HOW MUCH DIFFERENCE can a decade make in the experiences of rural students? Did the roaring twenties, the grim thirties, or the warring forties change what farm children were taught or how their schools looked and operated?

Consider this as you look back with three brothers—Harvey, Lowell, and Loren Horton—who all attended the same one-room school, though in different decades, in Clarke County, in south-central Iowa.

In 1925, Clarke County's population was just over 10,000. For nearly 4,000 of those five and older, a one-room school, through eighth grade, was the full extent of their education. It was a universal experience in many ways, yet one of the benefits of autobiographical accounts like these is that the differences, as well as the similarities, become evident. (One similarity you'll note is the authors' vivid and detailed memories of recess.)

Many of you will recogize the name of Loren Horton, former senior historian with the State Historical Society of Iowa. Over the last several years, thousands of Iowans have attended Loren's numerous presentations on state and local history as he traveled through Iowa. Here Loren travels back to his own past, as he reviews his rural school experience in the 1940s. His essay follows that of his two brothers, who write about earlier decades.

—The Editor

"You learn about people"

Attending a One-Room School in the 1920s

by Harvey R. Horton

I attended Brushwood School #5 in Doyle Township of Clarke County, Iowa, for six years, from the fall of 1922 until the spring of 1928. Our one-room school was located at the foot of a steep hill less than a quarter of a mile from East Long Creek, which overflowed in the spring—hence the school's informal name, "Frogpond."

In late summer before school started, the neighbors with children would spend a day cleaning the place up. The ladies would scrub the floors, wash the walls, and tidy up the inside. The men would mow the weeds, cut brush as needed, fill up the woodshed with firewood, check the pump, and make any necessary repairs.

The school was a frame building (replacing a log cabin that the old-timers had attended), oblong in shape and fairly large, as I remember it. It was heated with a Round Oak type stove located toward the center of the room. (The teacher used to pay one of the older boys to come early and start the fire before the rest of us came.) In cold weather we clustered around the stove to keep warm, burning in front and freezing in back. We were all farm kids, and some of the older boys ran trap lines in the wintertime. When they gathered around the stove and their heavy wool and denim clothes got steamed up, it was real easy to tell if anyone had caught a skunk in one of the traps.

Harvey Horton, age 12, on the way to a state spelling contest.

Besides holding a winter's supply of fuel, the large woodshed to the back also had a high door and room for horses during severe, blizzardy weather. Our teachers sometimes rode horses in bad weather. So did some of the rest of us, but we usually just tied the reins when we got there, gave the horse a slap on the shoulder, and told him to head for home, which he did.

The grader ditch along the road was where the teacher had us go out and lie down on those occasions when a neighbor came tearing by on a horse or in a car, warning that a "cyclone" had been sighted and might be coming down along East Long Creek.

In those days the schoolteacher was one of the most respected and highly regarded individuals in the community.

ALL PHOTOS AND OBJECTS COURTESY OF LOREN N. HORTON

Like many Iowans, the three Horton brothers attended a typical one-room school. Theirs (pictured here) was Brushwood #5, in Doyle Township, Clarke County, Iowa.

One of the terms of the contract was that if he or she was not a local resident, he or she must board with a family in the community. Most of the parents had received little education beyond a one-room rural school, and they were determined that their children would get a basic education. Actually, very few of the schoolmates I had in Brushwood ever went on to graduate from high school. The distance, ten miles, plus the Great Depression, helped to account for that.

School board members were landowners with children or grandchildren in school. My father served on the school board for more than 30 years. Having your father on the school board then was like being a minister's son in a small town. Members of the school board frequently stopped in unexpectedly for a couple of hours when they were in the vicinity to check on the teachers and pupils and make sure everyone was "reciting" every day.

Candidates for office also would drop by and leave little tokens such as rulers, yardsticks, and pencils. Once in a while others did too. County officials—the superintendent of schools, sheriff, auditor, et cetera—were expected to stop by at least once a term and talk to us, tell us something of what they were doing and why. I can remember others, insurance men and the lumber yard operator, doing the same.

You might say the country school then had so much community interest that it was a community project, so to speak. The school was where the pie suppers and box suppers were held, also the recitals and spelling and ciphering contests. Grown-ups participated, too, and school board member John Brand could sometimes outspell a teacher.

All the students brought their lunches from home in lard pails or improvised dinner buckets. It was good healthy farm food—apples, pears, custard, egg and meat sandwiches, slices of pie, hard-boiled eggs, cookies, bottles of milk, and the like. The last couple of years we started making something hot at school—cocoa, or maybe a kettle of navy beans or vegetable stew, taking turns furnishing it from home.

The school ground itself was by necessity also the playground, no matter what the lay of the land might happen to be. Here and there a more affluent school might sport a store-bought swing set for the smaller children. Ours was not one of the affluent ones. Although there was no store-bought equipment of any kind, we did have practically unlimited freedom to unleash our own wild ideas of self-entertainment. At least we boys did. The girls either had to content themselves with simple games of their own design or join the boys in what were usually rougher endeavors.

One winter we chopped down some of the trees and built ourselves a small log cabin. It served as a fort or clubhouse or whatever came to mind. We also built a sapling and brush lean-to that was so snug when covered with a deep drift of snow that we boys sometimes ate our noon lunches in there on cold winter days.