

THE ORIGIN OF RICKS COLLEGE

Thomas E. Ricks Family

Organization

1968

David O. McKay Library



Donated by: Elder
Mark G. Ricks
Regional Representative
of the Twelve.
February 13, 1978

THE ORIGIN OF RICKS COLLEGE,
Thomas E. Ricks Family Organization,
1968

The Origin of Ricks College

The founding and continuation of the Bannock Stake Academy, later named Ricks College, is a story bordering on the miraculous. The beautiful multi-buildinged campus which now stands enshrined upon the hill was at one time a vision in the mind of a great pioneer colonizer, Thomas E. Ricks. Many others have contributed genius, time, money, and infinite patience in making this dream into the present reality. However, the purpose of this short epistle to the family is to set down authentically the origin of Ricks College that we may realize the richness of our heritage as it blends into the pioneer beginning of the Upper Snake River Valley in Idaho territory.

Shortly after the founding of Rexburg by a hardy band of Utah pioneers, the Territorial Legislature passed the infamous "Test Oath Act" which disfranchised every member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints because they taught the doctrine of "Celestial Marriage" - not only did this act deprive them of the vote but of every right of citizenship except paying taxes. They could not teach school, hold any office of public trust, serve on a jury or enjoy any other right of citizenship. Under these circumstances, it is only natural that the settlers of the valley should turn to a private system of education as they were strong believers in training their children. At the Quarterly Conference in the new Bannock Stake held in Rexburg, April, 1884, President Thomas E. Ricks said, "We must educate our children as there are important positions awaiting them." Accordingly, a Board of Education was organized consisting of the Stake Presidency (President Thomas E. Ricks, First Counselor William F. Rigby, Second Counselor Francis C. Gunnell) and James E. Fogg and Andrew S. Anderson. The Stake Clerk, Thomas E. Bassett, was the first teacher of a tuition school, under the direction of this board, Later, Mrs. Sarah Ann Barnes taught the school. This arrangement was not satisfactory to President Ricks and at the July Conference in 1888 he recommended organizing a new Stake Board of

Education with the objective of providing a more satisfactory school program for the valley. Correspondence from Church headquarters encouraged this action and in keeping with instructions to all Stakes in Idaho, the Priesthood meeting of August 17, 1888, selected a Board of Education which was sustained the following day at the quarterly conference in Lewisville. This Board consisted of:

1. Thomas E. Ricks - Rexburg-President
2. James E. Fogg - Rexburg
3. William F. Rigby - Rexburg
4. Jacob Spori - Rexburg-Secretary
5. John Donaldson - Teton
6. W. M. Parker - Parker
7. Richard Jardine - Lewisville
8. James E. Steele - Iona"¹

At the first Board meeting held August 18, 1888, at Lewisville, Apostle Lorenzo Snow was present and reported: "1. Karl G. Maeser had been appointed superintendent of church schools. 2. All new church academies should be patterned after the B.Y.U. at Provo. 3. If an Academy should be established in a stake, the Church would pay the salary of the principal. 4. He felt that a Bannock Stake Academy should be started."²

Events moved rapidly during the following weeks as school time was approaching. Thomas E. Ricks called a meeting of the executive committee of the Board on Sept. 9, 1888, at Rexburg, at which time the First Ward meeting house was accepted as the temporary home for the new school. The Committee authorized President Ricks to contact the Church Board at Salt Lake and secure a principal and solicit church support for the academy.

On September 16, 1888, the Board met and made plans to "canvass the Stake for means to 'fit up' the meeting house for the use of the Academy".³ At this meeting, President Ricks reported that he had written several firms for the price of desks and "that Rexburg had already donated \$186.10 cash, forty bushels of wheat, and two steers."⁴ President Ricks was then authorized to go to Salt Lake to confer with

the Church Board of Education concerning a principal and purchasing desks.

After reaching Salt Lake where he conferred with the Board and Superintendent Maeser, he sent a letter to the members of the Executive Committee at Rexburg saying: "1. He could get good substantial desks at \$40.00 per dozen, and he had ordered three dozen. 2. He and Superintendent Maeser had decided that Jacob Spori of Rexburg should be the principal of the school. 3. It was decided that Brother Spori go to Provo to confer with Brother Maeser, and prepare for his new job as principal of the Academy. 4. Arrangements were made for carpenters to start work on the remodeling of the meeting house as soon as lumber was available. 5. Investigation was to be made for securing lime for plastering. 6. Brother Spori was to leave for Provo October 1st. to prepare for the opening of the Academy. 7. There were to be three departments in the new Academy: (a.) Primary (b.) Preparatory (c.) Intermediate. 8. Tuition for the first term of ten weeks was to be as follows: (a.) Primary grade - \$2.00 (b.) Preparatory grade - \$3.00 (c.) Intermediate grade - \$4.00.⁵

Hyrum Manwaring writes of the decision to select Jacob Spori the first principal: "Jacob Spori seemed to be just a common pioneer of Rexburg struggling to establish a home, and help conquer the stubborn elements of the newly possessed sage brush flat where a city was to be built. He was eager to lend his help in the social, religious and economic problems of this new community. He was surprised and almost shocked when he was chosen to be the first principal of the new Bannock Stake Academy."⁶

In The History of Jacob Spori by Elizabeth S. Stowell, his daughter, is recorded: "The Spori family consisting of Elder Spori, his wife and his sister Anna Clara and the three children, Jacob, Magdolena and Louise, left Berne, Switzerland, for America, coming directly to Rexburg, Idaho, arriving on June 20, 1888. There were few houses and none of them empty, so the family moved into the granary of Henry Flamm across the street from Thomas E. Ricks,

where on July 6, their fifth child, Elizabeth, was born."⁷ Brother Spori's misgivings came not from lack of academic training but, reading between the lines, from uncertainty in the English language. He spoke several languages rather well but his age when exposed to English gave him a very heavy brogue.

