

Arizona's Homeschool Roots

Arizona has the oldest homeschool law in the nation. Homeschooling has been legal in Arizona since statehood was granted on February 14, 1912. The original state legislators, aware of the remoteness of many areas and the lack of schools, knew they had to allow for some other means of education.

The history of homeschooling in Arizona extends back to territorial days. At the time the first Territorial Legislature met at Prescott in 1864, there were three small private schools that early settlers had set up at Prescott, Mojave and LaPaz; the padres' school at San Xavier Mission; and three parochial schools in Tucson. However, most of these schools did not stay in operation for very long.

On November 11, 1867, the Supervisors of Pima County voted to establish Pima County School District Number One and the first public school in Arizona. This school lasted only several months and its doors were closed in 1868. When newly appointed Territorial Governor Anson Peacely-Killen Safford arrived in 1869, he officially reported that no public school existed in the territory.

As a child, Governor Safford grew up on a frontier homestead in Illinois, where he learned to read and write without any formal education. Nevertheless, Governor Safford got caught up in the "education for all" enthusiasm of the times. He ambitiously advocated that education and books would do more for civilizing the frontier than guns and bullets would.

The independent pioneers who had settled the area were not easily won over. All through the year of 1871 not one school resulted from Governor Safford's efforts. Some desire for schools among the people did begin to appear and eight schools came into existence in 1872. Still, many children grew up on ranches miles away from the nearest school, so it was not unusual for children at this time to be educated at home.

Sharlot Hall, born in 1870, attended school for a couple of brief terms in a log-and-adobe schoolhouse four miles from her family's homestead, then boarded in Prescott for one year of school in town. However, most of her schooling took place on the ranch. While mainly self-educated, Sharlot was highly literate. She became Arizona Territorial Historian, the first woman to hold a public office.

Herbert V. Young, born in 1887 on a central Arizona homestead, dedicated his memoirs "To my father and mother, whose love, care, and teaching did so much to shape the lives of their children." He also wrote: "[We] explored the three R's under Mother's tutelage....She was a good teacher, and had concentrated on reading as the base for all other learning, though she had not neglected 'writin' and 'rithmetic."

Arizona was the last of the contiguous states to join the Union. The state's education law in 1912 read: "Every person who has custody of a child between the ages of eight and sixteen years shall send the child to a public school for the full time school is in session within the district in which the child resides.... [except if] the child is instructed at home by a competent teacher in the subjects given in the common schools of the state [or] the child is attending a regularly organized private or parochial school taught by competent teachers for the full time that the public schools of the district are in session."

One of Arizona's first two state senators was home educated. Born in 1874 to a pioneer ranching family, Henry Fountain Ashurst was raised near Flagstaff. The majority of Henry's early schooling came from ranch hands of various backgrounds, while his life in general was full of educational experiences. He also enjoyed reading, especially the classics. Ashurst's only formal education consisted of one year of law school.

Ashurst was later elected U.S. Senator, remaining in office until 1940. He was well known as a gifted and colorful orator who loved to quote Shakespeare. George F. Sparks, the editor of Ashurst's diary, explained: "His real teachers were the centuries of eloquence, the classical writers whom he never tired of reading....From them he acquired the long view across the sea of politics, and the loving command of rich language that flowed through a lifetime of oratory."

Today's Arizona homeschoolers can be proud of our state's rich homeschool heritage. Arizona was uniquely suited for adventurous men and women who were willing to think creatively and blaze new trails. Arizonans have always been a boldly independent folk. This same pioneering spirit is reflected in the modern homeschooling movement that is taking us back to our educational roots.

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Teri Ann Berg Olsen, home educator and author of *Learning for Life: Educational Words of Wisdom*, has been researching Arizona's homeschool history for her next book. Learn more at <http://www.ArizonaEdventures.com>.