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THE MARIETTA JOHNSON SCHOOL OF ORGANIC EDUCATION:
PAST AND PRESENT

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The Marietta Johnson School of Organic Education:
Past and Present

Marietta Pierce Johnson (1864-1938) founded the School of Organic Education in Fairhope, Alabama, in 1907, in order to implement her educational ideals. Her vision for education centered around creating a school which would cater to the needs and growth of the child. Mrs. Johnson was a charismatic, dynamic woman who infused the Organic School, the town of Fairhope, and even many parts of the nation with her vitality. Also, progressive education, whose principles this educator reflected, was popular throughout the United States. Thus, the educational climate was one in which her ideas could flourish.¹

Today, no such innovative, visionary person can be found at the Organic School. In addition, the national educational mood is one of "back to basics," a milieu in many ways opposed to the Organic School's goals. The school is not the shining star it once was, but it persists. The purpose of this paper is to compare the school under Marietta Johnson's direction to the institution as it is in 1984.

Before comparing the past with the present, however, a review of previously written literature concerning the school is in order. Marietta Johnson received recognition by some of the most prominent educators of the day. Probably the most outstanding acknowledgement came from John Dewey, the father of progressive

education. He came to visit Mrs. Johnson's school in Fairhope and, subsequently, devoted a chapter to it in his book Schools of Tomorrow. His report is glowing. For example, in reference to Marietta Johnson, he concludes, "Under her direction, the school has proved a decided success."²

g.v.
The Twenty-Sixth Yearbook, prepared under the direction of Harold Rugg in 1926, appraises curriculum-making in the schools. Mrs. Johnson wrote a chapter in the book describing the educational principles of her school.³

q.v.
In 1928 The Child-Centered School by Harold Rugg and Ann Shumaker presented an extensive evaluation of the child-centered movement in the United States. The School of Organic Education is mentioned twice, both as an example of a child-centered school and as an educational institution employing alternative grading methods.⁴

During the 1950's the educational climate of the country changed. In general, the public wanted more structured, scientific learning, and progressive education fell into disfavor. A book typical of the ones published in this period is Albert Lynd's Quackery in the Public Schools. The author describes progressive pedagogy as missing the point of education.⁵

In the 1960's some attention was again devoted to child-centered education in Lawrence Cremin's The Transformation of the School. He wrote a chapter on Marietta Johnson's school, discussing both its formation and its tenets.⁶

Recently, some additional literature has appeared concerning the Organic School. In 1978 Carol Thigpen published a dissertation

on the Eight-Year Study and referred to Mrs. Johnson's involvement in the progressive movement. Dr. Paul Gaston, a professor at the University of Virginia and a graduate of the Organic School himself, has written a book to be published in October 1984, entitled Women of Fair Hope. One chapter explores in detail the woman Marietta Johnson and her educational mission.⁷

A considerable amount has been written about Marietta Johnson and her school. Not so much has focused either on the factors contributing to her success or on the present-day Organic School. For these reasons, this paper will explore not only Mrs. Johnson's ideals and practices, but also both the conditions causing the school's wide recognition and the insitution operating in 1984.

Mrs. Johnson's ideology and pedagogy are noteworthy. This woman believed that traditional education forced adult goals and whims onto children without taking into consideration the child's needs and development. She believed children were made to perform tasks in school before they were physically, emotionally, or intellectually ready for them. The result was that children's healthy development was thwarted. She sought to remedy this situation by providing an education which was in harmony with the child's natural pattern of growth. (Her emphasis on growth can be seen by the term organic chosen to name the school.) Moreover, if growth were responded to with sensitivity, she maintained that it could not be restricted to intellectual development. Rather, the entire maturation of the child--social, physical, emotional, spiritual, as well as intellectual--needed

to be encompassed. Only by teaching in this manner could learning become a valuable, intrinsic part of children's lives. And when learning became a natural part of their lives, children would learn because they wanted to, not because they "should." In addition, each child should be allowed to develop at his or her own pace. No standard of achievement by a certain time should be set; no grades should be given; and competition should be discouraged.⁸

