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Louise Pound: Scholar, Athlete, Feminist Pioneer

Robert Cochran

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Louise Pound
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Scholar, Athlete, Feminist Pioneer

Robert Cochran

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Buy the Book
To the memory of John Long
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Louise Pound
The bride arrived at Lincoln’s Atwood House hotel by stagecoach, hungry and spattered with mud, on Friday, February 12, 1869. She had traveled with her new husband for nine days, ridden a midnight mail train from Chicago to Council Bluffs when misdirected baggage made them miss the express, and entered Nebraska by walking a mile and a half across the Missouri River to Plattsmouth guided by a seventeen-year-old boy on ice so thin the stages refused to cross. “It seemed to me a long way,” she later wrote. “In many places the water stood in pools, and I would step aside only to be told peremptorily by my guide to ‘get back in line.’” With nine others in their party, she had slept the previous night in the single upstairs room of a wayside house. The bride, in short, was an intrepid and determined woman, and with such adventures behind her she was only mildly surprised to find herself, later that evening, the only woman in a crowded dining room. The state legislature, she was told, was in session (the senate, in fact, had approved a bill establishing the University of Nebraska that very day). She had not eaten since the previ-
ous afternoon, and was “too hungry,” she wrote, “to permit this fact to spoil a good dinner for me.”

Thus did Laura Biddulph Pound, an educated twenty-seven-year-old New Yorker of distinguished Quaker background, come to Nebraska. She would stay for the rest of her life. Beginning in 1876 she would spend two years as a student at the fledgling university, “perfecting herself in the German language,” among other studies. Closer attention to her written account of the hard winter journey from Rochester only confirms the initial impression of fortitude and determination. In Plattsmouth, for example, the morning after her dangerous walk across the Missouri’s ice, she is introduced to an attorney named Irving, who addresses her confidently, “Mrs. Pound, you won’t like Nebraska.” Determined to make herself clear, she replies in emphatic terms, “I have burned my bridges behind me,” an interesting choice of image in a place then distinguished by the lack of any bridge at all. In the next sentence she notes that Irving returned to the East “when the grasshoppers came,” while the Pounds, even in the hard times of the 1870s, “were still content to stay.”

When Mrs. Pound recalls the moment of her arrival in Nebraska (she got stuck in the “almost impassable” mud on the riverbank and had to be pulled out), her narrative displays both unruffled composure and a finely understated humor. Told that a group of men she had noticed seated on the bluff above the river were “waiting to see the ice break up,” she allows that “this was not very comforting information, considering that my husband was still on the Iowa side” (he had waited with their belongings on a sandbar after the driver of the wagon they had hired in Glenwood refused to go further). After some hours of anxious waiting, wondering if she would be “left a widow on the west bank of the Missouri,” Mrs. Pound was relieved to hear “the rumble of a wagon” and look out from the sitting room of the Platte Valley House to see “the rest of our party with my dignified husband perched on top of a trunk in the back of the wagon.”

The husband who shared this challenging journey with his dignity intact was Stephen Bosworth Pound, like his wife a Quaker and
a New Yorker. Eight years his wife’s senior, he was born January 14, 1833, in Farmington, a small upstate town some twenty miles west of Phelps, the even smaller village where Laura Biddlecome was born on May 14, 1841. Both attended the academy in nearby Macedon, about ten miles north of Farmington, he from 1854 to 1855, she from 1856 to 1857. From there Laura went west, to Galesburg, Illinois, where in 1860–61 she studied ancient and modern languages at Lombard College, a Universalist institution that opened its doors in the 1850s, was a hotbed of abolitionist sentiment in the years leading up to the Civil War, and closed for good in 1930. Lombard was also unusual at the time for regularly admitting female and African American students. Plus there was a family connection: “Her uncle, Reverend Daniel Read Biddlecome, was the Universalist minister in Galesburg, and Lombard College itself was a denominational school of the Universalist church.” Laura was a fine student, though she never completed her studies: “Her record there was remarkable, however, the faculty approving a plan for her to graduate after only one more year of residence. But the unsettled conditions due to the approaching Civil War caused her parents to think it unwise for her to return to Galesburg.”

Stephen Pound also had abolitionist ties in his background—the upstate New York farm of his great-grandfather Hugh Pound “was one of the important stages on the underground railroad for runaway slaves making their way to Canada.” From Macedon Academy he went east to Schenectady, where he graduated from Union College with honors in 1859 and also played on the school’s baseball team. He then came back to his home county to study law with Judge Lyman H. Sherwood in Lyons, just east of Macedon. He was admitted to the New York Bar in 1863 and worked in partnership with his mentor until Sherwood’s death in 1866. At this point he made his move. Before the year was out he was in Wisconsin, where, according to a 1909 interview, “a glowing description of Nebraska” moved him westward again. He apparently went first to Omaha, where a “big lawyer named Poppleton” (Andrew J. Poppleton, in 1866 an unsuccessful candidate
for one of Nebraska’s first U.S. Senate seats) advised him to try Nebraska City, further south along the Missouri River and then “a lively place and quite a trading point.” Though impressed, Stephen did not stay long: “a great many people had their eyes turned toward Lancaster, later called Lincoln. Though the capital had not been located there at this time, it was confidently expected that it would be, and I decided to cast my fortune there.”

The “great many people” were right on in their guesses. Lancaster, then a mostly imaginary city, was selected as the new capital in two momentous steps filled with political maneuvering and financial chicanery so egregious that impeachment proceedings against the governor eventually resulted. Political alliances in Nebraska tended to divide along the Platte River, with north-of-the-Platte Omaha, the territorial capital, opposed by a host of south-of-the Platte contenders. In the first step, a bill authorizing relocation of the capital was approved on June 14, 1867, despite a last-ditch move by an Omaha senator to turn south-of-the-Platte Democrats against the measure by changing the name from Capital City to Lincoln. In the second, the three commissioners charged with selecting the new capital met in the attic of W. T. Donovan’s home in Lancaster on July 29, 1867, and voted unanimously (on their second ballot) to locate the capital there. Lancaster, then a tiny village less than a decade old with “six or seven houses” and a population of “about 30,” was by these decisions renamed Lincoln and established as the capital of Nebraska.

