

IMAGES

...THEN AND NOW

From the Indian Hill Historical Society



**Buckingham Lodge
1861**

Calisthenics in 19th Century Schools

Calisthenics is a type of exercise consisting of a variety of simple movements performed with or without equipment. The word evolved from the Greek – *kallos*, signifying beautiful, and *sthenos*, signifying strength. Many 19th century schools included calisthenics in their curriculum, though the practice of these movements varied depending on the teacher, the room size and its furnishings, regional attitudes, and the students.

There was considerable material to guide 19th century teachers in this type of instruction. Authors of books explained the rationale behind adopting calisthenics. In 1856 Catherine Beecher sought “to teach the methods by which children may be trained at school so as to become healthful, strong and good looking.” Among the benefits were “cure for nervous debility, hysterics, and the evils of too early puberty”, “feelings of friendship”, “a habit of obedience”, and carrying off “the seeds of disease”. J. H. Smart explained his system in 1864 to “develop the muscles of the body...enlarge the chest, strengthen weak lungs, remove the tendency to consumption, invigorate the whole system, and give a natural and graceful carriage to the body.” His vigorous exercises were meant to remove “idleness and mischievousness” and “clear away clouds that often settle upon pupil and teacher.” In 1896 author Jessie Bancroft stated, “Three objects are to be attained by physical exercise in the classroom: stimulation of the nutritive functions, correction of posture, and in general, basic training of the psychological powers, particularly of the will.”



**Jumping, feet sideways,
alternately**

Other books offered similar reasons for incorporating calisthenics in the daily school routine.



**Charging forward
with arms
stretching and
turning sideways**

Usually the classroom teacher started exercise sessions with a command – often “Class – Stand!” Then pupils were told to make room for those around them – “Take distance”. And before starting, they were instructed, “Position” or “Attention”, which was a standing pose with the feet parallel, knees together, arms hanging at the sides, shoulders back, elbows in, eyes front, and the body aligned in an erect posture. Some textbooks advocated stretching before calisthenics. Sessions were to last from 15 minutes to half an hour. They were to be performed every day. Several texts urged opening classroom windows during calisthenics. The exercises were repeated, and sometimes counted, or performed to music or recitations. Students did exercises in unison. In some schools pupils were taken to a special room, like a calisthenic hall.

Numerous variations of practicing calisthenics were practiced. Illustrations of techniques were included in manuals. One author focused on 5 different parts of the body (chest & lungs, arms & hands, neck, trunk, and legs & feet). Another added wrists and fingers. Lewis B. Monroe emphasized vocal gymnastics, and aimed to improve the oratory skills of the student. He incorporated breathing activities and proper control of the organs of the mouth with palate exercises. Samuel Mason recommended starting in the sitting position, then went to standing up, twists, turns, bends, horizontal and vertical extensions, and lunges. Lucy Hunt described stamping of feet, clapping hands, hopping, swinging legs and using wands, rings, dumbbells, and bean bags. Other instruction books suggested incorporating music in the program. Motion songs about topics like clouds, birds, trees, and water mills were noted. There were also marches for the entire class. Lieutenant Hugh Reid offered exercises for young ladies. His preface stated “In this age of progress, we are outgrowing the barbarous custom of regarding women as slaves...” and though he did “not wish to make Amazons of the fair sex”, he was “fully convinced that a dozen military drills would be a source of greater pleasure to young ladies than 100 lessons of calisthenics of any other form.” Besides using commands like “About Face”, “Right Face”, “Halt”, he promoted using brooms as implements. Suggested poses were “Carry Brooms”, “Present Brooms”, “load Brooms”, “Aim Brooms”, and “Fire Brooms”.

Students in schools practiced these movements not only in the 19th century but also in the first half of the 20th century. Besides being called calisthenics, they were sometimes referred to as gymnastics, free exercise, drill or physical training. Though no longer a mainstream component of education, calisthenics once were an integral part of the school day of yesteryear.