

Much of the time we indulged in somewhat rougher sports. "Cowboys and Indians" was considered harmless until one time the "Indians" captured a "cowboy" and started to burn him at the stake with a real fire. Bow-and-arrow fights were commonplace. So were snowball fights, and they could get brutal when the snowballs were dipped in water and stored out in some hidden cache overnight during subzero weather.

We made use of whatever we happened to have. A bandanna handkerchief knotted around a boy's throat produced an instant cowboy, and pulling it up over the lower part of his face turned him into a stagecoach robber. A lot of things could be made with spools, corset staves, tobacco cans, rubber bands cut from discarded inner tubes, raw whang leather, shoe tongues, pieces of scrap iron, and old shingles. Harness rivets made a fine decoration for any old leather belt.

It would no doubt surprise a later generation to know what the average enterprising country boy could come up with in those days using only a jackknife as a basic tool. The whole area was pretty heavily timbered, so wood of any kind was never a problem. Any boy worthy of his salt could make a bow complete with straight arrows, a willow whistle, a shinny stick, or a rabbit snare. Corn cobs were quickly fashioned into corn cob pipes. The iron bands from wooden wagon-wheel

axles made good rolling hoops, and most any discarded piece of farm machinery would yield enough strap iron to make runners for a bobsled. Lariats could be spliced out of old hitching ropes.

I had a cast-iron capgun pistol, as did several others. But I also happened to be a real handy whittler, and using that pistol for a model, I carved out literally dozens of pretty realistic life-size wooden six-shooters that were used to shoot their way through scores of bitter gun battles between good cowboys and bad outlaws.

Each morning came the potential honor of being chosen to raise the flag. Then we all saluted it and recited the Pledge of Allegiance. Next, we sang two or three songs, picked out from a couple of old moss-covered song books dating back to Civil War times—songs such as "Red Wing," "Marching Through Georgia," "Old Black Joe," "Massa's in the Cold, Cold Ground," "Swanee River," and such. The teacher would lead us in song and the results are not to be remembered! I still can't carry a note.

The studies were basic: reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic, history, geography—there may have been others. In later grades, civics was added. We memorized

"Everyone had a part"

Attending a One-Room School in the 1930s

by Lowell E. Horton

My tenure at Brushwood #5 (or "Frogpond") extended from September 1932 to April 1939, during which time I maintained perfect attendance, being neither absent nor tardy. The school year ran for eight months from early September to mid- or late April. The student population generally ranged between 8 and 16 students, about equal as to boys and girls. Having only one student in a grade was quite common, and in many years

not all grades between first and eighth were represented. I can still name 19 of my schoolmates between those years—4 Chipps, 2 Burchetts, 10 Wests, a Palmer, and my brothers George and Loren. I also remember a girl and a boy who lived up East Long Creek on the east side. They attended one year, were reputed to have the itch, and were treated shamefully.

All schools in the county were under the general direction of a county superintendent of schools, a

position held by Ada Tillotson during all the years of my recollection. Supervision of the local school was in the hands of a three-person school board. Its function, at least in part, included hiring the teacher and arranging room and board if



Lowell Horton in eighth grade.

poetry, some of it surprisingly good. I remember there were verses from "Hiawatha," "Evangeline," Poe's "Raven," "The Village Blacksmith," Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar," and so on.

The "library" consisted of two small wooden shelves in the corner with a collection of donated or leftover volumes. I read them all and still remember that they ran something like this: Fox's *Indian Primer*, several McGuffey's readers, *Swiss Family Robinson*, *Life of Daniel Boone*, books on the lives of Lincoln, Washington, great American inventors, great American patriots. It was also where I first learned of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, and of early Egyptian history. *Ivanhoe* was another one.

We didn't have a laboratory, but we had nature studies. And we could go as far during the noon hour as we could get back from by the teacher's handbell (we were not blessed with a belltower).

Everyone recited at the front of the room, and if all eight grades were represented, everyone got a chance to learn ahead, or review backwards, as the case may be. We learned county government, state officials, federal officials, what the state produced, names of counties, the states, et cetera.

As for social studies, when you are thrown together at any given childhood age for eight hours a day with

others—boys and girls, ages five to nineteen—you learn about people.

I guess long before now you have learned that I do not consider a one-room school any disadvantage. I am proud of having gone to one. The age differences were good for me. I was the oldest in my family, and when I started to school, the older girls sort of looked after me as a little six-year-old. Later, I was proud to have held my own with boys much older than I in the rough-and-ready arena of the school grounds and the long road home (where the fist fights always seemed to occur).