Lincoln’s hopes for the future were pinned on the expectation of great wealth to come from development of the area’s salt deposits. Governor David Butler addressed the inaugural legislative session in glowing terms just a month before the Pounds’ arrival: “we have, within sight of this hall, a rich and apparently inexhaustible supply of pure and easily manufactured article. It will be directly and indirectly a source of wealth to the state whose great value no one can fully estimate.” As it happened, while the hopes based on capital relocation endured and eventually prevailed, those founded on the salt deposits were never realized, in the long run producing “noth-
ing but lawsuits, and the only tangible evidence remaining today is a saltwater swimming pool at the west edge of the city.”¹¹ (Actually, the salt flats did leave at least one other lasting legacy—the Lincoln Saltdogs minor league baseball team plays today in the southern division of the Northern League.)

While these tumultuous deals went down, Stephen Pound was a brand-new resident seeking his fortune in the retail sector. For most of 1867 he operated “a small merchandizing shop in the front room of Jacob Dawson’s double log cabin,” though his neighbors apparently suspected his heart was not in it. “As a merchant,” it was said, “he was noted for his application to his law studies.”¹² (There is also a report, written much later by his younger daughter, Olivia, of one adventurous voyage westward to Fort Kearney as a “freighter.” During this journey he innocently gave a ride to two soldiers who turned out to be deserters, was falsely accused of setting fire to haystacks at a farm where he stayed, and was freed only when a search party hunting the deserters arrived.)¹³ In 1868 his legal studies paid off; the thirty-five-year-old New Yorker was admitted to the Nebraska Bar and went into practice with Seth Robinson, another Lincoln attorney. At the end of the year he went back east to claim his bride, having assured her that he would be bringing her to a place not entirely lacking cultural and intellectual attainments. In a letter of 1868, also cited in Olivia Pound’s recollection, the suitor reports the formation of “a reading club, the first of the kind over formed here, and of which I have the honor to be president.”¹⁴

But despite these successes, as well as the optimism with which he apparently contemplated the future he would share with his new wife in Nebraska, one moment in Laura’s account of their journey reveals that her husband, like attorney Irving in Plattsmouth, worried at least a little about her reaction to a place as raw and undeveloped as Lincoln. On the train, moving west across Iowa, he queries her about her expectations: “Have you any idea what sort of a place you are going to,” he asks, and when she replies with a one-word affirmative, he asks her to show him, in the landscape out the win-
dow, “a place you think something like Lincoln.” When she selects the small town of Tama, then a collection of “a few dingy shops with the regulation low, square fronts” (it is still there, still small, proud of a restored “Lincoln Highway” bridge on U.S. Highway 30), Stephen is impressed and relieved. “You have done pretty well,” he replies cheerfully, “only it is better than Lincoln.”

The newlyweds, then, had grounds for optimism that February evening as they enjoyed their dinner surrounded by legislators in the crowded dining room of the Atwood House. They had come through their difficult midwinter journey safely, and by virtue of their education and by Stephen’s occupation they were members of the new capital’s elite on the day they stepped down from the stagecoach. (Their safe journey was itself no small achievement. Fifteen years earlier, the Nebraska Territory’s first governor, South Carolinian Francis Burt, had died after just two days in office following the rigors of a similar trip.) Less than a year after that day, the couple had established themselves in their first Lincoln residence (located to the south of the original County Courthouse at what was then the edge of town) and the new husband had been elected judge of the Probate Court of Lancaster County. Stephen Pound, just a year after his admission to the bar, was Judge Pound, a title that would be joined to his name for the rest of his life.

Higher offices and two changes of domicile followed. After occupying a second home at 1542 P Street, the Pounds moved in 1892 to 1632 L Street. From these quarters Judge Pound’s career was a steady ascent. He was founder and first president of the Lancaster County Bar Association, a Nebraska state senator for the 1872–73 term, and a delegate to the state constitutional convention in 1875. A solid Republican who would have had no problem with the town’s earlier name change, Judge Pound was three times elected (twice unopposed) to four-year terms as judge of Nebraska’s Second Judicial District, serving from 1875 through 1887.

Laura Pound also rose quickly to prominence in the new community’s affairs. She served a full decade (and a little more) on the board.
of directors of the Lincoln Public Library. Her report “The Lincoln Public Library, 1875–1892” notes ten years of service by “Mrs. Richards and Mrs. Pound,” who are also noted as “members of the present board.” Laura was also a charter member of the City Improvement Society, the Nebraska Art Association (originally called the Hayden Art Club), and the Lincoln Women’s Club, as well as an early member of the Nebraska State Historical Society. She was most prominent, however, in the Nebraska Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), where she was a charter member of the state’s first local group, the Deborah Avery Chapter, and served four terms as state regent.

Bar associations, public libraries, a state art association, constitutional conventions—it is clear from such a list that Laura and her husband accomplished their climb in a world that was itself very much on the rise. They arrived near the beginning and grew up with the country. On the eve of statehood, in 1867, Nebraska claimed approximately 50,000 residents; just three years later, the 1870 U.S. census reported a population above 122,000. The new capital was at the very center of this boom. If Lincoln could boast only thirty residents and fewer than a dozen homes in 1867, a year later one of two local newspapers was reporting “by actual count 143 homes in Lincoln,” and by 1870 the population had increased to 2,500. The same year saw the Burlington Railroad arrive from Plattsmouth, and by 1872 the lines had continued west to Kearney and a connection with the Union Pacific. The new University of Nebraska opened its doors in January 1871, a faculty of five greeting a student body of ninety. Five years later, Laura Pound would enroll to perfect her German.

