

CEDARCROFT Our Schools

By Mary Margaret Moninger

The following article is the third and final section of "Cedarcroft" (a family history written in 1940) to be published in the Annals. It is here published by permission of Miss Louise Moninger and Mrs. Helen Moffat, sisters of the author.

Mary M. Moninger was born and raised in Iowa. She graduated from Grinnell College in 1913, taught school in Iowa for two years and, in 1915, she went to the Island of Hainan, South China, as a missionary under the Presbyterian Board. In this chapter of "Cedarcroft" Miss Moninger tells about the early country school in Iowa.

In our checkerboard state, the school houses came at regular intervals, standing at or near a crossroad and fenced off with an acre or so of land around the building. A coal or wood house and two small outbuildings stood near. In our township, the school houses were white frame buildings instead of the traditional red brick. There was an entry way at one end, with an outside door and one or two doors into the main room. In the entry way were hooks for hanging cape or hoods and coats, and a shelf for lunch boxes. Rubbers were left in the entry too, but in winter, overshoes and leggins were dried under the stove. The stove stood at the end of the room opposite the door. One side of the room was all blackboard, and there were short stretches of board behind the teacher's desk, between the windows and at one end of the room.

I started school in Marietta Township, District No. 2 — often called the "Moninger School" because it was on my Grandfather Moninger's land. Geographically, I should have gone to District No. 4 or the "Pyle School" and later when my Uncle Harold bought his farm in that district, I did go there, as did all the other children in our family. It was a mile and a half from our house to either school. The road to No. 2 was a lonely one, straight north all the way, with only one house on the whole road. The first quarter mile was along our own farm, and along this stretch we could find real crows' foot

violets, the dark blue kind. From the crossroads, we went down a steep hill and across a bridge over a small creek where, on either side of the road, the cowslips bloomed golden yellow in the spring. We then went up a bit of sandy road past the Pemberton house, across the sandhill and past our own big pasture. The pale pansy violets bloomed in one place in the Edsall pasture along that road; and on top of a little rise in ground, a clump of honeylocusts and another clump of wild crabapples were gorgeous and fragrant in blossom time. Just at the end of the pasture was a bit of slough road along what we always called "Dead Dog Ditch" because once we had seen a dead dog there. It was a shame to name the slough that because in spring and summer the loveliest patch of spiderwort I ever saw bloomed there. Next came the "Willow Pool", a little pool made by the widening of a tiny creek with a clump of old willows on the west side of the road. One of our children's books had a rhyme: "Twenty froggies went to school; Down beside the willow pool." So, of course, the place was named for us and, at least twice, 20 froggies did go to school there, judging from the noise they made when the weather took certain turns. We then went up a rather steep hill and across Grampa's pasture to the school — the road went around a corner or two, so the short cut across the pasture was faster.

There were usually from 15 to 25 pupils in the school; they ranged from tiny five and six year olds just starting (beginners came in the spring term) to the big boys and girls who were nearly grown up, with assorted sizes in between. We certainly had good times — the days weren't long enough for all we had to do. Of course, we had our lessons — readin' an' writin' an' 'rithmetic, grammar, spelling, geography, history. I was started in the Pollard Phonetic System and can remember yet the dark blue covered primer. My lessons never stuck in my mind though like my father's early lessons did in his — "Tom Twist was a wonder fellow; No boy so nimble and strong; He could turn ten somersaults backwards; And stand on his head all day long." or, "How big was Alexander, pa? The Fellows call him great." Reed and Kellogg was our standard grammar, diagramming our key to knowledge in that subject — and it is still to my mind the best way

to get an understanding of sentence structure. Ask any Latin teachers who takes classes brought up on mere "language work" in the grades and wrestles with them in Latin grammar! Our final arithmetic was Franklin's, I think, and a good text. Often on Friday afternoon we would "spell down" or "cipher down" for an hour before school closed.

Sometime during the day, usually just after school took up at 1:00, the teacher read a chapter or two of a storybook to us. Our county had an excellent school library system and, as Father was secretary of the school board for the township, once a term he would drive from one school to the next, from No. 1 at Minerva to No. 10 across the river, exchanging the books and adding new ones from year to year. We could read books in school time when our lessons were done and take them home, too. There were paper mats to weave, cut-out maps to put together (fore-runners of jigsaw puzzles), etc.

