

# The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom.  
Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.



Volume II

Lesson Eighty-Eight

## William Holmes McGuffey

### LESSON IDEA

To meet the man who wrote the *McGuffey's Readers*; and to see how his parents, his own family, and the events of his life influenced the production of the most popular textbooks in our history.

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**A**NNA HOLMES of Washington, Pennsylvania, was twenty-one years old when she married Alexander "Sandy" McGuffey, frontiersman. She was twenty-five and had three children when she followed her husband into the Ohio wilderness to pioneer a farm near Youngstown.

In every way Anna was an extraordinary frontier woman. From her Irish ancestors she inherited a warm heart, alive to beauty, poetry, and music. She was deeply pious — not with the "show religion" reserved for church on Sunday, but with the "down-on-the-knees" seven-days-a-week kind. When the roof caved in or the crops failed or the children had the fever, Anna took the problem to the doors of Heaven, confident that her Divine Father would deal with it. And she was as practical as she was pious and poetic. She believed in "book learnin'."

"No matter what came or went, nor how the housework piled up," wrote Alice McGuffey Ruggles, a great-granddaughter, "in season and out, Anna took time to give her children their first lessons in reading and ciphering, usually at night. In winter, by the dim light of a pine chip or the flickering fire, the children might be limp with sleepiness, but not Anna. Teaching waked her up. She loved to explain and exhort. The letters and

figures drawn in the clean ashes must be erased a score of times until they were absolutely perfect."

Anna taught them all she knew — which was little enough — and then looked for a schoolmaster who could take up where she left off. She was particularly concerned about William, her oldest son, who seemed so anxious to learn everything about anything. His memory was prodigious. He needed to read a sentence or a paragraph only once to know it by heart. His mind was keen, and Anna determined that none of its gifts should be wasted.

**T**HE ANSWER to the problem of "more learnin'" came from the Reverend Mr. Wick, a Presbyterian minister who was well-educated and enterprising enough to open a small school in Youngstown. It was here that William and his older sister, Jane, learned to "speak proper" — to say *cow*, not *ke-ow*; *catch*, not *ketch*; *creature*, not *critter*. William, in particular, impressed the clergyman; and the older scholar lent the younger one all the books he owned — and then helped him find others to borrow.

McGuffey, in turn, memorized the important passages from his borrowed treasures and promptly returned them. Not that he set any particular value on memorizing for its own sake. He did it because, once a passage was memorized, it was as good as having the printed page to study. Then the author's ideas could be turned over critically, pushed from side to side, and poked for weak spots.

William studied with Mr. Wick until he was fifteen or sixteen (the records are not clear), then decided to become a teacher himself. Since there were no organized schools to which he could apply for a job, he roamed the woods and settlements looking for frontier families who were willing to pay to have their children taught "readin' and writin'." When a sufficient number were found, he set up school in a nearby cabin or smokehouse and taught as long as parental interest and money held out.

Frontier teaching under these conditions was definitely not for the weak or the meek. William's broad shoulders and tough muscles did as much to bring a cabinful of wild and unruly children into line as did his keen mind. The known troublemakers he thrashed soundly at the beginning of the term — if they were boys. The girls he subdued by glowering at them. If that failed, he expelled them. In short, McGuffey's discipline was strict. But his lessons were clear and interesting. Parents respected him, and the children liked him. "He was so terribly in earnest about their learning," wrote Alice Ruggles. "His most marked trait was his concentration. He had set his mind on certain definite goals for a career, and he never swerved from them. He was sincerely religious and, unknown to anyone but his mother, had determined to become a Presbyterian minister. But his aims went far beyond a country parish. He meant to educate as well as preach. . . . On his travels a passionate desire had been rising in his heart as he observed the ignorance and mental vacancy of the backwoods people. Crowded ten or twelve in a cabin, they were yet lonely and hungry for something beyond their daily grind. They needed books and teaching, something to feed their souls. William resolved to help them."

#### FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

One of the little known facts of McGuffey history is that the *Fifth* and *Sixth Readers* were authored by William's younger brother Alexander. In 1841 Alexander, a brilliant scholar and lawyer known for his cultivated taste in literature, was asked to prepare an advanced *Reader* to introduce frontier children to the beauties of literature. More of this story and of William's later career are contained in two books we recommend: *The Story Of The McGuffeys* by Alice McGuffey Ruggles, and *William Holmes McGuffey And His Readers* by Harvey C. Minnich.

**B**UT FIRST he needed more schooling himself — college training, perhaps. Money to pay for more schooling was the big stumbling block. He had none of his own, and his father had none to give him. The lack of "ways and means" discouraged everyone except his mother. Didn't the Bible say, "Ask and it shall be given unto you?" Yes, of course it did. So Anna marched off to her garden, a favorite prayer spot, and asked and asked and asked again. Her prayers were answered in a startling fashion by the Reverend Thomas E. Hughes, President of Greensburg Academy.

Mr. Hughes had been travelling in Ohio, seeking scholars for his Academy, when he passed Anna's garden and overheard her prayer. The next morning he visited the anxious mother with an offer to waive William's tuition and let the young teacher earn his board and keep by "choring" for the Hughes. Can you guess what "choring" means? Have you ever had prayers answered in this way? [*Encourage family discussion.*]

"Choring" meant doing every necessary chore from shoveling coal to carrying wood and water, to digging a garden, to fashioning furniture. William did all of these in exchange for his bed and three meals that never varied. Breakfast was coffee, bread, and butter; dinner was bread, meat, and fruit "sauce;" supper was bread and milk. Sometimes his father sent a barrel of apples. But William never received any pay or even an allowance. He did not have a penny to call his own, but he was accomplishing his purpose — he was learning.

By 1820 McGuffey felt qualified to apply for the job of schoolmaster in Warren, Ohio. It was time to interrupt his learning with some earning, he thought. Unfortunately, two of the Warren town fathers, who were graduates of Yale, asked questions that were far beyond his limited education as well as the school's needs. The rejection by the Yale men was a bitter disappointment, but one that fired McGuffey's determination never again to be found wanting in education. He resolved to get a thorough grounding in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, ancient history, and philosophy before he attempted anything else. Thus it was that he became a student at Washington College in Pennsylvania, paying for books and tuition by interrupting his studies, whenever necessary, to teach frontier children their three R's (reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic).

