

Adele Parot: Beacon of the Dioclesian Lewis School Of Gymnastic Expression In the American West

by
ROBERT KNIGHT BARNEY
The University of Western Ontario

Based on the research efforts of several historians, it now appears evident that the “new gymnastics,” as espoused by Dioclesian Lewis, former orator-leader in America’s pre-Civil War temperance movement, became a somewhat popular method of exercise during the 1860’s, and further, was often implemented as an exercise component in the heritage of public school physical education. The “new gymnastics” formed the bulwark of the program of exercise shaping the curriculum of Lewis’ Normal Institute for Physical Education, the first of its kind in North America. Lewis’ institute, opened in Boston in 1861, realized a history of seven years, during which time a total of 421 students were graduated, of which about an equal number were men and women. J.D. Philbrick, Esq., Superintendent of the Public Schools of Boston during the 1860’s, in addressing the second graduating class of Lewis’ Normal Institute, stated:

“You may not know it, Ladies and Gentlemen, but the institution is famous in every part of the land. There is not a live educator in America who is not looking to see what is to be the result of Dr. Lewis’ institution in Boston. These exercises can be introduced into any schoolroom with desks. The problem is solved. I trust, ladies and gentlemen, that this is the commencement of a new era, and that the system taught by Dr. Lewis, will be universally introduced into our schools.”

Perhaps Philbrick’s statement may have been a bit melodramatic relative to “famous in every part of the land,” and “live educators.” Nevertheless, the record does indicate that the influence of Lewis’ exercise expression was such that many public schools in New England, in towns and cities along the eastern seaboard, and in California and other parts of the West, embraced it, if not in pure form, then at least in part.

Almost as geographically far reaching as the transfer of Lewis’ gymnastics to parts of Europe, Asia, and Africa was their extension to California. The pathfinder for the system’s appearance on the Pacific Coast, some three thousand miles from the citadel of their inception in Boston, proved to be a young lady of singular resolution as well as of mysterious relationship to Dio Lewis himself. That lady was Adele Parot, or Mademoiselle Parot, as she referred to herself in professional consequence.

The circumstances surrounding Mademoiselle Parot’s arrival in California are obscured but it is known that she appeared in San Francisco in the summer of 1862, ready to assume professional duties related to the teaching of the “new gymnastics” at the State Normal School, a small institution operated under the general direction of the San Francisco Superintendent of Schools, and an institution which dealt specifically with the training of teachers for the city’s schools (Report of the Superintendent of

Schools, p. 294). In San Francisco Parot began to introduce the Lewis system of exercise expression, which ultimately would have more influence in initiating the early trends of exercise programs in the schools of California than any other particular approach, including the German system. After spending one year at the Normal Institute of San Francisco, she joined the faculty of the newly formed Pacific Female College, located across San Francisco Bay in nearby Oakland. Aside from instructing “new gymnastics and physical exercise,” she also lent her expertise towards teaching French and German. Evidently the Oakland institution was as highly impressed with Adele Parot as they were with her credentials and endorsements from sophisticated and formal New England. The circular announcing the school’s curriculum, stated:

“Calisthenics and gymnastic exercise . . . will be under the charge of Mdlle. Parot, who comes to the institution recommended by Professor Dio Lewis of Boston as one of his most accomplished pupils (Circular of the Pacific Female College, p. 1).”

In 1864 Parot’s career in physical education in California continued with her appointment as director of physical education at the San Mateo Institute (later called Laurel Hall), a private school for young ladies. Her tenure at the San Mateo Institute stretched into the early 1870’s.

Before terminating, this writer would be grossly remiss in not reporting what he believes to be Adele Parot’s most significant contribution to the history of American physical education. That contribution relates to California’s historic 1866 legislation for mandatory physical education in the state’s public schools, the first state legislation of its type in the United States.

Several historians have pointed at John Swett, native of New Hampshire, popular San Francisco educator, and progressive State Superintendant of Public Instruction during most of the 1860’s, as being the sole force behind the enactment of the significant legislation. Certainly Swett’s role should not be minimized. However, this writer feels that other factors were present which helped bring the laws to fruition. One of the most significant of these “other” factors was the influence of Adele Parot. Parot’s role in the drama surrounding the 1866 legislation was played as an influencer and educator of Swett. The record indicates that Swett, anxious to investigate and implement new approaches to teaching methodology, became drawn to the system of gymnastics championed by the Dio Lewis school, the earliest California representative of which was Adele Parot. In calling a State Teachers’ Institute (a primitive counterpart of today’s teaching workshop or convention) in 1863, shortly after his election to the state superintendency, Swett made provisions for Adele Parot to be included on the program. She appeared twice during the six day session, lecturing on and demonstrating the Lewis technique. Swett must have been impressed. His writing pertinent to physical education, after the State Teachers’ Institute of 1863, assumed a more sophisticated aura and reflected a decided change from a general “amalgamated” approach to the subject, to one which embraced the outline form of the Lewis system. Terms such as wands, crowns, Indian Clubs, grace of movement, etc., began to replace references to hikes, outdoor outings, and heavy apparatus.

In conclusion, Adele Parot, through her activities in the private schools of the San Francisco-Oakland area, her instruction of physical education to the young ladies of the San Francisco Normal School, many of whom became school teachers themselves with duties linked to physical education, her appearance at institutes, demonstrations, and discussions, and even more prominently, her contact with school administrators, the most important of which was John Swett, helped immensely in arousing interest and concern for, as well as knowledge pertinent to physical education in the American West.