To implement her ideals, Marietta Johnson created a school program comprised of handwork (such as art and shop), nature study, folk dancing, drama, music, storytelling, as well as math, science, literature, history, and foreign languages. As much as possible, children were to learn from the environment around them, so that what they were learning was relevant and meaningful. For example, eight-year-olds learned physical geography by studying the gullies, the bay shore, and the plants and animals of Fairhope.⁹

Mrs. Johnson grouped students according to chronological age. School began with kindergarten, ages four through six. The children followed no fixed program, and they learned no traditional academic subjects. Marietta Johnson did not feel children at this age were ready physically or emotionally for formalized learning. Rather, these children wanted to run and play and explore. For this reason, she stressed that kindergarten pupils needed to "have experience in musical expression,

daily singing and dancing, and musical games, and ample time for free play." She also recommended dramatization, stories, and walks during which the teacher casually pointed out objects of interest in nature. In essence, the child should not be one way in his natural state and then come to school and be forced to act another way (for example, playful by nature versus quiet and obedient at school). Instead, school should be a natural extension of the child's life.¹⁰

At six years of age, children entered the first life class. Mrs. Johnson defines a life class as a place where "children live as wholesomely, happily, and intelligently as possible, and incidentally learn something." The students continued with more advanced versions of the subjects introduced in kindergarten. For example, action stories from kindergarten were supplemented by myths and stories of information. Concepts of numbers were learned at this age, but no reading or writing. Mrs. Johnson felt the children were not developed enough for such fine concentration. At all times, of utmost importance was fitting the course of study to the natural development of the child. Mrs. Johnson states, "The standard is an inner, human one. If the work is suitable and wholesome and the children delight in it, there is growth, which is the essence of education."¹¹

At eight years of age, the students entered second life class. They learned to read and write at this stage. Learning gradually continued to become more sophisticated and varied in all subject areas.

Gradually is the important word here. Mrs. Johnson felt the child should never be thrust into a situation which stressed and challenged him unnecessarily. Such an experience would only alienate the student from learning and interrupt his natural, healthy development. Teachers worked individually with each student, encouraging him to pursue his own interests at his own pace.¹²

As the child progressed through third life class (approximately ages ten through eleven) and fourth life class (approximately ages twelve through thirteen), the complexity of curriculum and activities reflected the degree of his maturation. For instance, fourth life class (also known as junior high) branched into such areas as algebra and American history. In addition, Mrs. Johnson scheduled afternoon folk dancing parties and provided sex education during the regular course of study.¹³

Students began the four-year high school at about fourteen years of age. The schooling at this stage retained the organic focus of natural growth, but learning became more structured. For example, the teachers, for the first time, assigned homework and administered tests (although no grades were given and a pupil could not fail if he were doing his best). Social activities, such as evening folk dances, were encouraged in response to the teen-agers' growing social awareness.¹⁴

In all classes flexibility was the norm. Teachers were constantly urged to place the needs of the pupils and the circumstances of the present situation over the completion of a prescribed lesson. Marietta Johnson writes, "It is far more

important that children shall love history, literature, and geography, than any particular amount of subject matter shall be mastered." And the way to instill this love of learning was an organic education--an education so natural in children's lives that they were not consciously forcing themselves to study, but learning from genuine interest and involvement. Marietta Johnson made an honest attempt to implement her ideology through the pedagogy of her school.¹⁵

Even though Mrs. Johnson's pedagogy was innovative and insightful, the question remains concerning how her small school became so well-known. There were several elements which contributed to its success. One, the country as a whole--especially the prosperous, elite segment--saw progressive, child-centered education as worthwhile.¹⁶

