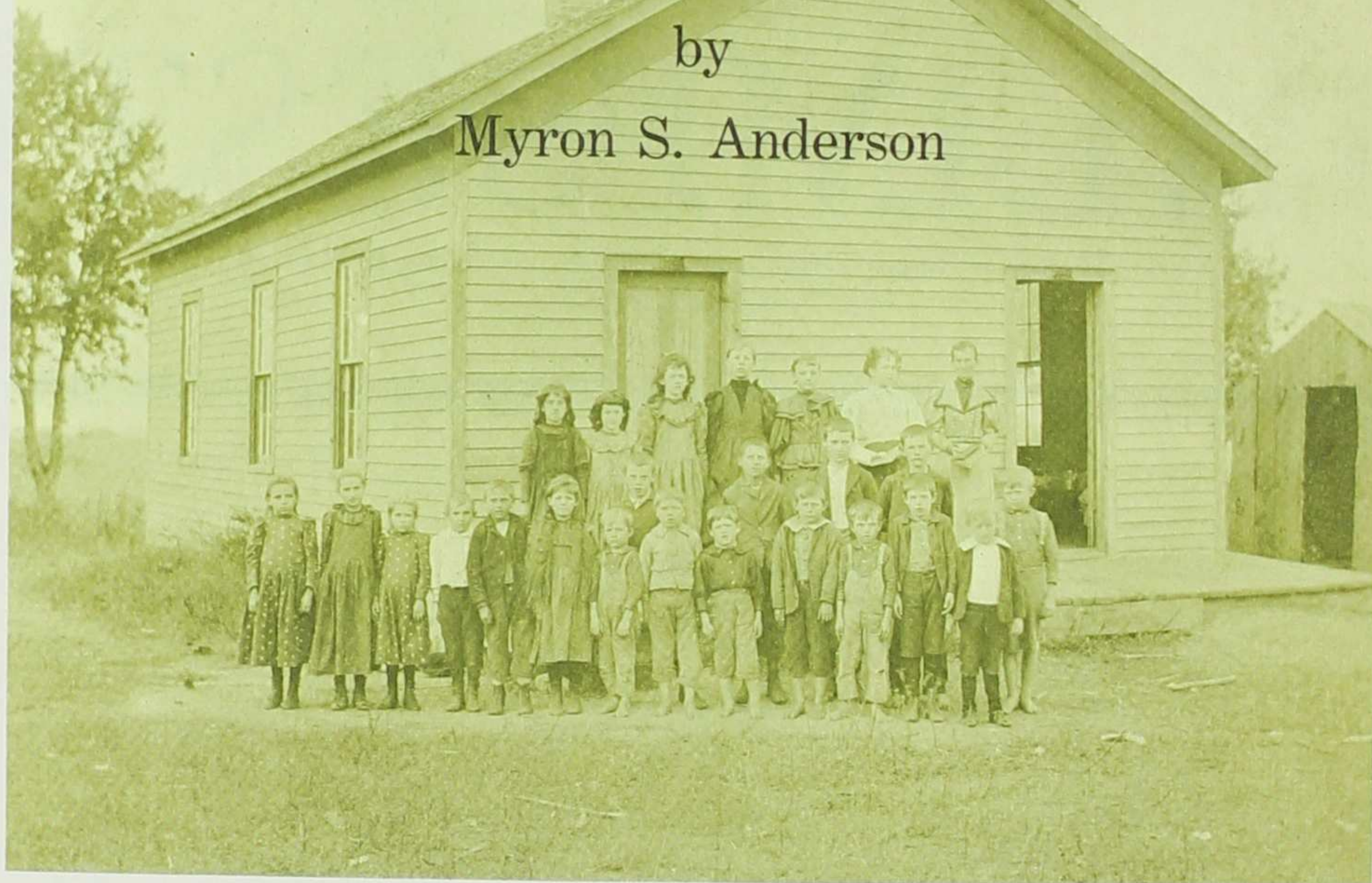


Story of a Country School

by

Myron S. Anderson



Born of a Swedish father and American mother in 1887 in Hamilton County near Stanholt, Myron S. Anderson spent the first 30 years of his life in Iowa, farming till age 19 when he left for college. He received his A.B. from Simpson College, his M.S. from Iowa State University, and his Ph.D. in Chemistry from George Washington University in Washington, D.C. In 1917 he went to work for the United States Department of Agriculture as a chemist and retired some 40 years later, having spent most of his time there as a soil scientist.

In 1966 he authored an entire edition of The Palimpsest on his Swedish roots. The following, a memoir of his boyhood school days, was first submitted for publication almost ten years ago. The article was accepted, filed, and forgotten for a decade. Mr. Anderson, now 90 years of age, resides in Washington, D.C.

— Ed.

This is a story of the school which I attended during most of the late 1890s. It was located in Marion Township, the southwest township of Hamilton County, Iowa. Local

one-room schools were then financed by independent districts or by sub-districts. The former were supported by taxes levied on property of a district usually four square miles in area. Ours was a sub-district school, financed like all sub-districts, by an allocation from the office of the elected County Superintendent of Schools.

Our school had no official or generally recognized name, but some people used the name of the local baseball team, "Bitter Creek." From the location, the school might have been named "Northeast Marion," since the name of the school two miles south was "East Marion." The school two miles west was known as "Crane School" after a prominent family. Each school was located so that no pupil would have to walk more than about two miles to school.