One of the new city’s most prominent citizens, C. H. Gere, was a newspaperman whose pioneering Nebraska Commonwealth began as a monthly, grew to a weekly, changed its name to the Nebraska State Journal in 1869, and became a morning daily in 1870 on the day the railroad arrived. Another early leader was James Sweet, a banker who gave his name to the Sweet “Block,” a stone structure built in 1868 to house Sweet’s State Bank of Nebraska and other businesses. Sweet
was a major player in the deals that brought the state capital to Lincoln—he nearly got caught in the scandals that brought down the state’s first governor, Republican David Butler. Lincoln was from its first days a city of churches—so much so that one of its abundant self-congratulatory nicknames was “The Holy City”—others included “The Hartford of the West” (celebrating insurance companies), “The Athens of the West” (celebrating colleges), and “The Retail Capital of the Midlands” (celebrating commerce). Congregationalists and Methodists were the first to organize, but by 1870 Baptists, Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Universalists were also holding services.

All this is not to suggest that the state or its capital enjoyed smooth, uninterrupted progress from rude frontier to a flourishing and civilized society. The 1870s, especially the years in the decade’s middle, were a difficult time for Nebraska, and for Lincoln. Some setbacks were national in scale. The financial panic of 1873 had roots in Europe but was triggered in the United States by the collapse of finance king Jay Cooke’s investment empire. The New York Stock Exchange shut down for ten days, farm prices plummeted, banks failed, and foreclosures mounted. Back in Nebraska, the general depression was exacerbated by bad weather. The early and middle 1870s were years of sustained drought, made worse by devastating invasions of grasshoppers. A Lincoln-area report from July 1874 makes clear the biblical scope of the destruction: “The hoppers entered Lancaster County from the northwest. . . . In two hours they were four inches deep on the ground. They ate the onions out of the ground, beets, carrots, and everything. All that was left of the garden was the holes in the ground. . . . They did this job in about two hours.”

Then, as if depression, drought, and grasshoppers were not enough, Lincoln was hit by damaging floods in 1873 and 1874 (two people died in the latter). The city was still reeling from the political and financial scandals of the capital location battles and the first leg-
islative sessions. The “public buildings at Lincoln,” according to one modern report, “stood out as stark monuments to the slipshod way” the new state’s affairs had been handled. “All had cost more to build than had been appropriated, and all were so poorly built that they began falling apart almost as soon as they were occupied.” The machinations of an ill-defined “Lincoln ring” were suspected (not without reason) to be at heart of these failures. Attempts to remove the capital from Lincoln continued to plague the city and undermine investor confidence until the matter was finally laid to rest by the adoption of a new constitution in 1875. It all added up to hard times. In 1873 and 1874, Lincoln experienced its first declines in real estate valuations (this was a statewide pattern—property assessed at $4.79 per acre in 1870 had fallen to $2.86 per acre by the decade’s close).

Many of these tribulations, political and climatic, touched the Pound household. Laura, in particular, left vivid accounts of hard times in “The Athens of the West.” In September 1869, just seven months after her arrival and four years before the panic, she answered a letter from back east with news from Lincoln. Her tone is resolutely upbeat (“so far we have done well here”). The letter goes on to say that “two railroads” and “better times and more to eat at cheaper rates” are confidently anticipated for the following spring. “Nothing short of a good-sized fortune,” the new settler concludes, “would ever tempt me to come back East to live.”

But mixed in with all this good news are a few complaints, with rain getting top billing: “I think there has not been a week since the last of April that it has not rained a little at least and generally in torrents.” When rain combines with winds out of the south, the water floods under the door “so badly that I have to tear two sides of my carpet unnailed and turn it back.” In addition, prices are “exorbitantly high,” the house lacks even one “decent pen,” and the writer anticipates a “dull winter with nothing much to do.” But these are minor quibbles; the dominant tone remains decidedly optimistic. Laura in September is now a settled resident of the Lincoln she first saw in February, and the spirited determination of her responses to
her husband’s queries on the train in Iowa and attorney Irving’s predictions in Plattsmouth is still very much in evidence in her letter to the folks.19

Nearly a quarter century later, however, in January 1893, Laura took a very different view when she looked back at Lincoln’s early years. The occasion was her address “The Lincoln Public Library, 1875–1892,” read at a meeting of the Nebraska State Historical Society. The city’s library, she reports, “was organized towards the close of the darkest period in the history of Lincoln, the year 1875.” An impressive catalog of disasters follows. In the first place, “the summers of 1873–74 had been dry, the crops were poor, and what the drought and hail had spared, was taken by the grasshoppers.” Then the winter came, with unusual cold, even for the Great Plains, “the thermometer during the months of January and February standing for many days at a time below zero.”

A general assessment of this “darkest period” follows, closing the second paragraph of what must have opened as an unusually grim report of a public library’s origins: “It was a time most painful to remember. There was the long and constant appeal for help, from the poor and suffering during the winter, and the gloomier prospects of the spring to come.”20 Even the prisoners at the new state penitentiary were tried beyond patience, rising up in January in a violent “mutiny” that ended with the fatal shooting of the rebellion’s leader, an inmate named McWatters.21 The contrast with the letter of 1869 could hardly be stronger. The letter subordinates present difficulties to anticipated future improvements; the report presents hard times aggravated by anticipated future worsenings. (Histories of Nebraska and neighboring states confirm Laura’s portrait of Lincoln for the region as a whole. “At first,” writes one, “public officials and newspapers, concerned with promoting settlement, minimized the seriousness of the situation. . . . But as reports of destitution began to pile up from all parts of the state, it became apparent that something had to be done.” Stopping short of a legislative special session, Governor Robert W. Furnas turned instead to private elites, convening “a
number of well-known citizens” in the fall of 1874 “to find a means of dealing with the situation.” The citizens responded by incorporating the Nebraska Relief and Aid Society to “collect money, provisions, clothing, seeds, and other supplies for distribution among the needy.” Delegations were also dispatched back east to more settled states in search of aid, where they sometimes found themselves competing with similar appeals on behalf of suffering Kansans and South Dakotans.)