Even more importantly, the town of Fairhope, although in the throes of establishing itself as a community, possessed a general ideology conducive to the development of such a school. Just as the Organic School was an experiment in education, Fairhope was an attempt to implement a new form of community living. In 1894 a group of people from Iowa moved to what is now the town of Fairhope to try to implement Henry George's single tax theory. Basically, this theory states that government should own all the land, tax it, and refrain from any other type of taxation. Then, as much as possible, the tax money should be used for community purposes. This system is supposed to provide a more democratic and flourishing town. An article on the single

tax theory, written by one of Fairhope's founders, E. B. Gaston, appeared in The Fairhope Courier on November 22, 1928. (It is interesting to note that the paper's slogan was "A Progressive Paper for Progressive People.") In this article Mr. Gaston reflects Fairhope's idealism when he writes that because of the town's single tax, an

absence of opportunity to profit unjustly from one's fellows by land speculation conduces to a spirit of equality and brotherhood which is rare, and grateful even to those who sometimes fail to appreciate its cause. The 'spirit of Fairhope' is recognized and acclaimed by visitors as one of its great charms.¹⁷

It is evident that not only the nation, but Fairhope itself, was ripe for Marietta Johnson's ideas.

However, even with national and local attitudes receptive to an experiment in child-centered education, one is still left wondering how Marietta Johnson's school became a successful and widely-recognized endeavor. After all, how many students could a town of several hundred provide? And although Fairhope was innovative, it was isolated in the Deep South from the main progressive thrust in the North. How did it succeed? The answer lies with Marietta Johnson herself. She certainly was the most important factor contributing to the school's vitality and fame. Mrs. Johnson was one of those rare individuals who possess great charisma, determination, and total devotion to a cause. She exuded such a warm and forceful personality that people often wished to follow her example. For instance, in his chapter on Marietta Johnson, Paul Gaston writes:

Mrs. Johnson was, of course, a standard herself. Her own expectations became a powerful force in the school, working on fellow teachers and students alike. Nearly every student of hers I have interviewed has remarked on what it meant in their lives to fulfill the expectations she had of them. There was "a standard there," one student from the 'teens recalls; "it went very, very deep." This woman remembers asking herself frequently "would Mrs. Johnson approve of this?" Another recalled that "I was convinced that she expected me to do nothing improper and I wanted not to disappoint her."¹⁸

Marietta Johnson herself writes of an experience which exemplifies her power and charm. For awhile, there was a Fairhope Summer School located in Greenwich, Connecticut. Mrs. Johnson would go there each summer to demonstrate her ideas. The building used for the school became inadequate, and Marietta Johnson spotted an unoccupied estate, damaged by fire, which she thought would be suitable for the school. She arranged to meet with the owner and relates the following first encounter:

Her [the owner's] first question was: "What do you want?" I replied, "I want your place at Greenwich." "What for?" she asked. "A school," I answered. She then asked, "Do you want me to give it to you?" "Yes", I answered. "Do you know," she cried, "that you are asking for three hundred and sixty thousand dollars worth of property?" "People have given more than that for an idea," was my reply.

After Mrs. Johnson described her educational ideals, the owner gave her a two-year lease--rent-free--for the estate.¹⁹

A woman quoted in Paul Gaston's book, a graduate from both the Organic School and the teachers' training course run by Marietta Johnson, illustrates the extent of Mrs. Johnson's power when she says, "She [Mrs. Johnson] made you feel that you

were part of something big and wonderful, that teaching was the most important job in the world, and . . . you could change the whole universe with what you did with these children."²⁰

Marietta Johnson was such a dynamic and enchanting person that people wanted to follow her; they desired to help her out. It seems unlikely that someone without such a personal magnetism could have created a successful educational experiment in Fairhope, Alabama, even with the most supportive climate, even with the most worthwhile goals.

