

SEGUIN

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One of the pleasures of a local historian is grazing through old, regional newspapers, interesting things pop up. It was on just such an excursion to our public library that I came across a short item on page 40 of the Cincinnati Post and Times Star of 20 January 1961.

The article announced:

"The Cincinnati Board of Education will take action Monday on the bids on the sale of two old schools and two old school sites. The high bidders in the auction held Wednesday were: Cincinnati Time Recorder Co., \$17,500.00 for the Seguin School, 528 Findlay Street, for a parking lot" [1]

Obviously, the editor did not consider this a particularly news-worthy item since it was buried on the back pages of the paper.

I, on the other hand, was curious about the Seguin School and did a bit of research on it. I learned that the building on Findlay Street had been vacated in 1959. Prior to that time, it had served as a school for retarded children, grades one through nine. It was in fact, in 1916 that the Board of Education established its first school for mentally defective children at the Findlay Avenue site.

The Seguin School was a three story red brick building without central heating that had been built in 1867. During its peak year, it had served some five hundred students in its classrooms, each with its own coal burning stove, lovingly tended by the school janitor who seemed to have been there as long as the building, itself.

Miss Emma Kohnky became principal of the newly established school and some twenty years later, in response to recommendations made by the School Survey Sponsoring Committee of the Cincinnati Public Schools in 1936, [2] became supervisor of all classes for the mentally retarded in the city. She was one of three Kohnky sisters (Frances and Irene were the other two) - maiden ladies, all - who devoted their lives to the Cincinnati school system. Working with Cincinnati's Dr. Louis A. Lurie an American pioneer in child psychiatry, and others interested in the retarded child, the bases of current educational practices for the mentally retarded were established in our public school system. It was at the urging of Miss Kohnky that the school, originally called "Special #3" was renamed The Seguin School.

But who or what was Seguin?

The answer to that question led me to a forest in southern France in the year 1799. In mid-winter of that year, a boy, some twelve or thirteen years of age, had clambered out of the forest and

entered a farmhouse on the edge of the village. The naked boy had first been sighted two years earlier, in 1797, running through the woods searching for acorns and roots. The following year, he was captured by some woodsmen and put on display in the public square. However, he soon escaped. In the summer of 1799 he was again captured and, on this occasion, given over to an old widow who apparently devoted herself to the boy. She housed him, dressed him in a simple gown, offered him a variety of food, and, most importantly, caring. Except for acorns, chestnuts, walnuts and potatoes, he refused all her offerings.

In spite of the kindness and attention that he received, he soon escaped again.

This time, he did not head back to the woods, but took off for the broad plateau between Lacaune and Roqueceziere in the department of Aveyron. He was more visible to the folks of the area in this more exposed region. He was noted to wander from farm to farm and place to place, avoiding human contact as much as possible, although he would take handouts of food, on occasion. During the day he swam and drank from streams, climbed trees, dug for roots and bulbs, frequently ran with amazing speed on all fours and often wailed or laughed loudly to the skies.

At 7:00 am on the morning of January 8, 1800, he appeared at the doorway of the workshop of a local dyer, Vidal. Bitter cold of that winter, the worst in recent memory, had apparently driven him into society. He was named the "Wild Boy of Aveyron".

Disheveled and dirty, his body, covered with numerous scars, was well tanned from exposure. He seldom walked; rather he trotted and showed remarkable endurance. When seated, he displayed spasmodic movements, constantly rocked from side to side and muttered in a low guttural fashion. His sensory apparatus seemed highly attuned. He ate nothing without first sniffing it. He bit and scratched when anyone opposed him. When frustrated he shut his eyes and banged his head. In general, however, he showed no emotion toward others, although when spoken to softly and stroked he seemed to enjoy it. He was inattentive to things around him if they did not bring him physical pleasure or pain. The sound of a walnut being cracked immediately aroused his attention. A dog barking or a door opening produced arousal. But someone speaking to him or music being played produced no reaction what-so-ever. He was instantly attracted to bright, glittering objects and the warmth of a fire caused him to shake his hands in apparent joy. He would roar with pleasure and move as close to the fire as possible, in order to warm himself. He uttered sounds, but spoke nothing intelligible.

