

# Education in Early Arizona

BY MARSHALL TRIMBLE · ARIZONA STATE HISTORIAN

Reading, writing, and arithmetic, like many other cultural conveniences, were late arriving on the Arizona frontier in the mid-1800s. The lifestyle for young people residing in the territory was not conducive to learning the 3 Rs. Some communities were so rowdy that the citizens could assume no responsibility for any pranks their offspring might choose to inflict upon the teachers. One teacher in Tombstone came home from school one day to find his house had been painted with polka dots. Another took a pistol away from a youthful cherub and angrily tossed it into the pot-bellied stove. However, she forgot to remove the cartridges and the resounding gunfire inside the stove loudly punctuated her oversight.



Funds were not always available for schools, and the teachers had to make use of whatever materials and structures were at hand. Josephine Brawley Hughes opened the first public school for girls in Tucson in an old brewery, while Mary Elizabeth Post taught pupils at Yuma in a three-room adobe building that had formerly served as the city jail. Graffiti scratched on the walls gave mute testimony to the characters and interests of the previous occupants, along with serving to broaden the educational horizons of the pupils.

One of the most articulate of the early educators was a former soldier named John Spring. He arrived with the Army in 1866 and decided to stay when his enlistment was up. His teaching career began in an adobe structure with a dirt floor that frequently had to be sprinkled with water to hold down the dust. The parents, in anticipation of future need, brought him a supply of ash flogging sticks. School opened with 138 students in one class, ranging in age from 6 to 21. Only a small few spoke English.

A teacher usually wouldn't be hired if they couldn't pass the qualification exam. That wasn't always the case, though. In Florence, an applicant was hired anyway, as the board member confessed he couldn't pass it either.

In his last message to the ninth legislature in 1877, Governor Safford, today known as the Father of the Arizona Public Schools, was pleased to report much progress in educating the territory's youth. He said that about half of the nearly 3,000 children of school age in Arizona had learned to read and write. ■



*He has been called a cowboy singer, a humorist, and a storyteller, and is Arizona's official state historian, but Marshall Trimble's most treasured title is teacher. He hopes people will realize the importance and fun involved in Arizona history and culture. If you have a question about Arizona's history, e-mail [marshall@northvalleymagazine.com](mailto:marshall@northvalleymagazine.com) and you may find your answer in the next issue!*