Structurally, at its height, the Organic School had many "irons in the fire." Both boarding students from around the nation and local pupils attended classes. Teachers who desired either to instruct at the Organic School or to employ Mrs. Johnson's methods in other schools could participate in a two-year teachers' training program in Fairhope. Marietta Johnson felt that teachers needed to be trained in open-mindedness and the organic approach to learning before they would be prepared to teach. In addition, for some years, Mrs. Johnson ran a summer teachers' training program in Greenwich, Connecticut. In 1921 a six weeks' Winter Course was begun. This program united parents, teachers, and social workers from all over the country with Fairhope residents in a study of the Organic School and its tenets. The purpose of this course was to equip adults to respond adequately to the natural growth of their children.²¹

Mrs. Johnson, however, was not content to limit her involvement to one experimental school. She wanted her ideals

to become the prevailing norm in all the schools of the nation. She was a powerful and popular speaker and addressed audiences throughout the United States and Europe. Through her lectures she won both financial and ideological support. For example, the May 16, 1929, issue of The Fairhope Courier described this woman's reception in California as follows:

California is very progressive along educational lines and everywhere Mrs. Johnson found the people eager to receive the message she had to bring and plans are already underway for her return in the near future for another course of lectures.²²

Clearly, the Organic School was buzzing with activity and zeal under this charismatic person's influence.

Today, the same buildings and land which Marietta Johnson obtained in the early 1900's are in use. The school has remained in operation since Mrs. Johnson's death in 1938. Although the 1984 Organic School lacks the former varied programs, national recognition, and dazzling personality of Marietta Johnson, it remains true to the organic philosophy of education. It is governed by a Board of Managers comprised of twenty-four people from the community, including parents, the Fairhope Single Tax Corporation, local businessmen, the school principal, and general members elected by the Board. The Board makes all of the decisions concerning the school, ranging from financial to curricular considerations. These people attempt to understand Mrs. Johnson's ideas and to implement them through the school's policies.²³

The division of the classes is exactly as it was when Marietta Johnson ran the school. There is kindergarten, first life class (corresponding to first and second grades); second life class

(third and fourth grades); and third life class (fifth and sixth grades). Junior high consists of the equivalent of seventh and eighth grades, and high school is grades nine through twelve. Also, the curriculum reflects that of Mrs. Johnson. Art, shop, folk dancing, and physical education are required courses, as well as English, math, science, and social studies.²⁴

Overall, the present pedagogy follows Mrs. Johnson's recommendations. For example, the school adheres to its founder's belief in no grades. Students are tested, but their work is not graded. Instead, parents have conferences with the teachers every six weeks in order to learn about their children's progress. Similarly, any form of competition is discouraged. For instance, there are no class officers and no valedictorian. Sports are played for fun, not for winning. This attitude complies with that of Marietta Johnson, who said that "the spirit of competition is always dangerous." Instead of competition, the focus is on each child developing his unique interests and talents fully.²⁵

Teachers still employ the flexibility encouraged by Mrs. Johnson. They are able to spend as much time as needed on a subject, rather than having to complete a certain amount of material by a specific date. In addition, if a subject of interest spontaneously arises in class, time from the usual course of study can be taken out to devote to it. In essence, there is no rigid course schedule which must be followed. Mrs. Johnson would be proud of these practices.²⁶

The 1984 pedagogy also reflects Marietta Johnson by encouraging students to do their best. There is no point at which a pupil succeeds or fails; rather, students are asked to put all they can into what they are learning. Mrs. Johnson is perfectly mirrored in this respect.²⁷

Another depiction of Mrs. Johnson's ideals is the present atmosphere of the school. An air of informality permeates the place. Students feel at home; they spontaneously ask questions and offer comments. For example, recently, tenth-grade students in social studies class were busy writing answers to questions their teacher, Rachel Hosey, had handed out. One girl looked up from her book and said, "Ms. Hosey, you know what I learned? Today's date in the year 2000 would be written 4/25/00. Isn't that weird? I never knew that, did you?" Marietta Johnson said that such a condition would exist when learning was in harmony with the natural development of the child. She writes, for instance, "The child always has a redeeming idea until his elders direct, instruct, and thwart his efforts until the inner impulse is destroyed." The school's present informality leads one to believe that pupils' "inner impulses" are encouraged rather than stopped.²⁸