On the day following his appearance at Vidal's house, he was sent to an orphanage at Saint-Affrique. Twice he escaped, twice he was recaptured. Word of the boy spread rapidly through the Republic. Interest, both popular and scientific was aroused. Although feral children had been

described previously, they are a rarity that evokes high levels of curiosity as well as a variety of myths. I need only to cite Romulus and Remus or Kipling's Mowgli or Edgar Rice Burroughs' Tarzan to demonstrate the popular fascination. In actual fact, according to Rousseau, there were some five documented cases of feral children prior to the Wild Boy: the wolf child of Hesse (discovered in 1344); the wolf child of Lithuania (1694); two children found in the Pyrenees in 1719; and the wild child, Peter of Hanover, 1724.

After the usual bureaucratic delays, attempts to identify his origins - which failed - and struggles between a variety of individuals claiming prerogatives, by order of Lucien Bonaparte, Minister of the Interior, and brother of Napoleon, the Wild Boy of Aveyron was transferred on 20 July 1800 from the south of France to the school for deaf-mutes under the leadership of Abbe Roche-Ambroise Sicard in Paris. After delays along the route because the boy contracted small pox, he arrived in the French capital on 7 August 1800. Sicard met with frustration. Unlike any other pupil - Sicard's patients were deaf mutes from urban communities - the Wild Boy frustrated all attempts to engage or instruct him. "Still", to quote Harlan Lane, "the Institute and its celebrated director had contracted an obligation - to the boy—and, one would add, to the government" [3]

Thus it came to pass that on 31 December 1800, Sicard created the post of resident physician at the Institute and turned the treatment of the Wild Boy over to Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard, a twenty-six year old physician who was appointed to the post. In spite of all the pessimism of his colleagues, both at the Institute and throughout the city, Itard enthusiastically accepted the challenge. The difference of opinion centered on the diagnosis. Was the boy a congenital idiot? Or was the appearance of idiocy, that is, mental deficiency, secondary to the boy's isolation from human contact? Most observers, including Itard's former teacher, Phillipe Pinel, diagnosed congenital idiocy.

Pinel, one of the great figures in the history of psychiatry, credited with striking the chains from off the mentally ill; author of *A Treatise on Insanity*, which introduced moral treatment of the insane into medical practice; and director of the Salpetriere which became the center for training and research in mental disease during the nineteenth century, was one of a distinguished committee appointed by the Society of Observers of Man that rendered the diagnostic opinion regarding the hopelessness of the Wild Boy's prognosis.

Undaunted by all of this weighty opinion, Itard believed that it was the boy's lack of language which led to his condition, an idiocy that could be remedied, if he could be taught language skills. Itard's therapeutic goals were ambitious: He wanted to improve the boy's social skills, develop his sensibility, extend his range of interests and ideas, teach him to speak, and develop cognitive and

problem solving ability. Although these goals were well formulated, Itard, wisely, began slowly. He attempted to engage the boy, now called Victor.

He was taken into his home. He began by "meeting Victor where he was", so to speak; that is, Victor initially set the pace. He was permitted to continue his daily routine as he knew it. Only gradually was he introduced to changes in his personal and social activity. He was engaged through the modes familiar to the boy; touch, taste and smell. Through trial and error, Itard began using techniques of reward and punishment, including what we now call positive and negative reinforcement.

A brief account of some of their encounters, in Itard's own hand, may enliven this narrative and give something of the flavor of the task that confronted him and Itard's attempts at solution:

"I have given him toys of all kinds one after another; more than once have I tried for hours on end to teach him how to use them and have seen with sorrow that, far from attracting his attention, these various objects always ended by making him so impatient that he came to the point of hiding them or destroying them when the occasion presented itself. Thus, one day when he was alone in his room, he took it upon himself to throw into the fire a game of ninepins with which we had pestered him and which he had hidden in the night commode, and he was found gaily warming himself before the bonfire" [4]

And again:

"I placed before him without any symmetrical order, and upside down, several little silver cups, under one of which I put a chestnut. Quite sure of having attracted his attention, I raised them one after the other except the one that covered the nut. After having thus shown him that they contained nothing, and having replaced them in the same order, I invited him by signs to seek in his turn for the chestnut. (Itard was playing the old shell game with Victor, in a new way) The first cup that he chose was precisely the one under which I had hidden the little reward for his attentiveness. Thus far, he showed only a feeble effort of memory. But I made the game imperceptibly more complicated. Thus after having hidden another chestnut by the same procedure I changed the order of all the cups, slowly, however, so that in this general inversion he was able, although with difficulty, to follow with his eyes and with his attention the one that hid the precious object." [5]

Itard and Victor, student and teacher, continued their labors together for four-and-a-half years - from 1801 to mid-1806. By the conclusion of that period, Victor had learned to write using adjectives, verbs and nouns properly. Expression of emotion appeared normal and he began to show the troubled sexuality of adolescence. However, similar to other reports of feral children, he remained mute until his death in 1828. The story of Victor inspired three novels,

two poems, three plays, a Truffant play, and a rock hit, "Wild Child".

Victor learned much from Itard; Itard, without question, learned more from Victor. He applied them to his work with deaf mutes. In 1808, his methods of teaching the deaf to speak were acclaimed by the Society of the Faculty of Medicine in Paris. His methods became part of the regular educational practices of the National Institute for Deaf Mutes where Itard remained as medical director until his death in 1838.

In 1837, shortly before his death, Itard was consulted by the director of a children's hospital of Paris. He had a young boy at the hospital, diagnosed as an idiot. Would Itard enter him into his program of training? In declining health, Itard demurred. "If I were younger", Itard replied, "I would undertake his care, but send me someone suitable and I will direct his efforts." [6] After some consultation and discussion, a young, twenty-five year old former student of Itard, was selected. His name was Edouard Seguin.

The Post and Times Star news item of January 20, 1961 with which this paper began coincides with Seguin's birth date, 149 years earlier on January 20 in 1812. His life all but spanned the 19th century - he died on October 31, 1880.

To quote Zilboorg, the nineteenth century "was a century teeming with activity, controversy and enthusiasm". [7] Out of the turmoil of political revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and the economic upheavals of the Industrial Revolution, the Western world became the stage for dramatic progress. In all areas of human endeavor - basic science, technology, natural science, philosophy, the other humanities - a surge of fruitful activity was unfolding. For the medical historian, it was the century that saw the emergence of modern medicine. One need only to recall such names as Johannes Muller, Sir Charles Bell, Claude Bernard, John Hughlings Jackson, Jean Marie Charcot, Rudolph Virchow, Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch.

The medical psychologist was ranging over the entire field of behavioral disorders - organic syndromes, the psychoses and the neuroses. The mentally defective, however, were largely neglected. These handicapped children, considered hopeless, were provided with little more than custodial care. To quote from the eulogy of George Savage:

"The name of Edouard Seguin will long be pre-eminent amongst those who, to use the forcible expression of Esquirol, have labored to remove the "mark of the beast" from the forehead of the idiot. Forty years and more have passed since the world awoke to a sense of duty towards these waifs and strays of humanity; and during these forty years the spirit of Seguin would seem, in one way or another, to have animated the work on both sides of the Atlantic". [8]

Seguin, a native of Clamecy, France, took his higher education at Auxerre and St. Louis. It is

unclear whether Seguin's primary training was in education, physiology, or some allied field. His wife described him as a modest, almost shy man, dedicated to his work with defective children and his interest in the arts. In addition to devoting himself to reading poetry and the classics, he also composed verse and was an ardent amateur painter.

His efforts with this first patient, under Itard's tutelage and methodology met with success. By 1839 Seguin opened a private school for the education of the mentally retarded, the first ever to be founded. In 1841, Seguin opened a second school, this one public, at the Salpêtrière; and, a year later, in 1842, a portion of the Bicêtre, another of several public hospitals in Paris, was set apart for the instruction of "idiots", and Seguin was appointed its first director. Educators, including George Sumner, an American pioneer in the education of the mentally defective, were attracted from the world community because of the success of the programs. Within a few years, schools for idiots, based on Seguin's methods were established in England and on the Continent.