It is a poor spring indeed that presents “gloomier” prospects than winter, but the spring of 1875 did arrive with a double-barreled combination of climatic and political worries. It was, Mrs. Pound reported, “cold, backward [i.e., belated], and rainy, but not cold enough to destroy the young grasshoppers or retard their growth.” The following summer was “probably the rainiest ever known in the annals of Nebraska . . . Salt Creek was out of its bounds the most of the summer, and once during the month of June, the high water reached nearly to the Metropolitan hotel.” But Lincoln residents in 1875 feared other things at least as much as rain and lack of rain, hail and grasshoppers, and economic slumps. According to Mrs. Pound’s report, citizens were also “looking ahead with gloom and foreboding at the approaching session of the legislature,” for then “stalked forth the grim spectre of Capital Removal.” On May 9, in particular, they anticipated “fresh troubles” in connection with “the meeting of the constitutional convention,” since these deliberations, too, might very well involve the location of the capital. There were also worries about the new University of Nebraska. Led by an Omaha newspaper, critics were calling for “the closing of the State University for five years, in order to give the high schools of the state a better chance, and to save expenses.”

Mrs. Pound’s listeners, in 1893, were no doubt properly impressed by this astonishing litany of disasters. As it turned out, however, the hard winter, “backward” spring, and rainy summer were attended before fall by several triumphs. The constitutional convention, adjourning on June 12 after almost exactly a month, at last put to rest
the “spectre” of Lincoln losing the capital. Under the new constitution, the capital could be relocated only by popular vote. The movement to shut down the university was also defeated. Even the Lincoln Public Library, whose prospects had looked so bleak in April when the reading room sponsored by “the ladies’ library and reading room association” had been closed “on account of hard times,” was by the end of the year “practically established.” Mrs. Pound, in retrospect, was inclined to see the events of 1875 as “the turning point in the history of Lincoln.” Credit, she said, was due to “to the untiring energy of the Lancaster delegation.” She did not say so, but Judge Pound was surely a part of that delegation, working to advance the interests of the community where “I decided to cast my fortune” nearly a decade earlier.

It is abundantly clear, then, that despite the hard years and the times “most painful to remember,” the new state and the new couple were from the beginning a perfect fit. For his part, Judge Pound’s 1909 interview in the *Nebraska State Journal*, just two years before his death, affirms his continuing satisfaction with his decision for Lancaster/Lincoln more than forty years earlier: “I decided to cast my fortune there. I have never been sorry, either.” For her part, Laura’s wedding journey account, published more than half a century later, makes clear that the bride who “burned her bridges” in 1869 never changed her mind. She ends her reminiscence with a ringing endorsement: “I have always been satisfied with Nebraska. I liked the altitude, the dry climate, the blue skies, the sunny days and gorgeous sunsets, the strange, new flora and the song of the prairie lark.” Stephen and Laura Pound, then, helped construct and thereafter lived successfully and contentedly in the highest tier of Lincoln society, and their accomplishments often made both of them visible on a statewide stage. But in addition to all this they did something else that lifted their town and themselves to still wider notice, to national and even international fame: they had children.

And here is a place, less arbitrary than most, to begin the story of Louise Pound. She was by any measure an extraordinary woman. In
the academic world she was a pioneering scholar who made important contributions to at least three disciplines. In the world of sports she was an outstanding athlete who would have been at one point the nation’s top-ranked woman tennis player had such listings been compiled at the time. She excelled at every sport she attempted, and she attempted them all. She was a passionate supporter, both as a player and as a coach, of high-level athletic competition for women; Title IX legislation, had she lived to see it, would have seemed to her the restoration on a national scale of a golden age for women’s athletics at the University of Nebraska in which she played a central role. She fought (and lost, in the short term) her life’s bitterest battle in support of women’s athletics at the University of Nebraska. But such gender-based commitments extended far beyond the playing fields—Louise Pound was throughout her long career as a teacher and scholar a dedicated advocate of opportunities for women in general and more especially for their educational and professional advancement. No cause—and she was active in many—gained her greater loyalty.

Last, but far from least, she was for all her long life a Nebraskan at home in Lincoln, casting her lot with her community and state every bit as wholeheartedly as her parents had before her. Like her elder brother, she could have gone elsewhere, to more prestigious academic posts (she did accept such appointments, but only for summer terms). Her choice, wholly conscious and fiercely affirmative, was for Nebraska. Nebraska had raised her and bestowed upon her the best it had to offer in the way of material advantages and educational opportunities. She remained grateful to the end of her days, and she worked diligently over a long professional lifetime to return the gift, to chronicle the state’s history and more especially its traditional culture in scores of written studies and hundreds of lectures.

Louise Pound was not, however, her parents’ first child. That was her brother, Roscoe, born in 1870, himself destined for a career very nearly as remarkable as hers. (Some would say more remarkable, and two of his champions have already written biographies.)
Louise came second, born on June 30, 1872, followed by her sister, Olivia, in 1874. With the arrival of her children, Laura Pound, already a woman of marked independence and resolution, came fully into her own. In retrospect it seems obvious that she was a homegrown pedagogical genius, a sort of Great Plains Maria Montessori, a woman whose own wide learning, combined with public school teaching experience in New York and in Nebraska, provided her not only with strikingly innovative instructional notions of her own but also with the confidence to implement them even in the face of community disapproval. Her first decision was to educate her children at home. The public schools of Lincoln she judged “too stereotyped”; she and her husband would be better pedagogues. To this end, unruffled by neighborhood criticism, Mrs. Pound ordered a large blackboard and had it attached to the wall in her living room.

