

Miss Ely Has Visitors: 1894

By Larry Kidder

Prologue:

In 1894 two state laws went into effect in New Jersey that changed the nature of public education in dramatic and far reaching ways. Long years of local community control of education ended when all rural schools came under the control of their township board of education and townships were required to provide free text books to pupils. The township board of education in Hopewell Township had the task of learning about the schools that were now under its authority and had to find ways to assess them and keep contact with them. One way was to have board members personally visit the schools.

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Miss Rebecca S. Ely, known as Reba, was a bit nervous in anticipation of the day's events. It was a Tuesday, December 18, 1894 and she had been working hard all fall to establish herself as the new teacher at the Pleasant Valley School. Now, she was going to be visited during the day by members of the township board of education to inspect her school and it was less than a week before the Christmas break that her students were eagerly anticipating. She had been preparing her students for the board visit, but she didn't know how they would act when the visitors came.

The school year that began in September 1894 was the first in which the township school board had control of rural schools like Pleasant Valley. Previously, each rural district had been under the control of its local residents who chose a small board of trustees from among themselves to operate all aspects of the school. The schoolhouse where Miss Ely taught had been funded and built by the Pleasant Valley community five years earlier. Ownership had been transferred to the township over the previous summer. The idea of putting the local rural schools under their township was part of an effort to standardize and improve education by providing a broader look at education. The Hopewell board did not completely get on board with that expansive idea. In mid-July the board appointed several committees. Each was to look after a group of schools in the township and three men were chosen as the committee to look after the Bear, Pleasant Valley, Harbourton, and Titusville schools. The men chosen for each committee often had ties to the areas of the township in which their schools were located so this somewhat defeated the purpose of consolidation. One of their duties was to recommend teachers for each school and at the July 30th meeting of the board the committee recommended Miss Reba S. Ely for Pleasant Valley. She was then appointed by the full board. At the same meeting the salary for teachers in the rural schools was set at \$30.00 per month.



This photo from the mid-1890s may well show Miss Ely and her students. If it is not Miss Ely, it is definitely her students and the schoolhouse as it was during her tenure. Note the horse shed behind the school that was used by the board of education visitors to tie up their horses during the visit.

This was a bit low since the last teacher at Pleasant Valley under local community management, Belle Carkhuff, had been making a little over \$33.00. The school board was still feeling its way along in administering the rural schools and at its next meeting increased the salary for Miss Ely to \$33.33.

Miss Ely had good reason to be nervous. She had just turned 18 in June and been hired in July, even though she did not have the required certification. She had made the trek to Trenton in early October, about a month after she began teaching, to take the county exam for Third Grade teacher certification and had passed. A Third Grade certificate allowed her to teach in any school in the county up through 8th grade, including multi-grade schools such as the one-room Pleasant Valley School. Since certification was supposed to be a requirement for appointment, the Hopewell Board must have had great confidence in her to hire her before she took the certification exam since not everyone passed. Reba and her family were known in the township and this may have been a help. Even though she was born in Bucks County, Reba's family had moved to Pennington by 1893 where her father, Elwood Ely, a former carriage painter and farmer, was a partner in the Ely Brothers grocery store. Her older sister, Elma, taught in one of the Pennington schools. So now, Miss Reba Ely would be evaluated after less than four months of teaching, by herself, in the one-room school. What would the board be looking for? What should she be prepared for? Since this was a whole new process for the township, no one could tell her what to expect from the visit.

One of her big concerns was how her students would perform. There were just 30 children in the district between the school eligible ages of 5 and 20; 19 boys and 11 girls. The ages of the children were such that 12 students were of appropriate age for grades one to four and 18 for grades five to eight. However, not all eligible children even enrolled in school and on any given day only about 12 students, scattered though all eight grades, were present. None of the students had perfect attendance or punctuality and on an average day at least one student was late to school. There were a couple of core families whose children were present most of the time and these were the students Miss Ely was relying on to make a good impression. These children included: Willie Atchley; Willie Blackwell (future State Senator William H. Blackwell); Amos and Ella Good; Wilmer Hunter; Cynthia and Laura Johnson; Florence LaRowe; Anna and Mellie Leigh; Hugh, James, and Samuel Parkhill; Clarence and Richard Smith; and, Cornelia Wambaugh. The Pleasant Valley community included parts of both Hopewell and West Amwell townships and while most of the students were from the Hopewell part of Pleasant Valley, several of the regular attendees, including Anna, Mellie, and Cornelia, were from West Amwell and paid tuition to come to school in Pleasant Valley.

Certainly the board's visit would be to check on Miss Ely as a teacher, but it was also to check on the schoolhouse itself. Since taking charge of the school, the board had done several things to ensure the schoolhouse was in good shape. Just before the school opened in September, Pleasant Valley farmer Thomas Wambaugh of West Amwell and father of Pleasant Valley student Cornelia, was paid \$2.50 to clean the schoolhouse and Miss Carkhuff, the previous teacher, was authorized to purchase some books for the school library using money she and her students had raised the previous year. And, just recently, in early December, J.W. Crook was paid for work he had done on the heating stove at the school in November.

