CHAPTER ONE

PART V: Females on Campus

By 1890, female students were in the majority at ISNS, with 397 female students and only 184 males. The number of female students would continue to grow.

By 1900, there were 367 female students, and only 168 males. A predominance of female students was not unusual for normal schools, but it was for other institutions of higher education during the period.

In 1875, many colleges did not accept women students at all. For example, the University of Pittsburgh, then Western University of Pennsylvania, did not admit female students on a full-time basis until 1895. Many other colleges had at best small numbers of female students, and sometimes forced them to into separate female designated curriculums. Penn State began to admit women in 1871, but did so in small numbers. This was not the case in normal schools, where female students were well-represented and often in the majority and where they attended classes alongside male students.

In fact, excluding females was never really an option for administrators at ISNS. As already mentioned, in its early years, even with female students, the School had difficulties because it could not attract sufficient students. With teacher training as the central focus of their instruction, and the feminization of the profession already well underway, to keep afloat they would have to attract young female as well as male students.

Group of ISNS students in front of a campus fountain, including McClellan Gordon, suggests the numerical dominance of female students.
The co-educational nature of the institution and the large number of female students, which increased over the years, was touted as an educational advantage in the catalogs, but presented those who ran the school with issues they would not have had to deal with in a college with only male students.

Though increasing numbers of women were attending institutions of higher learning during this period, they were doing so in the face of societal pressures. Victorian values prized the purity of women and urged women to remain at home and hearthside. The choice to leave home to attend an institution of higher education, boarding there in the same building as young men, must have made some young women, or at least their parents, pause.

For more than a decade both male and female students lived in Sutton Hall. Though housed in separate wings of the building, they were still in close proximity, 24 hours a day. To regulate interaction of what they called their “young ladies and gentleman,” the Trustees and faculty adopted a set of rules which fell under the heading of “Association of the Sexes,” a term and system of rules common at co-ed institutions of higher learning at the time. Under these rules, which continued with
little alteration for many years, social, though not educational, interaction of students of different genders was severely restricted.

The first catalog states: “Our purpose is to make the Pennsylvania State Normal School in all respects, a well-regulated home for all who attend it; in which they may become familiar with the usages of the best society. But while there are very great advantages that arise from the proper co-education of the sexes, special precautions must be taken to guard against all possible evil or scandal. Hence the following regulations; which will commend themselves to all as necessary and wise.”

The rules would appear draconian to modern students. They included: ”Students shall not correspond, walk, or ride with those of the opposite sex; or meet in the reception room, parlor or elsewhere, except by special permission of the PRINCIPAL and PRECEPTRESS. Ladies and gentlemen are also expressly forbidden entering the halls appropriated to each other’s respective departments without permission. They are on no condition allowed to visit one another’s private rooms, except in the case of serious illness, and then only in the company of the Principal or Preceptress.”

The catalog warned: “These regulations we deem vital to the very existence of the Institution, and the disregard of them will be visited with the promptest and severest punishment that may be necessary to secure their faithful observance.” Such rules were hard to enforce. Over the years, they gradually became less restrictive, but stayed in effect in one form or another for nearly a century.

Faculty meetings included discussion of tightening or easing the restrictions or how to develop more specific rules when the students had outwitted them on some
occasion. For example, after unrecorded incidents at a Halloween party there were rules suggested, and accepted, that in the future strict precautions would be taken such as a member of the faculty would inspect the female students’ costumes before the party, certain doors would be locked for the occasion, and no one from outside the school would be allowed to attend. One can only imagine what the cause of such restrictions would have been.

On another occasion the faculty discussed rules for chapel attendance. Students were required to attend chapel for religious services, but the chapel was also used for a variety of other assemblies and entertainments. At all times male and female students were seated on separate sides of the aisle, and male and female students even had to exit the chapel on opposite sides of the room to limit any possibility of contact between the co-eds.

At times there was some easement in the restrictions to allow for what faculty considered being acceptable social interaction between the sexes. At first, the use of the “grove” was restricted to male students on Sunday morning and female students in the evenings. In the spring of 1882, the faculty minutes reflect the decision to allow young men and women to walk on campus in mixed groups during certain parts of the day, if there were at least three in each assemblage. Such groups were, however, limited geographically to remaining within sight of Sutton Hall.

Violations of these and other rules were brought before the faculty at their weekly (or more often when needed) meetings. The minutes of these meetings reflect student misconduct that was discovered and how the faculty dealt with it. Recorded in these minutes are many of the same transgressions that modern professors and
judicial boards encounter including cheating, theft, drunkenness, destruction of campus property and disturbances in the dormitories. By far the most common cause of students being disciplined was violations of the rules of Association of the Sexes. It is hardly surprising that a separate dormitory for the “young gentlemen” was an early priority for the Trustees. Having the young men out of the building must have made the task of keeping the sexes apart a bit easier.

Students were not the only transgressors though. In April of 1881, a male instructor appeared before the Trustees to argue for his reinstatement. He had been terminated over his interactions with one of the female instructors. He argued in defense of his conduct which involved according to the Trustees minutes, “considerable love making” between he and the female music instructor. The Trustees felt such interaction was highly inappropriate for a man and woman of “their mature age” and “gave rise to considerable gossip among the faculty and students and might have given rise to scandal.” They discussed terminating the female faculty member as well, but in a close vote, she was retained and he was reinstated. They were given a warning though, that in case of the least appearance of a repetition of the complaint alleged, both would be summarily dismissed.