Her method could not have been more straightforward. Her bedrock principle, from which all good results followed, was to root education in inquiry. The student’s innate curiosity, which the instructor was at pains to enlarge and systematize, initiated the adventure of learning. This process could therefore begin at an early age, presumably with the child’s first queries. “I believe,” she told an interviewer in 1922, “in beginning the training and teaching as soon as they are born, and their inquiries should be answered intelligently; if a parent does not know the correct answer let him [or her, as it was most often in the Pound academy] find out what it is.” In the same interview, Mrs. Pound uses Roscoe as an instance of her method in action (despite her obvious commitment to equal educational opportunities for women, and despite the reasonable guess that her branding of the Lincoln public schools as “too stereotyped” referred to a too-limited sense of appropriate educational and occupational goals for women, she invariably uses him as her example): “every child should have a fad. My boy’s fad was collecting bugs and butterflies. He began by bringing into the house a cocoon which he just pulled from a tree, and stuck it up to await hatching time. It turned out to be a beautiful Cocropea moth.”
This, then, is the beginning. The child’s initiative produces a piece of the natural world and a question about it. The well-prepared teacher swings into action—that’s a great question, she says, asked before by other inquiring minds. There are answers, and what’s more, these answers exist within an organized investigative system. The child is thus introduced to nomenclature, to taxonomy, even to epistemology: that’s called a cocoon, that’s called a Cocropea moth. And the boy at play is thus hooked, launched into learning. In this instance, young Roscoe finds himself, without ever leaving his living room, taken over the threshold of Natural Science Hall, freed to explore in the entomological and botanical wings. As Mrs. Pound related it: “From studying insects he must study what they fed upon and must study botany to find out: so this took on a new interest for him and he learned it without knowing exactly how or when.” From such beginnings, she concludes, the captivated and encouraged mind, trained to systematic inquiry, takes its increasingly independent way: “in the college later, he covered all the work which Dr. Bessey gave.”

For Roscoe’s sister Louise, one early “fad” was apparently stamp collecting. Her earliest surviving letter, written to a cousin in the summer of 1881, when she had just turned nine, opens with thanks for the gift of several stamps (“three of them I did not have”) and goes on to a proud, carefully classified and quantified account of her collecting: “My album now contains 192 stamps. 49 are U.S. 39 are U.S. Rev. One Confederate and 103 foreign. I have only been collecting 3 months, but have some very old and rare stamps.” The letter concludes with a description, similarly detailed, of her friend “Lute” Bumstead’s coin collection. Like her brother’s interest in entomology and botany, Louise’s attraction to collecting and arranging, which would lead in her case to significant gatherings of everything from folk songs to dialect, got an early start in the Pound home. Louise was also playing the piano at an early age (did her mother teach her this as well?). Although her brother did not play, he was very fond of listening to his sister: “Almost every evening before the Pound
children settled down to their studies, Roscoe would stretch out on the floor and ask for one piece after another.”32 The natural sciences, then, were at the heart of Mrs. Pound’s pedagogy, and it is clear from her remarks elsewhere that she was in this area an ideal mentor and guide.

In the Lincoln Women’s Club, founded later (in 1894), Laura Pound’s expertise was recognized; as the leader of its science department she was responsible for the club’s program on January 31, 1898.33 She listed “the strange new flora and the song of the prairie lark” among Nebraska’s abiding attractions, and even her arduous wedding journey is enlivened by the sights of a country that is “monotonous but interesting,” offering her discerning eye “acres of dry sunflowers, thickets of sumac and wild plum, and a shrub unknown to me which I later classified as Indian currant.”34 (The oxymoronic phrasing “monotonous but interesting” indicates a spirit with little need for spectacle and speaks to Laura Pound’s capacity for untumultuous, ruminative pleasure.) Once settled in her new home, Mrs. Pound encountered other indigenous plants previously “unknown to me” and promptly shipped off specimens to Asa Gray, the nation’s foremost botanical scholar.35 Knowledge, it is clear from such actions, was for her a cooperative and a progressive enterprise. She defined the world of learning as a community of scholars, and she drew its boundaries generously. By sending prairie plants to Gray, she included herself, made her own contribution to the growth of knowledge. From all of this it is clear that Laura Pound was a wonderful teacher in the first place because she was an avid learner. At the heart of her educational enterprise is the simple sharing with her children of her own pleasures in exploring the world around her.

But insects and plants were not the whole of Laura Pound’s interests. After all, she did not enroll at the new university to perfect her botany. Languages, to note a second obvious subject, were no less central; and German, as the leading “scientific” lingua franca of the day, was the modern language of choice for the Pound children. Roscoe began his studies at six, in the same year that his mother, prac-
ticing what she preached, enrolled at the university for a two-year course of studies (the newspaper account of her “perfecting herself in the German language” refers to this time). The family in fact went all out in its campaign to learn German—a German maid was hired, and no doubt encouraged to use her native language in conversations with the children, while Roscoe was sent to Sunday school in a German Methodist church, where he “often won prizes for reciting the most Bible verses correctly.” Louise, just two years younger, may have gotten an even earlier start. There is no record of her reciting Bible verses in a German Sunday school, but a quarter century later she would be completing a PhD in philological studies at the University of Heidelberg.

