

School Days

by Lenore Salvaneschi

The students of St. Stephen's Lutheran School, Atkins, Iowa, in 1926, with their teachers, H. Albrecht (back row, right) and Rose Schueler (front row, right). (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

*School days, School days,
Dear old Golden Rule days;
Readin' and writin' and 'rithmetic,
Taught to the tune of a hickory stick;
You were my queen in calico,
I was your bashful, barefoot beau;
You wrote on my slate, "I love you Joe,"
When we were a couple of kids.*

Out of the memories associated with school there is the sound of this jingle introducing a radio program that we children loved to listen to. It was called something like "Dr. Katzenjammer's School" and it was made up of

simple silly jokes the like of which I have heard at two very separate moments in my life: once when my family and I celebrated New Year's Eve in a folkloristic Zurich restaurant; and, many years before, during the "dialogues" St. Stephen's schoolchildren used to present on the Fourth of July.

The abovementioned St. Stephen's School, when I had reached the very venerable age of six, was the goal of my ambitions. It seemed that my whole life had been directed to this one purpose: to be a First Grader. Nothing could be more exciting. Heaven help the child so eager to begin school, trembling with determination and the bursting necessity TO LEARN. There were many frustrations in being a pupil

in St. Stephen's School of Atkins, Iowa; how the "educationists" of today's graduate schools would deplore the methods used; but in spite of the many sick headaches which that school literally provided me, its effects — both good and bad — are still with me, and in the balance the good outweighs the bad.

The physical properties of the school were anything but comfortable. Old wooden benches — for the younger pupils, double benches — were screwed to the floors, adorned at the right-hand side with a stained and acrid smelling hole the size of a dollar for the inkwells, and inscribed with the initials and other deeply graven signs of previous scholars. A small shelf underneath would hold the precious books I couldn't wait to acquire. The furniture otherwise consisted of the teacher's golden oak desk, with the recess bell, a long ruler, and the hand eraser (ammunition against unwary dreamers) on the desk, his captain's chair, an upright piano, the round piano stool, and one cupboard to hold history books and the American flags for the annual Fourth of July flag drill (about fifty in number). Oh yes, there was one shelf in the back of the room which

held the *World Book Encyclopedia*, the only "library" our school boasted of. This luxury was not provided until I was in the sixth grade, and I remember clearly the discussion by the trustees over such an unwonted expenditure. And there was a big dictionary, which I'm sure was rarely consulted, since the parochial school pupils and our teacher himself had little need for an extensive vocabulary.

The floor of the classroom was of narrow reddish pine boards and always redolent of sweeping compound and barnyard manure, the former used in a vain attempt to dispose of the latter. Water was provided by a pump on the schoolhouse grounds and by a big earthenware crock with a spigot, inside the school. A tin cup next to the crock effectively spread any colds lurking in the student body. Heat was provided by a round iron stove in the back of the room, which I remember chiefly as the source of little warmth, despite the coal and wood my father or Teacher Albrecht had hauled from the old barn many yards on the other side of the church property. But the stove was the source of many rare and steamy odors as the pupils dried or thawed out on cold winter mornings. Garments were especially



"Reading? All of a sudden there it came, and the world was before me!" The author enjoying a favorite pastime in May 1924. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

fragrant on days the households were "butchering"; the smell of home-rendered lard and fried-down pork mingled with a variety of sausage combinations.

Our coats, caps and mittens, and enormous four- or six-buckle overshoes were left in a narrow hall leading to the schoolroom. Dinner pails with their two-inch thick sandwiches of home-baked bread, homemade sausage, pickles, cake, and doughnuts were set among the overshoes, beneath the coats. This hallway, with a long wooden bench, was a great place for "drilling," the practice of sending out of the classroom a group of pupils under the supervision of a seventh- or eighth-grade pupil for the purpose of special study, perhaps preparation for the dreaded county exams or just an exercise in grammar or spelling. During the course of the drill, lunch pails and clothing often got mixed as thoroughly as verbs or nouns, and the resulting dust might be occasioned by the teacher's anger as well as by the intensity of the learning.