The Organic School of 1984 differs from the school under Mrs. Johnson's guidance in that it offers no supplemental programs. The Winter Course is no longer in existence. Also, the school

has no representative who lectures extensively around the country. In addition, teachers receive no special training. However, there are occasional teachers' meetings when the staff discusses Marietta Johnson's philosophy and how to apply it to the current situation.²⁹

One of the main dissimilarities to the former Organic School concerns the topic of continuity. Continuity between the child's life at home and his life at school was paramount to Marietta Johnson. She urged parental involvement in order to insure this goal. As stated previously, she instigated the Winter Course to teach parents how to raise their children in accordance with the child's natural growth pattern. Also, students generally started the Organic School in kindergarten and remained in it through high school, causing a consistent student body. Teachers, too, tended to stay with the school for many years.³⁰

Today, extensive parental involvement no longer exists. One of the main factors contributing to this condition is the structure of society. Often, either both parents work or the parents are divorced, resulting in a single parent family. Earlier in this century, the woman stayed at home and devoted her time to her children. That situation is now becoming the exception rather than the norm. Dual careers or sole responsibility for the household leave parents with limited time for family life. This situation is reflected by decreased parental participation in the Organic School.³¹

There is also a lack of continuity with students. Numerous pupils now come to the school after having attended public school for many years. It is hard for them to become a part of the organic system of learning, especially in the upper grades. They frequently find self-motivation difficult because of their orientation from public school to learn for grades.³²

Moreover, since 1965 thirteen different principals have headed the school, and most teachers leave now after working there several years. This condition is attributed in part to low salaries. Also, our society today is more mobile in terms of employment than the one of Marietta Johnson's day. Other reasons for personnel turnover are not known at this point. Further research needs to be conducted in this area in order to fully understand this condition. At any rate, the former smooth cohesion of ideology, teachers, parents, and students has become somewhat fragmented.³³

As well as affecting continuity in the Organic School, changes in society have influenced the school in other ways. For instance, child-centered education is no longer in vogue. The present educational climate is not one which favors experimental, creative teaching. In fact, many people in the nation desire the opposite: a strictly prescribed curriculum concentrating on basic facts to be memorized. The Organic School does not find the country as a whole so receptive to its methods as it once was. Further, technology has advanced rapidly throughout the nation, profoundly

affecting the nature of our culture. Children watch television. They hop into their cars and go to shopping malls or to the movies. Marietta Johnson made her school the center of each pupil's activities--social as well as intellectual. The Organic School was the total focus of its students' lives. The school now does not function in such a comprehensive manner. This change is more a result of societal conventions than the school's deliberate lack of adherence to Mrs. Johnson's principles.

The last difference between the school past and present concerns the nature of the student body. In recent years, many parents of children with learning or emotional problems have sent their children to the Organic School because they seek increased teacher attention. Marietta Johnson accepted a few exceptional children, but she maintained that her school was primarily for "normal" pupils. Efforts are being made to reverse this trend, but at this time there is still a relatively large proportion of students with learning or emotional difficulties. In general, the 1984 Organic School implements many of Marietta Johnson's educational ideals, although the character of the school varies in some ways from the former institution, due partly to the lack of Mrs. Johnson's presence and partly to societal changes.³⁵

In order to form a complete picture of the school, research needs to be done on its development since Mrs. Johnson's death in 1938. This paper contrasts only the institution under her guidance with the one of today. Nevertheless, some insights

can be gained. Marietta Johnson was an extremely charismatic woman who motivated people to follow her ideals wholeheartedly. Her charm and determination coupled with her innovative teaching methods caused her small school to receive national and international recognition. Under her inspiration, the Organic School was a bustling, vibrant place, filled with students, teachers, parents, and visitors from across the nation who were united through a common ideology. The fact that the school has continued for forty-six years after her death is a tribute to the power and the insight of this woman. The Organic School today is not the dynamo it was under Mrs. Johnson's influence, but it recognizes the validity of her ideals and makes an honest attempt to perpetuate their implementation.