Meanwhile, along with all the botany and German, the languages of the traditional curriculum were not neglected. And here Judge Pound came to the fore. Roscoe was introduced to Latin at eleven, and his father, “who was quite adept at classical languages, shared the teaching responsibilities with Mrs. Pound.” The Centennial History of the University of Nebraska offers a wide-angle view of the Pound home as a frontier classics oasis in action: “In the Pound household . . . on Sunday afternoons the Greek Scriptures were read aloud for visitors.” The Pound home here shows itself as one of Lincoln’s cultural standard-bearers, one of the “houses of brick or wood in chaste or classical lines or spun wonders of Victorian Gothic” (this would describe the longtime Pound residence at 1632 L Street) where the town’s elites “moved in, took out their white kid gloves, subscribed to Century, shipped in oysters frozen in blocks of ice, and tried to keep life very much as it had been in Ohio, New York, Illinois, or Virginia.” As another observer put it, “It may have been mud-flats on the outside, but it was Boston within.”

Actually, the “Boston” is misleading, and the “Ohio, New York, Illinois, or Virginia” is much more apt. Certainly, there were New Englanders who played important roles in the settlement and development of Nebraska and its capital, but the majority of the pioneer elites arrived, like the Pounds, from mid-Atlantic and midwestern
states. The early leaders of the University of Nebraska had similar backgrounds. The land-grant universities established by the Morrill Act in 1862 looked consciously not to the nation’s oldest institutions in New England but to the educational institution most obviously modeled on a Jeffersonian vision: “the grandparent of the state universities was the University of Virginia, not Harvard.” In fact, in the case of Nebraska a traceable, three-generation line of descent is strikingly direct. The legislative bill establishing the university in 1869 was written by Augustus Harvey, who used the University of Michigan’s charter as a model. The 1837 charter of the Ann Arbor school, in its earlier turn, was based on the prose of U.S. Circuit Judge Augustus Woodward, who in his still earlier turn had met with Jefferson as he was planning the University in Charlottesville. “The University of Michigan can be said to have kindled its fire from Jefferson’s university and so, in time, did the University of Nebraska.”

Louise probably began her studies in Latin and Greek alongside her brother, just as she may have done with his earlier work in German. In the 1940s she suggests a possible Greek origin (a later consensus describes a nineteenth-century American source) for the American expression “O.K.” Later still, on the occasion of her eighty-fifth birthday, her brother recalled that when Louise graduated at the head of her class in 1892 he was “moved to translate the S.P.” on her Phi Beta Kappa key (it stands for societas philosophiae) with an explicitly feminist Latin motto, “sedeant pueri: Let the boys go back and sit down.” Louise, presumably, would have appreciated the joke and could have translated it for herself. But despite the impressive accomplishments of Roscoe and Louise, the real classicist in the family was Olivia, the youngest, whose studies carried her to a master’s in Greek at the University of Nebraska and a distinguished career as Latin teacher and longtime assistant principal in the Lincoln public schools. No doubt those schools were much improved from the days when Laura Pound found them inadequate, and surely she would have been pleased at her family’s signal contribution to their betterment. It seems entirely appropriate that there is today a Pound Mid-
dle School in the Lincoln system, though it is a glaring omission that the school’s website names Stephen Bosworth Pound and his three illustrious children but omits the mother whose innovative teaching started it all.

But of course the curriculum at Laura Pound’s little school on the prairie did not end with ancient and modern languages and natural science. The humanities were by no means shortchanged. In this area, as in the language studies, Mrs. Pound credited her husband’s contribution: “Their father was away a large part of the time, but when here, he read with them good books like ‘The Iliad’ and was very painstaking.” Roscoe’s biographer provides a wider view of Judge Pound’s reading lists: “Judge Pound often read aloud to the children, and Dickens, Scott, Thackeray, and Shakespeare were among the family favorites.”

The young Pounds also read, according to Olivia’s written remembrance, European fairy tales (Grimm and Labouage) and history (Froissart’s Chronicles, Kingsley’s Greek Heroes, and Macaulay’s History of England) as well as the American tales of Hawthorne (Tanglewood Tales and The Wonder Book). “Father and mother were careful about the books they got for us,” Olivia recalled. “Father read aloud to us a great deal. . . . Louise never cared much about listening. She would rather have the book herself and read at her own lightning pace. . . . Louise and I found the ‘Elsie’ books and Louisa Alcott’s too slow. I think we used Watson’s readers when mother started us out.”

Toward the end of their home schooling, with Roscoe already dividing his instructional time between his mother and German classes at the university, Mrs. Pound was able to concentrate on her daughters: “While Roscoe was at the University Mother taught Louise and me reading, spelling, arithmetic, and later geography, grammar, and United States history,” wrote Olivia. In at least one instance, a parental bribe was offered in support of these ambitious readings. When Roscoe was twelve, “his parents offered him and his younger sister Louise a dollar to read Macaulay’s History of England. They read together to ensure honesty, and they periodically asked each other
questions. Tradition had it that Louise read faster but “that Roscoe retained more.”

Mrs. Pound inculcated this curriculum (surely she included mathematics as well, though specific mention of algebra, geometry, and trigonometry is missing from the record) via a method that would today be recognized as supervised independent study. Formal schooling—that is, time spent in face-to-face teacher/student interaction—“covered but one hour of the day,” and even this was apparently insisted upon less for its opportunities for direct lecturing or questioning and more for its embodiment of “regularity and system.” Mrs. Pound, asked to describe her pedagogy, gives short shrift to instructional technique but devotes painstaking attention to opportunities for the free play of curiosity and “fancy”: “A large playground is one of the things all children need. Ours had a big back yard, which they turned into canals, or towns, or whatever their fancy dictated.” The children were also liberally provided, neighborly disapproval once again registered and dismissed, with books and other supplies: “One day I bought a rather expensive article for my boy to use in his work with the insects. A rich neighbor told me I was going to ruin the child, and I answered, you would think it all right for me to pay ten dollars for a hat.”