Of sanitary facilities we had a minimum, two greyed plank structures behind the school, between the congregational cemetery and the ball diamonds, designated for the boys and girls, respectively (though not always respected: occasionally a gang of screaming girls took refuge in their facility while boys pursued them with garter snakes or pelted them with snowballs). Always innocent of real toilet paper, the girls' outhouse occasionally boasted the remnant of a Sears Roebuck catalogue which some proper person had lugged from home.

Well do I remember the first day in September when I officially entered the desired sanctum of St. Stephen's Lutheran School. Providentially, my parents had consented to "bob" my hair of the long curls I detested. Thus with hair neatly brushed and held in place by a barrette, attired in a new cotton dress sewn by my mother, which in turn

was covered by an embroidered apron (no uniforms in our school, but uniformity in style), I was taken to the hallowed building by my father. Throughout the entire day Dorothy and I, the only two first-graders, were under the observing eyes and hateful grins of the eighth graders. One big Freddy especially annoyed me with his knowing eyes and teasing words. I was sure a fly was sitting on top of my head, a sensation I have not to this day been able to overcome whenever I am nervous. By evening tragedy had struck: we had not been taught to read on the first day of school. Since that had been my goal I felt cheated and staged the most immediately effectual protest of my life. By suppertime my father had had enough. Privately I am sure he agreed with me — hadn't he been the one to instill this eagerness? — and after a brief conference with Teacher Albrecht he returned home with the news that Dorothy and I would be permitted to begin *READING*. Oh, it was beautiful. Phonics? I loved them, and couldn't go fast enough. Reading? All of a sudden there it came, and the world was before me! Open sesame — and it did! By the end of the first spring we two spindly youngsters discarded not only first but also second grade together with our long winter underwear, and I knew the delight of that word *VACATION*.

Vacation did not mean freedom *from* reading, rather it meant freedom *for* reading. Long stockings having been discarded with the long underwear, I could curl up barefooted in the high bluegrass between the rows of grape vines on the parsonage property and alternate between making long bittery dandelion curls and reading some marvelous adventure. The wrens scolded as they built their nests and the bees hummed strenuously over the blossoms of the nearby grape arbor while I imagined myself climbing mountains or sailing dangerous seas.

For two years, grades one and three, I sat in the old schoolhouse and ate voraciously whatever bits of knowledge I was fed. I always secretly finished the readers in the first week

they were handed out, but I found arithmetic to be a ghastly plague, with multiplication tables designed to be as baleful as loose teeth, both occasioning an anguished cry to *der lieber Gott*, "Warum?"

By the time I entered fourth grade, the congregation had decided to add another room to the school, and a "lady teacher" was hired. Here I was introduced to girl friends, of the kind with whom one compared one's clothes — theirs always better than mine I thought — and measured the calves of one's legs, longing to have enough girth to make them appear attractive in the much-desired silk stockings which our grown-up sisters wore. Of learning during my two years of sitting in the "little room" I can remember none, except what I got from home. The fault probably lay as much with me as with the teacher, though I do remember my father's contemptuous snort when I came home one day and told about the

marvelous steed *Pegasus*, the accent coming exactly where my teacher had told me.