In my particular case, my father and mother had both taught in one-room schools briefly before I was born and so I naturally had some head start before school. With that and the advantage of listening to all grades reciting before me, I completed the eight grades in six years. I went on to be salutatorian of my high school class, had a couple of years of college, was an officer in World War II, and at no time ever felt any disadvantage from having learned the fundamentals in a one-room country school that no longer exists today. ❖

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needed, seeing to an ample supply of firewood in the woodshed, doing needed maintenance to the building (although I don't recall that the fence was ever maintained during the time I was there), and, I assume, all business matters as directed by the county superintendent.

Discipline was exercised in many forms and had a lot to do with one's grade in deportment. One teacher, Charley Brown, had a piece of broken yardstick that made a good "whack." Except when called upon to recite, speaking or whispering during school hours was not allowed. By raising one's hand with one, two, or three fingers extended, one could get permission to either sharpen a pencil, go to the outhouse, or speak with the teacher or another student. I've forgotten the

code and no longer remember which finger signal went with which activity, but at the time the system worked very well.

Students supplied their own textbooks, pencils, pen and ink, and tablets. In my case, most textbooks were handed down from my older brothers, Harvey and George. I remember that, from middle grades on, I was pretty well up on most of them before the appropriate grade arrived. Also, one could do a lot of learning as older students recited their lessons. Since Mom and Pop both had libraries, I was able to do a lot of reading at home. (The school didn't have many story books.)

Subjects taught in the first three grades included reading, orthography, citizenship, phonics, and arithmetic. We were also graded on neat-

ness, industry, and deportment. From fourth grade on, the subjects covered civics, reading, penmanship, arithmetic, geography, grammar, spelling, U.S. history, physiology, music, drawing, and physical education. Science was also taught in eighth grade. Grading on deportment was standard throughout.

Nearly all of the "homework" was actually done at school—things such as studying assignments, reciting lessons, doing arithmetic problems and times tables, learning names of states and capitals, practicing penmanship, memorizing history dates, and learning government structure and office-holders.

Spelling was a top item for me, and I went to the county spelling contest once. I was in fourth grade when my brother Harvey was at-

tending business college in Grand Island, Nebraska. He also had a spelling class and we sometimes exchanged word lists in our correspondence. His words were much longer than mine.

Report cards show my grades in music to have been fairly good, but I remember nothing whatsoever about the subject, and there is no evidence in later life that anything of a permanent nature was absorbed. I think we had a hand-wound phonograph and some records, but no instruments that I know of.

Penmanship was not much better. My grades were fairly good and I remember spending lots of time doing practice sheets, drawing lines and circles, and that sort of thing, but my handwriting was and still is barely on the legible side.

Graduation from grade 8 was a requirement for enrollment at Murray High School. Occasionally a student had trouble making that hurdle and, if failure continued, usually threw in the towel at age 16 or so.

During the early and mid-1930s, money was scarce, and many ingenious ways were devised to get around this problem. One was to extend the life of a pair of shoes by going barefoot during the warm months, and it was quite acceptable for the younger boys to go to school barefooted. We had an unofficial competition to see who could hold out the latest in the fall before freezing out. I distinctly recall one year going to school barefooted on frozen ground in order to win. I also recall that my feet were weather-cracked and sore, but winning was worth it.

The walk from home to school was one mile, uphill and down (over hill and dale, so to speak). I

had to leave home promptly at 8 o'clock each morning and arrived at school between 8:30 and 9 o'clock depending on the weather and the distractions en route.

The trip home usually took longer unless the weather was bad. Most of the time I walked home with Ira Burchett and we often found that nature study matters were good reasons for delay. Bird nests had to be looked for, snakes caught, and other interesting things could usually be found. I remember when a big blue racer held us up for nearly an hour one nice afternoon.

I tried never to be later than 6 o'clock as Mom ran out of patience about then and punishment was apt to follow. One exception was when I got stuck in the clay mud in the middle of the road. This was within shouting distance of the house. After some hollering back and forth for a while, I convinced my parents that I couldn't get out and Pop came to my rescue. He almost got stuck too, so they knew I wasn't kidding. In retrospect I think the afternoon dawdling of these early years whetted my lifelong thirst for learning about the natural world around me.

I remember two different events that were put on to raise money for needed school supplies. One was the annual pie supper held at the schoolhouse during the fall. Each of the neighborhood ladies brought a pie (sometimes a cake) to the early evening affair. Each dessert was auctioned off to the highest bidder, who then was entitled to join its baker and enjoy eating it with her. A couple of the ladies had established reputations as excellent bakers, and their pies produced some fierce bidding. Others were sometimes hard to sell, but since almost everyone came as couples, everything eventually sold and everyone paired up to eat.