Since this was the first inspection tour, all members of the school board were present when the day began at the crossroads neighborhood of Woodsville. After inspecting the Woodsville School the group traveled in their horse drawn carriages along the dirt roads to the Harbourton School and then to Pleasant Valley. When they arrived they drove around behind the school and tied their horses in the stalls of the horse shed built by the community for use when they came to community events at the schoolhouse. Since the board only had an hour or so at each school they probably left the horses hitched to their carriages. According to the report of the board, published in the *Hopewell Herald* two days later, everything was found to be satisfactory - or - pleasant.

This place and school is truthfully named; a more pleasant school is hard to find and a more pleasant situation likewise hard to find. The teacher, Miss Reba Ely, can be classed in the pleasant class also; the scholars' orderly and attentive, marching in at the tap of the bell with the precision and drill of soldiers, and in justice to teacher and scholars it was agreed by all that there seemed to be a place for everything and everything in its place. The visit to this school was much enjoyed and "pleasant" recollections of it will linger with the Board in years to come. Addresses were made by Mr. J.C. Reid, President, Frederick W. Seither, District Clerk, Mr. J.C. Muirheid and others.

From this description, it would seem that the board, while looking for opportunities to use the adjective "pleasant" as often as possible, was almost as interested in speaking to the pupils as in learning about the school. It must have been intimidating for the students, as well as Miss Ely, to

have a group of about a dozen distinguished strangers invade their school and talk at them from the raised platform at the front of the classroom while they remained still in their seats and everyone tried to stay warm with the uncertain heat given off by the wood burning stove in the middle of the classroom. Note that the priorities of the board seemed to be discipline and order rather than what the children were learning.

A primary purpose of the board visits was to assess the physical state of the school buildings. The board was interested in improving the schools and after the visitations arranged to pay for repairs and improvements. With regard to Pleasant Valley, in January 1895 J.W. Crook was paid for more work on the heat stove, installing a damper and pipe. Perhaps it hadn't been working properly when they visited. Also, the Kennedy, Dailey Company was paid for lumber for a bookcase and the bill for the books Miss Carkhuff purchased for the library from Ginn & Company was paid. Finally, Pleasant Valley farmer Joseph K. Leigh, from West Amwell and father of two Pleasant Valley students, was paid for providing the school with brooms for cleaning.

Teachers in the rural schools were normally on their own and did not experience many visitors, even though parents were encouraged to visit the schools. But, on occasion the teachers wanted visitors to come so they could show off the achievements of their students. Miss Ely was no different, and on Friday, April 26, 1895 the school again had a large group of visitors. This time it was parents of the children and members of the community who had gathered at Miss Ely's invitation for the annual Arbor Day exercises. As Miss Ely undoubtedly had hoped, Rachel Williamson reported very positively about the event in the *Hopewell Herald*. This year just one Maple tree was planted, dedicated to Rev. Samuel J. Milliken from Titusville who spoke to the assembled people. The school board clerk, Frederick Seither, who had spoken to the children back in December, spoke again at this event. Only one child, Anna Leigh, was mentioned by name as participating in a presentation, but three groups of little girls are mentioned; a group of eight, a group of four, and a group of seven. Curiously, no boys were mentioned at all.

When the school year ended in June, it was evident that in all respects, Miss Ely had passed her first year with flying colors. At its May 20, 1895 meeting the school board appointed her to continue the following year, although with no increase in pay since no teachers received a salary increase. The board also realized, perhaps from its visits to the schools, that it had been very unclear communicating to the teachers what it expected from them in addition to their teaching duties. The board decided that the district clerk would make sure that teacher contracts expressly stated the non-teaching duties of each teacher. These duties mostly related to cleaning the schools, lighting and maintaining the heating stoves, and caring for the school grounds. One senses there was some debate over whether these tasks should be the responsibility of the teachers and, if so, whether they should receive additional pay if the additional duties were going to be required. At the same meeting, the board also noted that the Pleasant Valley schoolhouse needed some repairs. It voted to take care of these repairs and also paid R. Blackwell for providing curtains for the schoolhouse.

Miss Ely was also very well accepted by the Pleasant Valley community and Rachel Williamson noted on May 23 that Miss Ely had been part of a social gathering of Pleasant Valley women at the home of Mrs. Joseph Johnson, across Valley Road from today's Howell Farm. It may be that Miss Ely was boarding with the Johnson's who had several daughters at her school. The school year ended on June 7, earlier than usual, due to the fact that the board had run out of money for the year, having incurred higher expenses than expected. This may well have been due to the other part of the

law that put the schools under township control. This law required school districts to provide free textbooks to students, presumably uniform throughout the township. Money needed to be raised locally through a tax and a number of school districts had trouble doing this the first year. There were also lingering problems from the international economic Panic of 1893.