These also were the years in which I began to be interested in poetry, of the kind I found in my father's library, by nineteenth century English and American poets. For a time, Tennyson was a favorite together with Shelley, and I tried to become a "missionary," deeming it my duty as well as my really earnest wish to convince the kids in my grade that poetry was something to be loved. Ill-fatedly I tried to form a poetry club in the Ladies Aid kitchen beneath the schoolroom, but my friends would have nothing of it. They came only to eat the cupcakes which my mother had kindly provided and then to run laughing out of the room. This was my first and most tearful experience with Philistines, which heretofore I had known about only from the Bible. Another attempt at a "literary club," which met twice in the unlikely setting of an igloo we had constructed from big snowdrifts and branches left over from the

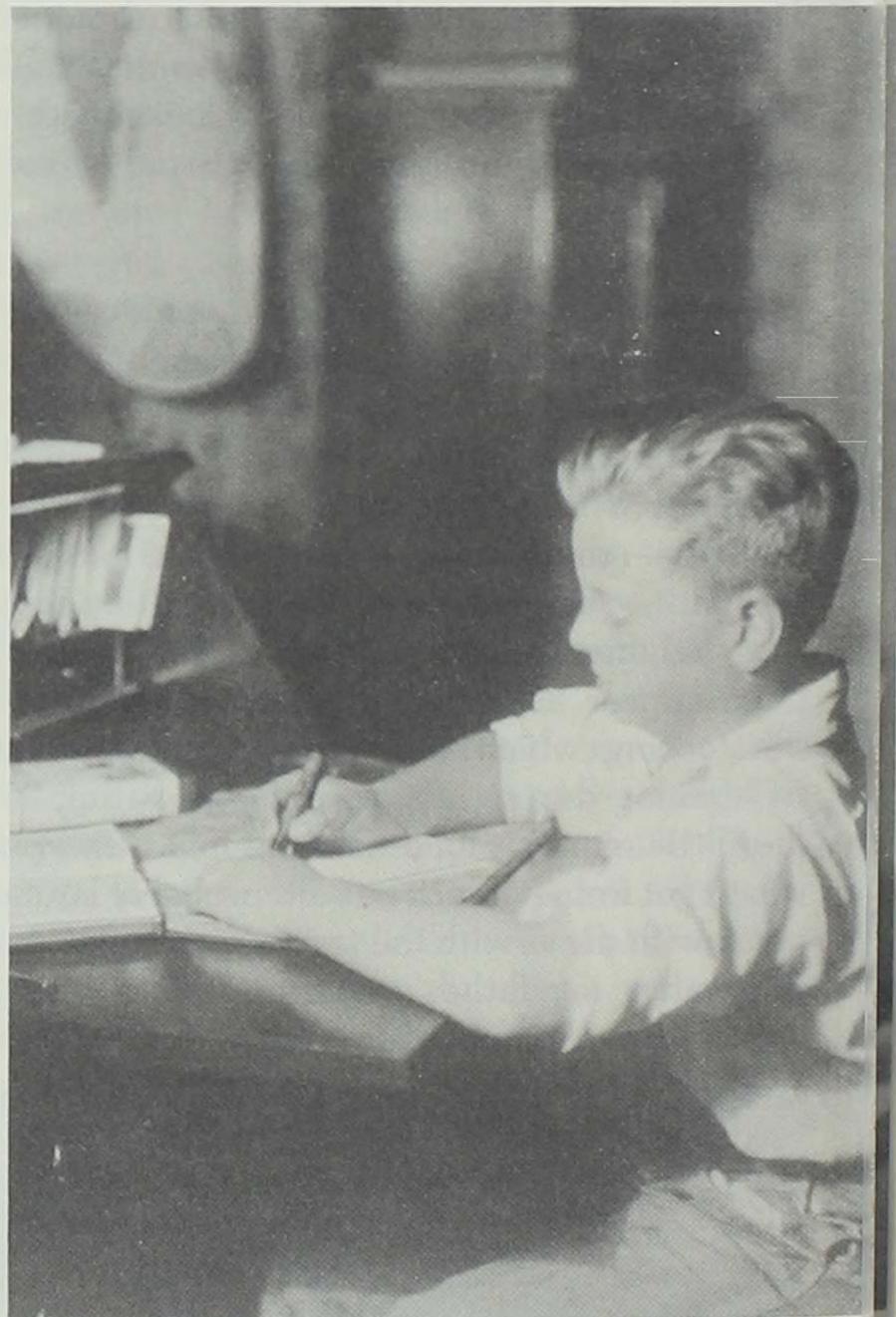


Some of St. Stephen's schoolchildren rode ponies to school. Gerhardt Krug (left) and Willie Kreutner (right) on the church grounds south of the parsonage. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