Recesses and noons, of course, were the greatest fun and there was never a dull moment. On very rainy days or snowy, blizzard days when we had to stay inside, we played "post office" and guessing games or mumble-the-peg, at which some were very clever. Out of doors, ball was our greatest standby, "ante-over," "one old cat," "two old cat," and "single nine." "Double nine" we never had enough players to use. Everyone could play "ante-over;" we divided into two sides, the captains measuring hands-up-a-stick for first choice of players, the defeated one taking choice of sides. When all was ready, the players stood half on one side of the school house and half on the other; the ball was thrown over the school house roof with the cry "ante-over." If a player caught the ball on the fly or on "first bounce" his side rushed around the school house to catch as many as possible of the opposing side, as they rushed around the building in the exchange of side. Then the fun began! "One old cat" and "two old cat" were last resorts when players were limited to three or four. "Single nine" needed at least nine for a full force, but could manage with two or three less or more, and we tore around our diamond—batter, pitcher, catcher, first base, second, etc. moving up as an "out" put the batter down into the field. We used a solid rubber ball and sometimes

took time out to resuscitate a player hit with it in any vulnerable spot. We played "livery stable" in the spring, with certain speedy runners as horses harnessed with cords. "Patrons" came to hire a horse or a team and take a wild drive around the school yard. "Pom-pom-pull-away" was another good game for everybody, and we had "drop the handkerchief," "cat and mouse," "Jacob and Ruth," and sometimes "Pussy wants a corner" and "prisoners' base."

In winter we wore our thick high leggings and overshoes — built forts for snow battle or played "fox and geese." But, at No. 2, coasting was *the* sport. Grandfather's pasture had a long steep hill in it, just near the school house, and when things were just right we could start at the top of the hill, rush down it and along a level stretch, swing through the open gate into the road and go almost to the railroad track — about a quarter mile in all. The hill was so steep as to be almost dangerous, and small fry couldn't be trusted to guide a sled down it, even if they owned their own sled.

I had an extra fine sled which my Grandpa Kellogg had made me, stout and strong, with a special type of runner — it was very popular. It had a box to fit, which could be screwed on and was used when any of us were tiny and were being taken for a ride. When we were coasting, the big boys and some of the more daring and athletic big girls (only our elders said "tomboys" instead of "athletic girls" then) lay on their stomachs on the sleds and we smaller ones went down "bellyback," one or two at a time, astride our conductors back and holding on for dear life to coat collars or whatever we could grab. It may have been dangerous, but I never saw anything more serious than an upset into the snow since the speed was so slackened before reaching the gate that even hitting the post would not have been too bad. I've heard father say that in his day they did far worse — six or eight people on a board across the front bobs of a sled, careening down the hill.

At No. 4 School the coasting wasn't so good. There was a short steep hill and a longer gradual one but they were on the public road and the sled tracks didn't fit our narrow runners. But there were compensations, particularly a creek just below the school yard, and we spent many a busy hour

damming it — only it never stayed dammed. Drowning out or snaring grinnies (ground squirrels) and trapping gophers engaged our attention, too. This school had no wells on the ground and we took turns carrying water from the nearest house. Once a year, in winter, we would have a box supper. We had three terms of school, spring term from Easter to mid-June, fall term from September 1 to corn picking time, and winter term in between with two weeks of vacation at Christmas and New Year. This meant three "last days of school" with programs of songs, recitations and dialogues — and report cards. Our mothers and sisters and little brothers came to these afternoon affairs — but seldom any fond fathers.

In general we had very good teachers, and learned our rudiments of reading, writing and arithmetic very thoroughly, even if we did not have all the extra things then taught in town schools and now taught in consolidated and standardized schools that have so largely superseded the old one-room district school. My father was secretary of the township school board and he signed the teachers' warrants and sometimes their pension papers. Miss Bruner was my first teacher, and she always boarded at Grandpa's and was a family friend. We often visited at her home in Toledo and after she stopped teaching, she often visited us. When she left the Moninger school after many years of service, the patrons gave her a gold band ring which she wore until her death. I remember Mrs. Waters, Maggie Anderson, and later Miss Myra Jensen of Morrison. Miss Jensen was very well liked by her students and was an excellent teacher; she always boarded at Uncle Harold's. Genevieve Heighton and Kate Timmons were two other teachers of ours, and later when John was in school he had a man teacher, Mr. Belden, but men teachers in country schools were rare.

I finished country school before the days of eighth grade examinations and went to Marshalltown to high school before many country pupils were attending there.

When I think of all the effort Daddy and Mother put forth to give us our education, it is a staggering total. Mother once figured that she had put up school lunches for 23 years.

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