Miss Ely undoubtedly felt more secure when her second year at Pleasant Valley began in September 1895. She had received good reports from the school board, parents of her students, and the Pleasant Valley community in general. By January 1896 it had been over a year since the board visit and the board was getting set to visit the schools again. This year they did it after the Christmas vacation.

On January 6 the members of the school board made their second annual day of school visitations that included Pleasant Valley. The report of the visit in the *Herald* noted: "Pleasant Valley came next. Miss Ely, the teacher, received the board. This school and locality seem rightly named, as everything seems pleasant, especially at the school, where a pleasant smile seemed on each scholar's face." Whoever wrote the report for the board still couldn't resist using the word "pleasant" as often as possible. The report went on to describe a special event at the school that day, again finding many ways to use "pleasant."

A pleasant picture and easel were carried into the schoolroom, and Mr. Seither, the secretary of the board, was placed, as he remarked, in one of the most pleasant positions he had been in since being a member of the board – that of presenting the picture to Miss Ely, on behalf of her scholars, as a token of the appreciation of her efforts in the welfare of the scholars and their parents. Miss Ely was visibly moved by this token of respect and in a few well-chosen remarks thanked the scholars for their gift. Everything is progress at Pleasant Valley, and "pleasant, very pleasant," may be said of this school and the teacher's future prospects.

After this event, the rest of the year went relatively well for Miss Ely. In February, J. W. Crook had to make more stove repairs. Then in late March she took ill and missed two weeks of school. The school board was still struggling with setting policies and therefore the board had to decide whether to approve her pay for the two weeks she missed for illness during the winter. The board did approve to pay her, although not until June. At that time the board also reappointed her and raised her salary for the next year to \$37.50. Shortly after, Rachel Williamson took the opportunity to write in her column: "We are glad to learn that Miss Reba S. Ely is coming back to the Valley as teacher in the public school for another year. She is of a genial social nature and a pleasant addition to our neighborhood."

However, in spite of having made such a positive impression on both the school board and her community, Miss Ely decided to give up her teaching career so she could marry John C. Hoff of Titusville. She maintained some social contacts in the Valley from her new home in nearby Titusville, but she was no longer the teacher. Her two years as an eighteen and nineteen year old rookie teacher had been highly successful and helped the school make a smooth transition from local to township control. She had impressed everyone who visited her school but she had been in a very tight spot as the first teacher that the Pleasant Valley people had not chosen for themselves. Her success went a long way towards helping the people of Pleasant Valley find township control less distasteful. So, her success was not just her own; it also contributed to the success of the township's new board of education and the state's 1894 education laws.

Epilogue:

One would hope that the story of this young woman who had done so well as teacher for Pleasant Valley for two years under the new township supervision system would have a fairytale ending, of the “they lived happily ever after” variety. Unfortunately, this was not to be the case. On April 11, 1899 her family moved from Pennington back to Bucks County where Elwood went into the grocery business in Wrightstown. Her older sister Elma stayed behind for a year or so in Pennington where she boarded with the family of May Fleming, the teacher who replaced Reba at Pleasant Valley. In 1900 Elma was a 28 year old teacher and still single.

Reba’s husband, John Hoff, was twelve years her senior and in 1900 found the couple living in Titusville where John worked as a clerk for the railroad. Although married for three years, they had no children yet. On November 12, 1907 the *Trenton Evening Times* reported on a Halloween Party at the Delaware House in Titusville attended by a number of married couples and some unmarried young people. For this event she was listed as Mrs. Reba Hoff and there is no mention of John. Something was amiss and by 1910 she was apparently separated from John and living with her parents and younger sister in Washington, Pennsylvania while John was still living in Titusville. This separation continued for at least a decade and they were apparently divorced about 1917. She continued to describe herself as married in the 1920 census although John did not. So, her marriage lasted 21 years, but during most of it she lived separately from John.

John died January 8, 1926 in Titusville and in the 1930 census Reba declared herself to be a widow, rather than divorced. She kept the name Hoff and never seems to have reconciled herself to the actual state of her marriage. She never remarried nor had children of her own, but apparently she did help raise a niece, Ruth, who was the daughter of her sister Elma and her husband Lewis (Lou) K. Sickel. In a mirror image of Reba’s marriage, Elma was twelve years Lou’s senior and must have married him about 1907 or 1908 when she was about 35 years old and he was about 23. Elma and Lou built a nice home in Wycombe, Pennsylvania and established themselves there in early 1909 shortly before the birth of their twin children, Ruth and Elwood. Ten days later Elma fell down some stairs and shortly after died from the internal injuries she suffered. Lou remarried and raised Elwood, while Reba, who was childless, raised Ruth.