church Christmas tree, froze on the proposal that we talk about boys instead of books. To console myself over these disappointments, I read all of Longfellow's *Hiawatha* and then tempered this orgy of romanticism with an even worse glut of Plutarch's *Lives*, which I had discovered in my father's fine print copy. Having read myself into a deadly headache, I lay on the green plush sofa near Father's desk and hated the vitals of my sister's Sunday night suitor when he ha-ha-ed, "too much reading again!"

The return to the "big room" when I entered sixth grade was a good feeling. As a matter of fact, sixth grade was a marvelous challenge in human relationships. As far as studies went, they went flowingly — no county exams to worry about yet, and everything else was easy. Only arithmetic gave me an inkling of the *Weltschmerz* that was to come.

Just about this time I began to realize the worth of boys. Hardie Albrecht, the teacher's son, had always been special, but then we had so much in common: long curls, until we went to school; papas who in our opinion were both about to become bankrupt; mutual love for robins' nests in the willows lining the road between his house and mine; an equal fondness for willow whistles; and an equal enjoyment of all the things in the Sears Roebuck catalogue. But now my feelings were different, and usually directed toward a member of one of the Schirm families. Pleasantly enough, the admiration seemed to be mutual for a time, much of it based upon a shared interest in baseball. All of the Schirms were noted for their outstanding ability to play this game, and what other game did we ever play during recess when the weather was warm enough than baseball, or softball, if the girls were to be included? The big boys usually preferred baseball and Teacher Albrecht usually pitched for them. We younger champions played softball and quarreled bloodcurdlingly over the honor of being



The author's brother, Robert, working away at a desk in their father's study in November 1931. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

pitcher or catcher. I am not ashamed to say that for one bright and shining year, even the Schirms thought I wasn't too bad at either job.

When winter put an end to ball-playing, our greatest sport was either Prisoner's Base, with the rear portion of the church serving as base, or "shinny," our own thoroughly satisfying version of hockey. With curved sticks, still tangy with the scent of the evergreen boughs from which they had been sculptured, and with an old tin can between us, we dared our opponents with the battle cry "Shinny on your own side" as advertently and inadvertently we gave each other whackingly permanent remem-

branches of the appropriately named game. Football had its attractions for us in the fall — in the spring the Atkins mud would have been too deep to permit this sport — but suddenly it was placed beyond my reach when my mother insisted that “Girls cannot play football.” Since I had been doing quite well at clawing my way out of any heap of kids who might land on me, I could not understand the prohibition. When Mother refused to explain, I considered her even more obtuse than usual, but somehow didn’t quite have the courage to ask my father for enlightenment.

Only once was the joy of the sixth grade year destroyed; it was a day when Teacher Albrecht must have been feeling particularly “ornery,” as we pupils termed it. Undoubtedly, the vexations of teaching in that particular setting must

have prompted many feelings which this truly dedicated teacher usually suppressed. Perhaps that is why there was often a degree of teasing within his methods which could be painful for a youngster who felt his selfhood invaded, and even excruciating for the bashful and tender-hearted. One favorite method was to “christen” a pupil anew, a practice which most of us endured good-naturedly, but which was halted eventually by an irate father who didn’t like his Louise transformed into a Lizzie. Another very common approach was an unexpected piece of chalk thrown accurately behind the ear of a youngster gazing longingly outdoors, or an eraser tossed at the head of someone luckless enough to have fallen asleep. The sneezes from the cloud of dust brought even the deepest sleeper to his senses.