Most of all she wanted independent minds capable of directing themselves. And if a given practice served these ends she pursued it unswervingly, even in the face of disapproval: “I was regular and painstaking with them and began early to teach them the wonderful advantage one has who is able to decide and not change his mind.” In this emphasis upon individual initiative the parental Pounds were very much of one mind. In 1897, Judge Pound delivered a short, informal address to the Nebraska State Historical Society. Published the next year as “View of Judge S. B. Pound,” the piece is a surprisingly flippant exercise, very funny in places, but ending with a serious, almost curmudgeonly defense of “individual effort.” He begins by taking issue (“I am not prepared to agree”) with previous speakers who have “placed a very high estimate” upon the members of the
Nebraska Territory’s first legislative session. Noting that this body simply adopted verbatim the criminal and civil laws of another state, the judge suggests (“that is pretty crude legislation”) that its members “lacked the knowledge and ability to frame laws of their own and express them in their own language.”

All this sounds straightforward enough, but then the judge goes on to note that this same legislative body incorporated “some fifteen or twenty cities,” thereby establishing a state lacking thereafter “any small towns or villages.” The explanation he provides can only be tongue in cheek: “the early inhabitants of this state were, at least one-third of them, distinguished and titled persons; they were majors, colonels, generals, judges, and governors, who preferred to live in cities.” This ratio, he continues, has endured to the present day: “we are all colonels, or judges, or something of that sort, so that this may be fairly claimed as one of the results of this legislature. We all live in cities. We have the cities of Brownville, Nemaha City, the city of Plattsmouth, Dakota City, the city of Carlisle, the city of Fontanelle, Republican City,—all these are cities.”

This is on its face an extraordinary passage, a wholly appealing send-up. Judge Pound, himself one of the “distinguished and titled persons” gently mocked, speaking to an assembly of his fellows inclined, as the tenor of the addresses preceding his own makes clear, to celebration of themselves, quietly deflates the entire occasion. That he seems not to have offended, that his remarks were duly published in the group’s Proceedings and Collections series, speaks warmly of the esteem and affection his neighbors and fellow citizens held for their judge. But Judge Pound closed his remarks in a more serious vein. That same 1855 inaugural legislative session, with its penchant for incorporation that resulted in so many paper cities, also called into being “some thirty ferry companies” in a society with “little or no travel,” and in addition a host of “banks, and railroads, and emigration societies, and seminaries, and insurance companies, and all sorts of corporations.” Such actions, the judge concludes, reveal a habit of mind: “people at that time seem to have thought that the great source
of wealth and prosperity was in legislation.” This overvaluation of legislation and incorporation is accompanied by an undervaluing of the “private individual”—“Nothing could be carried on by individual effort.” This attitude, the judge concludes, is persistent: “there is a prevailing sentiment of that kind abroad at the present time, in the minds of people, that individual effort cannot accomplish much.” It is also wrong, and harmful, and the judge ends on a monitory note: “I think it is a false opinion—a false idea. Legislation can do something, but not much. Very much depends on the individual and very little on the legislation.”

The tone of Judge Pound’s remarks, then, is much more bantering and merry than any surviving utterance, public or private, attributed to Mrs. Pound. Stephen Pound was cherished in his family for exactly this impish sense of humor under his judge’s robe. As family stories reported by Olivia make clear, Judge Pound was especially fond of stories deflating pomposity and pretense, the antics of the horde of “distinguished and titled people” who crowd the upper echelons of small-town society. One fellow attorney who much amused him was famous for frequent (though often wildly inaccurate) “references to Greek and Roman history or mythology.” This gent’s rhetorical arsenal featured, among other excesses, the phrase “embossed battlements,” only slightly altered to fit particular cases. Thus a stack of railroad ties accused of frightening a team of horses were characterized as offering to the nags “the terrifying aspect of the embossed battlements of a military encampment.” In another case the jury itself was described as sitting “as the embossed battlement of civil and religious liberty.” Judge Pound took this phony elegance home, where his wife and children soon learned to expect to hear “embossed battlement of a military encampment” employed to describe “any obstruction.”

In another case, the same attorney was pleading a case where a set of missing check stubs played a significant evidentiary role. “Embossed battlements” were insufficient to this cause, and the advocate trotted out instead “the funeral cortège of the noble Roman lady
Juno,” which passed through the streets of “the eternal city.” But when the crowd noticed that one figure was missing from the group of ancestral images carried in the procession, they called out repeatedly, “Where is the bust of Brutus? Where is the bust of Brutus?” The attorney then returned from Rome to the case at hand: “Gentlemen of the jury, I ask you, ‘Where are these stubs?’” This gem, too, came home to the Pound household, where “If my father ever missed anything around the house he would usually call out ‘Where is the bust of Brutus?’”

On another occasion a family breakfast was enlivened when Judge Pound smiled, chuckled, and finally burst out laughing. “We all joined in,” recalled Olivia, “not having the least idea what we were laughing about.” Finally, Mrs. Pound asked for an explanation, and the judge recounted a story from a dinner of the bar association the evening before. “You know how pompous M. is,” he began, naming a prominent local barrister who had “enjoyed too much port wine” with his dinner. “In the midst of one of the speeches he got up solemnly and to everyone’s surprise began to walk up and down, gesticulating with wide sweeps of his arms, and declaiming eloquently—’If anyone tries to haul down the American flag, spot him on the shoot, spot him on the shoot.’”