Enrollment varied widely from school to school. Attendance was usually greater in winter than in warm weather when some of the boys did farm work. During the middle

1890s there were two terms of school; the winter one of about 14 weeks (from about December 1 to late March), and the spring term of 12 weeks (from April 1 to July 1). During the late '90s families with young children were able to change the term arrangement to eight weeks in spring, eight weeks in fall, and 12 weeks in winter. Once, during a winter term there was an enrollment of 32 pupils, and all of the seats were filled. Some pupils were excellent scholars interested in their work, while others were simply putting in time when there was no pressing work at home. Examinations of the kind given today were unknown. Most of the pupils were from Swedish families and many spoke Swedish at home. A few learned English in school, if indeed they ever did learn an acceptable form of English.

Teachers were poorly paid and the turnover was great. Often a teacher stayed at a school for just one term. The salary was about \$25 per month at a time when a salary for a farm hand was about \$20 per month, with room and board. A few of the teachers lived with relatives in the area.

Opportunities for teacher training were inadequate, if not poor. The only four-year high school in Hamilton County was located at Webster City, the county seat. At the one-room school I attended, only one of the teachers was highly educated. However, some of the others were people of good educational capacity and were good teachers. Several of them had had no high-school training. One of the teachers repeatedly attended the so-called "teacher's institute," held at Webster City each summer for two weeks. There was an opportunity to take a teacher's examination at the close of the session, and the applicants who made satisfactory grades were given license to teach. One woman, after repeated at-

tempts, passed and was hired by our school director, but she lasted only one term.

A school day was from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., with recess from 10:30 a.m. to 10:45 a.m., noon leave was from 12:00 p.m. to 1:00 p.m., and the last recess from 2:30 p.m. to 2:45 p.m.. Usually on Friday afternoons, after the last recess, a special program was held. Usually this was a spell-down, followed by a cipher-down. Occasionally the latter took the form of rapid oral arithmetic.

Textbooks were an important feature of a country school. The quality of reading and the content of the matter read were very important in the life of a child. Appelton's *Readers* were used for a considerable period, particularly through most of the '90s. The *Fourth* and *Fifth Readers* covering the sixth through the eighth grades were excellent. Some of the stories were beyond the comprehension of many of the pupils, but offered opportunities for the teacher to explain them, if indeed, she had the literary ability to do so. The arithmetic texts were by Robinson. The "*Complete Arithmetic*" was an excellent text with a long section of practical problems near the end. Few pupils ever completed this list of difficult problems during their school days. The geography text was Harper's, in elementary and advanced forms. The grammar was Maxwell's, and later a text by Read & Kellogg was used.

We played various games during the free periods of a school day. In warm weather, the older boys often played some form of ball, using a locally made ball somewhat softer than the conventional type. These were made by one of the more mature players. When the local players were few, as they usually were, versions of the game called "One-Old-Cat" or "Three-Old-Cat" were played. Also, there were local games such as "Handy-Over" that involved throw-

ing the ball over the school house. "Throw-the-Stick" was a version of "Hide-and-Seek." Another similar game was "Steal Money," but these games were not easily played because we had few places to hide on plots of prairie ground. In "Shinny" or "Rolly-Holey," we used a beaten-up tin can, and would drive it toward a central hole.

Party games, played in the winter, included, "Pig in the Parlor," "Skip to My Lou," and others. One of the boys enlivened these singing games by bringing his autoharp for an accompaniment. Some of the more conservative parents heard of this and concluded that the fun was too much like dancing to be carried on in the schoolhouse.

Punishments were sometimes meted out, usually to boys. An elderly teacher administered old-style-spankings, and occasionally slapped the side of a pupil's head. A mild punishment was pulling the ear; hand palms were tapped with a wood ruler. Very mild punishments included standing on the floor at the front of the room for a certain period of time, staying in the seat during recess, or remaining after school. Offenses often leading to some form of punishment included whispering, shooting paper wads, use of tobacco in the schoolhouse, and various acts designed to make others laugh.

Lunch was usually brought in a tin-plated bucket. In the winter when the temperature was well below zero the lunch usually froze en route, and on arriving at school, the lunch buckets were sometimes set in a circle around the stove. Swedish farm families usually ate an afternoon lunch and this practice was carried on by the children in school. When pupils were dismissed for afternoon recess many lunch

pails were opened for an afternoon snack. The contents of a lunch pail varied. Bread was the basic portion of a sandwich, commonly spread with jelly or jam. One large family would bring bread soaked in sorghum molasses. Pork sausages fried and packed in lard while hot, were occasionally included in the menu. A cold pancake occasionally came out of a lunch pail, along with boiled eggs, common in the spring season.

The Northeast Marion school, like many others, was located on about an acre of prairie land. In one corner of the lot stood a coal house, where corn-cobs and other kindling materials were kept. The teacher often engaged a local boy to start a fire in the pot-bellied stove each morning. This type of stove was conventionally used in schoolhouses, but it did not seem to warm the room as rapidly as did other types of stoves in our homes.

A few of the schools in this area had caves for storm shelters in the event of tornadoes, locally known as cyclones, which were very common in the prairies of the Midwest. Our school had no cave but there was constant agitation for the digging and construction of one. Often when storms broke out in the afternoon, a few of the parents came after their children in spring wagons. Our mother saw to it that we had transportation home in the worst of the storms.

After attending school, many of the pupils remained on their family farms to work; a few became craftsmen; others went into business in town; some moved.

By 1919, improved local transportation was rapidly forcing changes in the school system. The advent of passable roads during most of the year caused Iowans to abandon the one-room school. Pupils then began to travel to village schools affording better educational opportunities, and a four-year high-school course. □