NOTES

¹Paul Gaston, Women of Fair Hope (forthcoming in October 1984), pp. 2-125.

Robert Church, Education in the United States (New York: The Free Press, 1976), p. 252.

²John Dewey and Evelyn Dewey, Schools of Tomorrow (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1915), quoted in Marietta Johnson, The Fairhope Idea in Education (New York: The Fairhope Educational Foundation, n.d.), p. 22.

³Harold Rugg, director, The Twenty-Sixth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education: Foundations and Technique of Curriculum-Construction: Part I, Curriculum-Making: Past and Present (Bloomington, IL: Public School Publishing Company, 1926; reprint ed., New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969), pp. 349-351.

⁴Harold Rugg and Ann Shumaker, The Child-Centered School (Yonkers-on-Hudson, NY: World Book Company, 1928), p. 49 and p. 76.

⁵Church, Education in the U.S., pp. 404-428.

Albert Lynd, Quackery in the Public Schools (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1953), pp. 183-211.

⁶Lawrence Cremin, The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957 (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), pp. 147-153.

⁷Carol M. Thigpen, "The Development and Evolution of the Eight-Year Study" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1978), pp. 19-21, p. 38.

Gaston, Women of Fair Hope, pp. 2-125.

⁸Marietta Johnson, Thirty Years with an Idea (University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1974), pp. 1-16.

⁹Ibid., p. 67. ¹⁰Ibid., pp. 51-56. ¹¹Ibid., pp. 58-64.

¹²Ibid., pp. 65-70. ¹³Ibid., pp. 79-96. ¹⁴Ibid., pp. 97-115.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 81.

¹⁶Church, Education in the United States, p. 375.

¹⁷Paul E. Alyea and Blanche R. Alyea, Fairhope, 1894-1954 (University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1956), p. 131.

The Fairhope Courier, 22 November 1928.

¹⁸Gaston, Women of Fair Hope, p. 100.

¹⁹Johnson, Thirty Years, p. 45.

²⁰Gaston, Women of Fair Hope, p. 123.

²¹Ibid., p. 35.

Gaston, Women of Fair Hope, p. 111.

²²Ibid., p. 113.

The Fairhope Courier, 16 May 1929.

²³Interview with Robert Renz, Marietta Johnson School of Organic Education, Fairhope, Alabama, 24 April 1984.

Nancy James, the second life class teacher at the Organic School, was also interviewed on this date.

²⁴Ibid., Robert Renz.

²⁵Ibid.

Johnson, Thirty Years, p. 84.

²⁶Interviews, Patricia Laraway (art teacher, K-12), Rachel Hosey (social studies and physical education teacher, junior high and high school), Tillie Stephens (English teacher, junior high and high school), Linda Watts (math teacher, junior high and high school), Marietta Johnson School of Organic Education, Fairhope, Alabama, 25 April 1984.

²⁷Interviews, Robert Renz and teachers named in preceding notes.

²⁸The name of the tenth grade student who offered a comment is Kristie Killian.

Johnson, Thirty Years, p. 65.

²⁹Interviews, Robert Renz and teachers named in preceding notes.

³⁰Interview, Tillie Stephens.

³¹Ibid.

³²Interviews, Robert Renz and teachers named in preceding notes.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Johnson, Thirty Years, pp. 52-53.

Interviews, Robert Renz and teachers named in preceding notes.

³⁵Ibid.

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