The preponderance of evidence suggests that, outside the home, Judge Pound usually kept his penchant for such mockeries on a short leash. Accounts of one spectacular murder trial from the 1870s, for example, would suggest that he was himself wholly capable of the same florid oratory he pilloried in more private moments. Sentencing the youthful murderer and horse thief William Henry Dodge “to be hung by the neck until dead on July 21,” the judge attempted to satisfy both the requirements of the law and those in the community favoring a life term as more appropriate for such a young and presentable prisoner by making “‘touching and pertinent remarks’ in passing the sentence ‘which brought many tears to the eyes of those who witnessed the scene.’” On at least one occasion, however, when a trial was disrupted by the drunkenness of one attorney, he allowed
his sense of humor to peek out even from his judicial robes. After tolerating the inebriated lawyer’s incoherencies for a time, Judge Pound brought down his gavel and postponed the case for a week. “The lawyer for the plaintiff,” he ruled, “is trying to practice before two bars at the same time. It can’t be done.”

The point does not need to be overstated—Laura Pound was herself certainly capable of a wry humor, as in her reaction in 1869 to the crowds gathered to watch the ice she has just crossed break up. Another instance would be her response to her son’s outraged reaction when he discovered a battered volume of Horace on the family bookshelf. “What vandal” had done such a thing? he asked. “His name was Roscoe Pound,” his mother replied—evidently young Roscoe numbered hurling books into pails of water among his “favorite pranks.” A third example comes from Mrs. Pound’s published account of her efforts in support of a turn-of-the-century DAR campaign to mark “the only point touched in Nebraska by [the Lewis and Clark expedition] which could be positively identified” by placing “a Nebraska boulder upon the site.” As committee chair, Laura Pound was obliged “to raise the money and to find the boulder.” The money came easily, but finding the boulder proved more difficult, and Mrs. Pound’s account brings both the scientist and the dry humorist to the fore: “Finally a boulder of Sioux Falls granite was found in the Marsden farm, north of Lincoln, and it was given to the society by the owner, who remarked that he was ‘glad to be rid of it.’ Its dimensions were $7\frac{1}{2} \times 8\frac{1}{3} \times 3\frac{1}{2}$ feet. Its weight was between seven and eight tons.”

On the maternal side of the family, the gift for humor is traced back another generation in one of Louise Pound’s articles from 1918, where her discussion of a “negro spiritual” named “Weeping Mary” in a short piece for Modern Language Notes is based on a family story originating with her maternal grandmother:

I learned it from my mother, who caught it from the singing of a white woman, Nancy [last name forgotten], in the village of Ham-
I have always been satisfied with Nebraska" • 25

ilton, Madison County, New York. My mother used to repeat it, im-
mitating the original singer. Nancy had just come from a Methodist
“protracted meeting,” and was singing “Weeping Mary” over and
over again, on the occasion when my mother heard her, working
herself up to a frenzy and beating incessantly with something in
her hands as she sang. Finally she attracted so much attention from
passers-by that she had to be stopped. My mother had a tenacious
memory, and was a good mime, and she often reproduced for our
entertainment Nancy’s hysterical singing of her religious song.63

Biddlecome women, then, were fully capable of levity, just as Pound
men assisting runaway slaves were capable of unmixed earnestness.
But a fundamental (and wonderfully complementary) difference of
temperament nevertheless seems clear. Both were essentially serious
people, widely respected for their accomplishments and admired for
their many kindnesses to others, but if Laura Pound was a nearly per-
fected teacher, just the one to help her children appreciate the impor-
tance of their schoolwork, her husband, a fine teacher himself, was
perhaps no less perfect as an encourager of their play.

And play they did. The Pound home seems to have served as a
neighborhood social club for the children and their friends. Olivia’s
papers, in particular, preserve a number of brief family history pieces
devoted to her parents and siblings. One of these, “Home Life of the
Pound Family,” includes an account of war games featuring armies
of wooden soldiers “whittled out by Louise, dressed by Olivia, and
given the proper military designations by Roscoe. They were ma-
neuvered by Roscoe and Louise. Sometimes the battles became so
fierce that Mrs. Pound had to interfere and imprison both armies till
a truce was declared. Roscoe and Louise composed histories and ge-
ographies of the countries of the opposing armies, also the full peer-
age.”64 Roscoe’s biographer notes that the siblings “had many friends
in common, and as they grew older, the living room of their home of-
ten resounded with the gaiety of dances and parties. Judge Pound, an
excellent dancer himself, occasionally joined in the fun.”65
For Louise in particular, that fun included a striking range of sports and games, and here again her father played a prominent role. By Roscoe’s report, his sister “inherited a skill at games” from her father, who “played baseball in college in the formative period of that game and was actively interested in what would now be called athletics.” In Nebraska Judge Pound retained his enthusiasm for baseball—he was such a well-known fan of Lincoln’s squads in the 1890s that umpires reportedly opened games with a standard declaration: “If both teams are ready and Judge Pound is in the grandstand, the game will begin.” His eldest daughter apparently began with croquet—a 1983 study devoted to her distinguished athletic career notes that this genteel lawn sport “was much too tame for Louise, who, by the time she was 14, was a master of the mallet-and-ball game.” Many less-tame games and sports would follow—figure skating and roller skating, baseball and softball, riding and rifle shooting, diving and bowling and cycling, and above all basketball, tennis, and golf. Down the road there would be local, regional, and (in tennis) even national acclaim.

The young Pounds, then, as their mother completed their primary education in a home that seemed to offer the finest instruction west of John Stuart Mill’s house (and without the stresses), were sent off each in his or her turn to the new University of Nebraska. It may have been new, but Laura Pound had sampled its wares, and if she had confidence in it sufficient to enroll her children, its faculty and administration must have been doing something right.
3. Louise Pound as a young child. Nebraska State Historical Society, RG0909 PH7 2.
4. Louise Pound as a preparatory school student. Nebraska State Historical Society, RG0909 PH7 7.
5. The Pound family home at 1632 L Street. 
Nebraska State Historical Society, RG0909 PH18 3.