Unfortunately, my fate hit me on the day when I had just lifted the lid of my new desk, one of the joys of being in the “big room” since the lifted lids afforded a marvelous chance for conversation and flirtatious looks if one were lucky enough to engage in them at a time when Teacher wasn’t looking. This time I had innocently lifted the lid to take out some legitimate object when Teacher strolled down the aisle and discovered my Treasure Box. From the time I began walking down country roads and picking up stones, I had been a collector. But my collections, no matter how interesting to me, always collided with the interests of my sister with whom I had to share a room. Thus, what more private place to hide the treasures than my covered desk at school? Now the teacher had invaded it and he promptly began to remove its secrets: a tiny celluloid umbrella pencil, with which he walked down the aisle, tapping its point upon each desk; a monarch butterfly of dried and damaged wing, but marvelous in my eyes, which he held up to the room and referred to as “that dead thing” in my desk. By then I couldn’t hold back the tears and I added a momentary hatred to the resentment I had felt when he had once noticed the long



The author, c. 1926. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

underwear showing beneath my sleeve. His ensuing lecture to the delighted room on the virtue of such attire shamed me before my peers who had long since been liberated from such armor, and confirmed me in the opinion that my parents were living in a moldy, moth-infested age.

With the prohibition against football perhaps an omen, I found that seventh and eighth grade brought their share of sorrow. Not only did we work long and often sweaty hours at drilling from the beginning of the school year until May for the formidable county exams which were given in both seventh and eighth grades, but we also began to grow in physical ways which were both frightening and puzzling. Developing more slowly than my classmates and certainly less subject to the facts of life than those who lived on a farm, I could only be bewildered by their knowing whispers, and hurt because they thought it inadvisable to share their secrets. The cherished friendships were no more as lipstick appeared from time to time on the faces of favorite friends and acne blossomed on mine. Fulsome figures were revealed by the shortened dresses of the other girls, while knobby knees were only accentuated by the made-over skirts I had to wear.

Two events stand out in those troubled years. One was my first experience in a public school, mingling with the "heathen" who had gathered for the same purpose of taking seventh grade exams. Enough reference has been made to these county exams to require an explanation. Each year the county superintendent of schools arranged for the administration of written tests at various centers throughout the county. Ostensibly, the tests were to determine whether one could pass from seventh to eighth grade and from eighth grade to high school. Practically, I never heard of anyone's not passing, though any grade below seventy was considered a public disgrace. On the appointed day in May, I was brought to Atkins

Opposite: Some of St. Stephen's schoolchildren ready to go home after school, c. 1926. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

High School, a misnomer since it only went through ninth and tenth grades at that time and was not accredited, together with the other hopefuls from St. Stephen's to write the exams in physiology and two other subjects which I no longer remember. Probably the only reason I remember physiology is that I barely passed with a seventy, to my parents' and teacher's chagrin; in the other subjects I had marks in the nineties. After the tests were written I was permitted to go "up town," all of three blocks, to Elma Mitchell's store, where I had enough money to buy lunch — a bag of potato chips. Since this was my first taste of such a delicious confection, I felt constrained to consume the whole bag. For some time after that big splurge of independence and indigestion, Atkins High School stood as the symbol of moral disintegration for me.

The other event which had more lasting results was the uncomfortable and, to me, unjust situation in the spring of eighth grade when I was not permitted to be confirmed with my class. According to the rules of the congregation, only those pupils who had arrived at thirteen years of age could aspire to that rite of passage in the church. Since confirmation occurred on Palm Sunday, in either March or April, I was out of luck because my birthday came in May. Other pupils managed from time to time to circumvent the regulation, but as a preacher's kid I had to obey the rules. This prohibition only served to cut me off more from my classmates. Gradually I began to sense that I might not follow their example. The future began to look bleak. I couldn't raise corn, for my father owned no land; I couldn't raise Cain, for my father wouldn't permit it. The only thing I might aspire to, it seemed, was college. At the age of fifteen that was still, albeit tantalizing, a vague and distant prospect. □