Seguin's therapeutic work with his patients rested on a functional theoretical base: "Some idiots," Seguin said, "are more afflicted in their minds, even to the verge of insanity, and others in their motor and sensory functions, even to the point of paralysis or anesthesia, but in either form their treatment must proceed more from training of the senses in order to improve the mind, than from education of the mind in view of developing the sensory aptitudes." [9]

In translating these theoretical notions to action, Seguin emphasized the following general procedures in his work:

1. The necessity to carry out the educational effort in a favorable environment.
2. The necessity for the education to be carried out by a single teacher. The single teacher, he felt, could learn more about the strengths and weaknesses of the individual student;
3. To establish a therapeutic goal which capitalizes on the intact functions of the child with a recognition of their severe limitations, as well;
4. To begin training with an emphasis on motor control, gradually increasing the complexity of the acts,
5. To provide strong stimuli to enhance the capacities of the student, e.g. he recommended exercise and used nature walks with its vivid visual, auditory and olfactory stimulation as educational procedures;
6. To individualize training but to use group as well as individual instruction;
7. To proceed from motor and sensory training to speech training;
8. To develop useful work skills; and
9. To utilize all the insights gained by Itard in his work with Victor, particularly the

award/punishment techniques .

France in the 1840's was in political upheaval. By 1848, just two years after publication of his first book describing his theories and methods, Seguin left Paris and the unrest created by Louis Napoleon's ascendancy as French emperor. He sought refuge in the United States and spent the remainder of his life as an American citizen. He helped organize classes at the State School for Idiotic Children in Waltham, Mass and collaborated with Harvey Wilbur in the training program at the Institution for Feeble-minded Youth in Barre, Mass. and at an experimental school in Albany and later Syracuse, New York. He also assisted in establishing the Pennsylvania Training School.

Did he ever come to Cincinnati? There is no evidence that he did so. However, for some ten years he was in Ohio - in Cleveland, later in Portsmouth. In 1858 he revisited France. On his return to the U.S., he settled in New York City, enrolled in New York University's College of Medicine and obtained his medical degree in 1861. Following graduation he was instrumental in establishing the Randall's Island School for Defectives in 1863. He was the principle delegate to the Vienna Conference on Education of Retarded Children in 1873; was instrumental in founding the Association of Medical Officers of American Institutions for Idiotic and Feeble-minded Persons in 1876, and served as its first president. During his lifetime, he received commendations from the French Academy of Science and Pope Pius IX. In England, the asylums at Earlewood, Colchester and Lancaster were largely patterned after Seguin's work. In the United States, his work was endorsed by Horace Mann and *George Sumner*.

By 1866, Seguin asserted that Itard's program (It was, in truth, Seguin's program of education developed from Itard's experience with Victor) was now equal to the task of training large numbers of retarded children. Indeed, he felt that the methodology could be applied, with adaptation, to education in general. That was a prophetic statement. As it turned out, this wider application of the Itard/Seguin method had to await the turn of the twentieth century before it was realized.

Human knowledge, like life itself, evolves. We stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before. Today, at least in parts of the Western World, the intellectually handicapped child has educational opportunities that are beyond the comprehension of our ancestors. Our story began with Hard and the Wild Boy of Aveyron; Seguin followed, developing methods at the Salpetriere and the Bicetre and schools in Great Britain and the United States. Locally, Ms. Emma Kohnky lovingly worked with Cincinnati's handicapped children at Special #3 that she dubbed the Seguin School. Seguin's writing was avidly read by a young Italian physician. She was the first woman graduated from an Italian Medical College. Her name: Maria Montessori. But that is another story, for another time.

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The Cincinnati Post amid Times Star, 20 January 1961, p. 40.
2. Survey Report of the Cincinnati Public Schools, U.S. Office of Education, Report No. 64, July 1935.
3. Harlan Lane, *The Wild Boy of Aveyron*, (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 53.
4. Lane, "The Wild Boy", p. 105.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
6. Lane, "The Wild Boy", p. 261.
7. Gregory Zilboorg, *A History of Medical Psychology* (New York, W.W. Norton & Co. Inc., 1941) p. 379.
8. George H. Savage, Review of funeral service, *J. Ment. Sci.*, 27: p. 421, 1881.
9. Edouard Seguin, *Idiocy and Its Treatment by the Physiological Method*. (New York, W. Wood & Co., 1866).