[Vol. III, Historical Series No. 21]