The few older unmarried girls

in the area also brought pies, and the bidding by older boys seemed to me at the time to be downright ridiculous. Sometimes the deal was rigged and a married man bought the girl's pie so the "wannabe" suitor had to bid elsewhere (just to teach the young sprout a lesson, as I understood it). The younger kids, including myself, always got a piece of pie by invitation at one desk or another.

The other event, a raffle, was conducted only once as I recall. The student who sold the most tickets would receive a prize, and school was let out early one afternoon so everyone could sell tickets. Most of the kids just went home, but I undertook a long journey to most of the farms within a mile. I sold several tickets, too, and prospects for winning the prize looked good. Unfortunately, another student's parents bought enough tickets to guarantee their child would win. Mom was highly critical of this tactic. I learned another of life's many lessons.

Each year about Christmas time the students put on a program for parents and others. I remember almost nothing of the program content other than that everyone had a part and everyone had a stagehand duty. The preparation required six bed sheets supplied by parents; Mom usually furnished two. The teacher's desk was moved, and lengths of telephone wire were strung across the front and along the sides. Two sheets were hung loosely on the center wire so they could be opened or closed as the program required. The curtains on the sides made small, concealed areas for props and actors. The curtains were handled by older students.

The teacher was positioned behind the curtain at the front of the stage to handle the prompting job.

Most of the actors were not too good at remembering their lines or entrance cues. It was all pretty traumatic for small actors and a great relief when it was successfully concluded. The audience seated themselves at the desks, first come, first served. Those at the bigger desks probably enjoyed the program more, but everyone clapped a lot and had a good time.

I think older boys had the honor of getting the Christmas tree for the schoolhouse, but I remember tagging along as a younger kid. We went to a hillside a half-mile away that had red cedar seedlings and small trees scattered about. We had the owner's permission to cut one. The selected tree was taken back to the schoolhouse, mounted on a block of wood, and readied for decorating.

Many of the decorations had been made at home and brought to school to be hung on the tree. Popcorn strings and bunches of woodbine berries were made at school. I suppose tinsel and icicles were donated by someone, but that point has passed on. I don't recall that gifts were ever exchanged at school, probably because gifts were a scarce commodity at that time.

On St. Valentine's Day it was our custom to exchange valentine cards, and some aspects were rather traumatic for a young lad. The cards were handmade at home and taken to school for exchange. We cut out hearts and other designs from any colored papers we could find and pasted them up to decorate the card. Each card had to include a disgustingly mushy sentiment, such as "Sugar is sweet and so are you" or "Will you be my valentine." This is where the trauma began. The valentines were exchanged with everyone at school, girls as well as boys. The only saving grace was that all valentines were anonymous, mak-

ing it impossible for the girls to prove authorship of the valentines they received. The only exception was the teacher's valentine. This was the biggest and best that one could make, and was signed boldly in hopes of acknowledgment or maybe even a perk of some sort.

Games of several sorts were played at recess time and I suppose those involving teams were a basis for part of the grading in physical education. Ante-over was one we played a lot. Team captains chose up sides, one team positioned on the north side of the schoolhouse, the other on the south side. A ball (usually a softball) was thrown over the roof for the opposing team to catch. Team members took turns throwing, but little kids could name their stand-in. Points were tallied for catching the ball. The trick was to throw the ball so that it barely cleared the peak of the roof and rolled down the other side. The roof pitch was such that the opponents could not see the ball until it cleared the eaves and, since it might be appearing anywhere from end to end, catching it became a real challenge. Missed throws (failure to get the ball over the top) were penalties and called for point reductions. The game was often played with only one or two on a side, as a variation on playing catch.

In the spring and early fall we also played a lot of marbles, but this was just for boys and was not an organized sport. Those who had perfected the "end of finger" technique were held in awe as that shot could shatter a glassy. Those who couldn't shoot it kept trying. We usually played "keepers" so it paid to become as proficient as possible.

Winter in Iowa always produced snow and this brings back two sorts of recollections, the good

and the not-so-good. The good were the pleasures of sledding. The not-so-good were the struggles that came from blizzards and drifting. Both were common phenomena.

I don't recall going to school with a blizzard in progress, but two occasions come to mind when the morning trek to school followed a night of blizzarding and Pop had to help me get to school. We would travel across the fields, as drifting in the roads was often too deep to break through and open fields usually had just the actual snowfall without many drifts. The first time we took one of the horses. Pop led the horse and broke trail as I sat astride the horse (I was in third or fourth grade at the time and somewhat shorter than the snow pack). This system worked okay so far as I could see.