The day for opening the new Academy dawned November 12, 1888. At the First Ward Meeting House were gathered many Pioneers of the valley. Under the direction of President Thomas E. Ricks, a short service was held, at which short talks were delivered by William F. Rigby and Jacob Spori. President Ricks then offered the dedicatory prayer and the school was officially opened as the Bannock Stake Academy.⁸ Many of the written accounts state that Karl G. Maeser was at the opening, but it seems strange that no mention is made of it in the official minutes of the meeting. Surely if Brother Maeser had been present, he would have spoken, but his name is not recorded; therefore, I believe he was not present, but because he was in charge of all church schools and had been consulted before the organization, that later authors have interpreted this to mean he was there.

The school was taught in three departments as indicated in the correspondence above, with Jacob Spori in charge of the older children, Axel Neilsen in charge of the preparatory group, and Sara Ann Barnes teacher of the Primary group. The children had many deficiencies to overcome before they were prepared for the excellent instruction which Brother Spori was prepared to give them. It is not entirely clear whether it was disappointment over the quality of scholarship, financial hardships or other causes which brought Jacob Spori to leave the young Academy after three years, but we find the following notation: "At a meeting of the Board of Education held July 23, 1891, Jacob Spori resigned as principal of the Academy. He had successfully conducted the school through the storm and stress of its first three years. He has always been highly honored as the first principal of Ricks College, and the first great educator of the Upper Snake River Valley. He outlined

the school program, and initiated the policies that have been followed by all principals and presidents since his time."⁹

Just prior to this resignation, the Board had been reorganized after the death of James E. Fogg. John F. Smellie had been placed on the Board and given the job of Secretary and Treasurer. I find no relationship between this event and Brother Spori's resignation. However, it seems sad that the first principal should have left so soon after the school's weak beginning. The strong belief of the valley leaders buoyed up the school and continued the vision of the founders through many vicissitudes which followed. By reading the minutes of all Board of Education meetings for several years, it appears that the small salary often paid in kind had something to do with Jacob Spori's resignation. The older boys were often very rude mostly because of the language difficulty. Probably the real reason for his resignation was that his wife inherited several thousand dollars in 1890 and they decided to invest in the agricultural developments of the area. He continued to be a member of the Board of Education until June 5, 1895, though his attendance was very irregular during those years.¹⁰ His ventures in mining and agriculture took him to many parts of Idaho where he often taught school during the winter months. In fact, he taught school on Friday, September 25, 1903, and died two days later on Sunday.

In 1895-96 the old Bannock Stake was divided with the south half becoming Bingham Stake and the north half Fremont Stake. The Academy was renamed and a new Board of Education selected. Again, Thomas E. Ricks was selected as Chairman of the Board and Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Board. So that he directed the school from 1888 until his death in 1901 as Chairman of the Board of Education. His great contribution after the initial founding of the school, was a wise selection of principals, encouraging continuation, and in helping raise the funds necessary to continue a school under pioneer circumstances. In his lifetime President Ricks supervised and directed the administration of four Principals; Jacob Spori, C. N. Watkins, George Cole, and D.M. Todd.

Following President Ricks' death, Thomas E. Bassett became Stake President and Chairman of the Board of Education. "At the first meeting of the new Board, held January 26, 1902, the name of the Academy was changed from the 'Fremont Stake Academy' to 'Ricks Academy' in honor of its founder, President Thomas E. Ricks."¹¹ Other changes have always retained the Ricks name. (1917, Ricks Normal College and 1923, Ricks College) Today this wonderful educational institution stands as a challenge to the family to continue the greatness of Grandfather Thomas E. Ricks.

President Hyrum Manwaring in recording the Death of President Thomas E. Ricks said, "Thomas E. Ricks, the founder of the Academy, and President of its Board of Education died. This was a definite loss to the Academy. By his foresight and untiring support in developing the school through all its difficult struggles, he had immortalized his name in the annals of the school's history. He died feeling sure that the future of the school was secure and its work put on a high standard."¹²

Today (1968) under the inspired and benevolent leadership of President John L. Clarke, the campus is literally sprouting new buildings. President Harvey L. Taylor and the Church Board of Education are most generous in providing means for this modern expansion. Rexburg receives several hundred additional students each year as the school expands. But the world receives greatest benefit of all as the graduates from this great institution spread its spirit of Faith in God and self-reliance into all parts of the United States and into many foreign nations.

REFERENCES

- ¹from RICKS COLLEGE, A HISTORY OF FIFTY SIX YEARS 1888-1944 by Hyrum Manwaring
- ²IBID
- ³IBID
- ⁴IBID
- ⁵IBID
- ⁶IBID
- ⁷from THE HISTORY OF JACOB SPORI by Elizabeth S. Stowell on November 16, 1926
- ⁸from Bannock Stake Record Pp. 282-283
- ⁹from RICKS COLLEGE, A HISTORY OF FIFTY SIX YEARS 1888-1944 by Hyrum Manwaring
- ¹⁰Minutes of Board of Education (In archives at Ricks College)
- ¹¹Manwaring op.cit.
- ¹²IBID