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THE REAL OLD-FASHIONED ONE ROOM SCHOOLHOUSE "STORY OF A DIFFERENT ERA"

By Mabel Connor

I should like to share some of my experiences in regard to the real old-fashioned one room schoolhouses.

I attended one from the age of five to twelve years. This was from September, 1909 to June, 1916. All grades were taught when children living in the district were in any of these grades from one to eight – no kindergarten. Sometimes it was possible to eliminate one or two grades or to combine two grades in one class with some variation in assignments.

This school was in a small farming community in Northern New York. The parents were mostly hard working conservative people. They were high-principled, not rich, but never considered themselves poor.

We had nearly all excellent, devoted teachers who were well respected. They were usually looked upon by their students with a certain degree of affection. Only one teacher I remember who had poor discipline under whom we learned very little.

My first teacher was a kind lady who taught to help her husband financially to complete his medical training. Since I was the youngest pupil and had to remain later than the other young children,

she was very motherly to me. She often held me on her lap for the last hour of school. We lived nearly a mile from the school so my parents wanted me to wait to walk home with my older brother. The other younger children who lived nearby went home earlier.

She was followed by other good teachers with the exception of one. When I was in the sixth and seventh grades, we had an excellent teacher, but more stern. I covered sixth, seventh and eighth grade work in two years and passed the Regent exams. I was ready to enter the village high school at age twelve. I learned a great deal of English grammar under this teacher which was a big help to me later when I studied foreign languages.

In regard to salary for teachers pay at that time, it ranged from six to eight dollars per week. When I was in fifth grade we had a very good teacher much liked by her pupils. She was receiving eight dollars per week. She asked for nine dollars for the next year. She was refused and dismissed.

As a rule the children got along quite well together. There were, of course, small quarrels and petty jealousies. They learned to study and play together. Occasionally, the teacher might join in the games at noon or recess. This was long before the time of radio or television when simple games were enjoyed – A different era!

During the pleasant weather in Spring and Fall, many games were played outside, “Blind Man's Bluff,” “Drop the Handkerchief,” “Three Deep” and different forms of tag. In Winter things changed with snow and cold weather. On fairly mild days the children played outside, making snow men, snow forts and had snow battles. However, the favorite winter game was “Fox and Geese.” first a large circle was tramped down in three or four inches of snow. This was crossed into sections like a huge pie. The “fox” stood in the center and all the other children were geese on the outside of the circle. The fox tried to gain a spot on the outside of the circle as the geese cautiously changed places.

This was long before the time of the school hot lunch, but these children were creative. A large iron box stove stood in the center of the room, the only source of heat. It burned huge blocks of wood. In bitter cold weather, instead of eating cold sandwiches, they toasted bread over the coals spread with

homemade butter or homemade jam. Besides, they made hot cocoa on top of this stove. Each child usually finished off this lunch with cookies and an apple from his own lunch pail.

On special occasions, birthdays or holidays, even fudge was made on top of the stove. A very special treat, much enjoyed in those days. Different families took turns bringing the ingredients from home.

If the lunch didn't take too long and the weather was bitter cold, games were played inside. Flinch, Rook, Dominoes; but a favorite was "Sir Peter Peppercorn." Sometimes guessing games were played or tic-tac-toe on the painted wooden blackboard.

It was considered a privilege to help the teacher, cleaning the blackboard and dusting the erasers. Often older, quick, bright pupils corrected simple arithmetic papers from the first and second grades. Younger pupils seemed to learn considerably from the older ones' classes.

A twelve quart galvanized water pail stood on the shelf in the corner. When two of the older children had finished their assignments, they were allowed to go to the nearest house or spring. They brought back about three-fourths of a pail of fresh cold water for all to drink. This, too, was considered a privilege since they were allowed fifteen or twenty minutes during regular school hours. Many of the children had their own collapsible cups, otherwise, the tin dipper was used.

After graduating from high school and attending "Normal School," I taught for several years in another one-room school.. Things were much the same, except some of the pupils here came from really poor homes, some with illiterate parents. One family had several school age children who were truly mentally deficient. Although I spent a lot of time and great effort determined to teach them, I found it practically impossible. One teen age boy of this family finally achieved second or third grade level in Arithmetic, but almost nothing in other subjects.

However, on the bright side, I had a few vary smart children who did two years work (seventh and eighth) grades in one year. One girl whose mother was completely illiterate did excellent work in school. She was very shy and self conscious as she had never had the opportunity to get out among

people. She refused to go to the village school to take her Regents examinations unless I went with her the first day. She was well worth the effort on my part as she passed every Regents exam. With considerable urging and help from an uncle in another town, this girl finished four years of high school.. I attended her graduation some distance away and took her parents with me to share in her hard earned success.

To add a bit of color to this seemingly dull routine, I should like to say we studied nature at close range – sometimes too close. This school was near mountains and in a wooded area. We learned the names and to recognize most common varieties of trees and shrubs by their bark, shape and leaves; Also, their greatest potential use: It might be lumber for building, pulp wood for paper or fine maple and walnut for furniture. Rabbits, squirrels, chipmunks, many kinds of birds and butterflies were most common. Occasionally a frightened deer might cross the front lawn of the school. The greatest excitement was when a well grown bob cat was closely observed resting on a limb which overhung one of the outhouses. He made no disturbance and seemed as curious as we were. No one was harmed – A story to be retold often.

I did enjoy teaching and had a special affection for most of my pupils. I believe this was partially reciprocated. After I married, and started raising a family of my own, some of my pupils urged me to return to teaching. It was a respected occupation. I felt I learned much and still cherish the memories. It certainly was a challenge and most worthwhile experience.

Perhaps I should add that my mother also taught in a one-room school in the late 1880's. She received three dollars a week, part of which was “boarded out” around the neighborhood in lieu of taxes. Some of the places were not too desirable, but usually their taxes were lower so she stayed a short time there. One family, in particular, were fine people with whom she formed life long friendships. In fact one of my earliest memories is of a framed photograph of this family which always hung in her bedroom. Teaching in a one room school was an experience never forgotten which remained a good memory.