The second time Pop decided he wasn't going to break trail for a damn horse, so he just broke trail for me and I slogged along behind him. This system worked okay too, but I liked the other way better. Actually, with drifts often five or six feet deep, there was no way a small kid could have made it alone.

One year the shallow rise just west of Sam Kane's place drifted full from fence top to fence top. The V-plow used by the county to plow out roads was stuck in it, leaving 50 to 75 yards of road packed solid with snow six to eight feet deep. Drifts like this always crusted over and would support a walking person until the weather warmed. Therefore, the road blockage didn't affect the going to and from school. However, we soon discovered that some of the cuts were exceptionally good spots for digging snow caves and such. As a result this drift became a site for serious dawdling on the way home from school. After about two or three weeks, the local farmers joined forces and dug the

drift out by hand, thus allowing the U.S. Mail (and some groceries and supplies) to pass through—but really messing up the snow cave project.

Now to the really good part of winter—sledding. The first three-quarters of my daily trip to school was poor sledding, a few shallow downslopes but mostly uphill. The last quarter mile was worth the wait. The Sam Kane Hill was long and steep, then a short swale and rise leading into the Schoolhouse Hill, which was shorter but even steeper. In poor snow conditions this stretch was pretty good. In good snow conditions it was great. Sometimes one could almost clear the rise without stopping.

One winter an ice storm covered the hillsides with ice. We had been using our strap-on ice skates to skate in the pasture, but the morning trip to school with the sled was even better. A running start produced a good ride even on the flats and shallow slopes. Then came that last quarter mile. As soon as I started down the Sam Kane Hill, I knew this was something different. As the speed increased, the wind brought tears to my eyes and I knew there was no choice but to hang on. The world was a blur as I crossed the swale and over the rise, sled runners scream-

ing on the ice, and the slackening of speed scarcely noticeable.

And then—the Schoolhouse Hill. The roadside became a solid blur. Knuckles tightened on the steering bar, and all emotions froze. Too scared to go, and too scared to let go. As I hit the flat at the base of the hill, the schoolhouse whizzed by and I shot eastward at blinding speed. Somewhere about halfway to East Long Creek, I drifted to a stop. I lay on the sled a long moment, slowly realizing the significance of the experience that had just been granted to me. A brief walk back to the schoolhouse and it was all over. On a scale of one to ten, I would have to rate this ride as somewhere between glorious and ecstatic.

Another exciting but more serious event involved sledding on the school grounds. After a good snow we could trample out a good sled run from the higher west side down to the flat by the schoolhouse and ending at the road on the east side. Those of us with sleds would use this during recesses and the noon period. There were usually more kids than sleds so we often went double. Most of the time one of the younger (and smaller) kids rode the top spot and, if a good running mount was made, that often increased the length of the run.

On one occasion one of the older kids, without asking, leaped aboard

as I was starting a run. He weighed as much or more than me and the extra weight added momentum. Our speed increased and I could tell it would be a very long run. And so it was. We reached the road and continued eastward at a pretty good clip. I saw there was a fence on the far side of the road and it had a barbed wire strand about 18 inches from the ground. I crouched down low so as to pass under it. The passage was made cleanly and the ride went on for a ways.

As the sled came to a stop, I realized I no longer had a passenger. Rushing back to the fence I saw the other kid getting up, staggering some, but not looking a whole lot different than usual. It seems that the barbed wire struck him in the forehead at the precise center of gravity. The wire didn't break so he stopped quite abruptly. I suppose the snow cushion, heavy clothing, and luck must have combined to prevent serious injury. But I'll bet the memory of the incident stayed with him for a long time.

Come to think of it, it has stayed with me for a long time, too. Neither of us mentioned the accident to the teacher and, so far as I know, neither did anyone else. ❖

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Rural Schools—Who decided what?

The typical one-room rural school of Iowa was a creature of a local board of education, for an area that averaged four square miles each. Curriculum supervision was in the hands of a county superintendent. It was one of the only political and elective offices open to women, and women served as county superintendents of schools in many counties. In 1915, for example, 55 of Iowa's 99 counties had women superintendents.

Matters of curriculum were addressed by the Department of Public Instruction. As early as 1922 it promoted

the value of "practical subjects that pertain to rural life, and that are valuable to the health and citizenship in the community." By 1932 it recommended extending rural choirs to each school; broadening reading and study programs to include language, grammar, and social studies; and increasing funds for libraries. By 1942 health education was emphasized. Vocational rehabilitation of what were termed "severely handicapped persons" was emphasized during the war years. Special education for handicapped children became statute in 1948.

—by Loren N. Horton