

## A BACKWARD GLANCE AS THE DOORS OF THE RURAL SCHOOLS CLOSE

Memories of years spent in our rural schools as pupils, teachers and parents, creep back as ghosts through the closing doors. To many in hundreds of communities, the rural school was the only formal education we had. In spite of its many drawbacks and disadvantages, it was a part of a way of life, and thus, tugs at the heart strings when we know it is no more.

We shiver as we recall the (pre-bus) days when we were bundled in scarves, mittens, long stockings (wrapped inside with paper to keep the warmth within) and overshoes to face the wintry weather on the long hike to school on drifted, unplowed roads, alone or with your schoolmates, had a therapy valve missing today. It was a time to forget or a time to reflect on the pleasures or frustrations of the day as you hurried or dawdled along the road under the open sky.

Biology, science and art were silent teachers along the way. None knew better than a rural teacher or child, when the first May flower, cowslips or violets bloomed. Pussy willows, cocoons and frog eggs hatched and grew in quart jars on the window sills as reminders of life's ever changing round. There were many firsts: the first robin (in spring), first blade of grass turning green, first dandelion, in fall we wait for the first yellow pumpkin, first southward flight of geese, and later the first ice over streams and first snowfall. So many firsts and also many lasts.

Eight grades in one room has been called a calamity by some, but there was much good in this assortment of ages. Older pupils learned self reliance and concern for the younger ones as well as the pride in being trusted with chores to help the teacher. How much remedial teaching was done in a rural school each day! How many older pupils first "caught on" to the phonetic sounds and "families" as they watched them being taught to the first and second graders. If we missed fractions or long division due to days of illness, we learned by watching our classmates or the grade lower. We presented our work on the black board. Beauty of words and sounds as the older children recited from Longfellow, Whittier and Lowell always left a lasting interest in poetry in many of us younger children.

From the walls of every rural school hung pictures of Washington and Lincoln. Respect for our flag, chosen leaders and law was expected and taught in those days. We truly loved our country and were proud to be a part of it.

The dipper in the water pail, (frozen in winter if not emptied the night before) was used by all children. Later the dipper was used to fill the row of tin (named) cups. The chore of filling the water pail from the outside pump was usually done by the older boys. Later the crockery container replaced the water pail and dipper. An old wash basin and soap and towel were placed near the water pail.

Two outdoor toilets, swing or (teeter) seesaw were a part of rural school needs. Most schools were built on an acre of



land. Many times donated by the farmer who wanted education in his community and for his children.

The syrup pails were used to carry our lunches. They were lined up on shelves in the entry hall, weather permitting. In cold months the pails were placed near the pot belly stove. On rare occasions a girl would own a decorative (purchased) lunch pail - she was the envy of every girl in all the grades in school. Boys thought that was being a sissy, so the syrup pail was the only way to carry their lunch. Lunch consisted of everything from pancakes, potatoes, soup, and very rarely a fresh fruit "Pint Jar" method of bringing food from home was popular. It was heated in water on the stove, was forerunner of our hot lunch program in those days.

Kerosene lamps and their reflectors, gasoline lanterns or lamps with fragile mantels had their place on walls or ceilings in every rural school. They were never lit to help us study, only for special occasion such as basket or pie socials or Christmas and Halloween programs. How exciting the school looked with its windows gleaming at night and inside flickering shadows from the light and warmth of excitement. Christmas program night there were teams of horses blowing steam from their nostrils pulling sleighs. Children and their mothers covered with blankets and robes sat on hay, their feet warmed by heated bricks or flat-irons. Father sat in front with his horse-hide overcoat and gauntlets as he guided the horses through the dark. When they arrive at school, mother and children hastened to get inside the school, father buckled heavy horse blankets over the team to keep them from being chilled during the long wait for program to be over.

Inside, excitement ran high as we all were dressed in our Sunday best and got ready to recite and sing or act the plays we had practiced so long. The stage which had been set up by the big boys (sometimes the fathers), took up one end of the room. It was covered with rugs to muffle the sounds of excited children jumping on and off the stage before and after each act. Lucky were the two tallest children for they were always chosen to pull the curtains made from sheets, which children would bring from home for this big occasion. I could never bring a sheet. One reason was that we just had enough sheets for our beds and the second reason was that our sheets were made out of flour or feed sacks. From the smallest preschooler lisping their piece, to the self-conscious eighth grade boy who would have a part this special evening of the year. Usually from 35 to 45 pupils would close the long program and would await for Santa to arrive with his sack of goodies purchased by the teacher, (sometimes the school board paid part of the expense). It was hard to know which shown the brightest -- the eyes of the children, the light of the tree (candles), or the glow in the hearts of our parents, as they watched us waiting for Santa to give us our treat -- which was a bag filled with candy, peanuts, nuts, popcorn ball and apple. The teacher was not forgotten by the children, as each family scraped their pennies to buy a present for the teacher to be given by their children. After the last package was



given to the teacher by Santa, we all were bundled on the sleigh and taken home. After father unharnessed the team, and came inside we sat around with our sacks emptied on the table. Mother and father helped us to end a perfect and happy night, by enjoying our treat from our teacher. After a two week vacation, sad memories followed -- taking down the Christmas tree at home the first day back at school. Recalling the cold and stormy days that followed, there were days when only five or seven pupils and the teacher came to school. On those days we would go home about two o'clock. Those were sad days. You waited for your classmates to be back to school so "forts" out of snow could be made by two sides for attack fired by a mountain of snow balls. Again all 35 to 45 pupils had a part. I truly believe that January and February were months dreaded by every rural school child and teacher because attendance was small and we missed our classmates. School picnics in spring was another day of gathering. Fathers left their field work to join in the potluck dinner. There was lemonade by the milk can full and ice cream -- all you could eat (another treat from the teacher). Men folks played ball, while the teacher conducted races and games for the small fry and sometimes for the parents. Mothers talked in genial groups and cleared away the debris of the day.

Much can be written in favor of the courageous men and women who tackled to teach in a one room school with 35 to 45 pupils. They were overworked and underpaid. They often walked more than a mile from their boarding places to school, did their own janitor work or paid the older pupils to help. In winter months they would enter the cold school room only to find a stove with a small flame or the fire completely out. The temperature in the room was below freezing. The teacher would try to make it comfortable before the first child arrived.

Teachers were respected, often they stayed many years in a school and devoted their lives and molded the habits, character and education of an entire family generation. They grew to know the parents with their problems and shortcomings and were able to cope with the children's problems because she understood and was a family friend as well as their children's teacher. Every rural teacher recieved help from the county superintendent and supervising teachers. Young teachers were encouraged and guided in methods of teaching. Older teachers were brought up-to-date methods. Visits from county superintendents or supervisors required good behavior from all of us in school. Teacher had to be proud of us -- we hoped?

As the rural school, as we knew and loved them, pass into history, our gratitude goes to all from the past to the present who made the rural school what it was. May the new school system, as it replaces our smallest form of democratic government, carry on the role that this government "of the people, by the people and for the people shall not perish from this earth."

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