



An Acre of Hill



Above: "The new teacher and her crew of happy, intelligent, and industrious ambitions. Just now making walks to well and fuel house out of old desks. Hard wood, hard nailing. Also spading for hyacinth and tulip beds."

"I HAVE BEEN weaning myself from my beloved 'Arbor Vitae Summit' all the year. In the early mornings before the children came I have gone from window to window and looked out long and silently on my little yard and trees. I planted my love in their rootlets. I felt sad but brave not to show it. Sunny day."

In late May of 1909 Sarah Gillespie Huftalen, age 43, wrote the above passage in a small notebook labeled "1904-09 at Arbor Vitae Summit School. Oneida, Delaware Co." For five years Huftalen taught in the northeastern Iowa county, bringing her students in the one-room rural school up to her educational standards. Steadily she added her touches outside too, planting trees and flowers until the schoolyard became worthy of the new name she painted on the newly constructed wooden arch: Arbor Vitae Summit.

Then in late August of 1909 Huftalen signed a contract to teach in Tarkio Township, Page County, Iowa. When she arrived at Norwich School in southwestern Iowa, she realized she would have to start all over again. Her description of the school reveals the challenge: "The ground contained an acre of hillside sloping somewhat steeply from west to east; the north side having a double row of trees; back of which was a board fence that had been repaired with barb wire (against the law). At the west close to the building there was an untrimmed hedge of Osage Orange at least 20 ft. in height. At the east and foot of the hill there was no fence although there were remnants; also along the entire south side where two or three posts still remained, remnants of barb wire lay along the ground in the dead grass. Outside in the road sweet

clover as high as a cow's back was thick and thrifty in bloom. There was a board (large) gate lying on the ground. A stile stood lonely at the top of the hill in front of the building. No well.

"... There was a fuel house; the outbuildings were so old and decrepit as to be past describing and the lower third of the ground was covered with coarse horse weeds as high as our head. More than a wagon load of ashes and broken glass lay underneath the porch at the east and another load likewise under the hedge at the west.

"A vision came quickly to mind of the possibilities of the whole of that long hillside with the building perched on its top. What to be done inside and outside remained to be seen."

What remains to be seen on the following pages is how Huftalen turned her vision into reality, with the help of students, parents, and others in the community. The following photos of Norwich School (perhaps taken by a Reverend Nichols from Yorktown), the captions Huftalen wrote beside each photo, and the notes and reports are from scrapbooks and notebooks in the Sarah Gillespie Huftalen Collection, SHSI (Iowa City). (Captions and notebook entries have been edited slightly for publication.)

— *The Editor*



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Left: "Lulu Smith and Myrtle Wallace mowing weeds with hand sickle and stacking up to help beautify the yard. Girls take a hand in the cleaning game at one corner of the large school yard."

Right: "John [Snyder] says he knows how to empty ashes better than anybody else. They go a scattering on the highway, not on our yard under the porch or by the hedge or fuel house."

Huftalen invited every man in the school district to a "School Yard Improvement Bee" to cut, grade, and seed a level playground out of the hill. She noted that "scrapers were borrowed from the county." A Shenandoah business dug an 80-foot well and "built a flower bed as a bonus." Huftalen listed the improvements in a scrapbook: "Terrace wall built 1910. 96 ft. long, steps 12 feet long. Level play ground 96 ft. × 48 ft. Soft ball & tennis, etc. Lower terrace sodded. We also put up a graduated steel flag pole and May pole having colored lines with rings & snaps. These poles were equipped with pulleys & children appointed in turn to be custodians. Also had 3 swings, 2 seesaws, 2 croquet sets; these on upper grounds above terrace wall. We hauled a load of ashes and debris from under the porch, another load from where the alyssum bed now is, and a load of old iron, wagon loads, mind you, and we cleaned up and it looked better."





Right: "Mildred and Beulah Hall looking at a little tree which they planted on the school grounds in the spring, watched and hoed it during the summer and are now loving it through the winter."



Left: "Hazel Gwynn and Dallas Copeland. Bordering our tulip bed with bricks. Team work such as helps build for citizenry and Democracy."



Above: "Glenn Lawson and Elmer Lingo, May 1911. Proud of our new cement rimmed flower bed! Picture shows fence we repaired, trees [John] trimmed and top of cement wall and steps. Lawn mown. It was a school home not a school house. It was where we all loved to be."



Left: "A corner of the sand pile where many happy hours of constructive work in thought and action were indulged. These primary children imitated the 8th grade geography class by building a map of [South America] — large and shapely. They formed the school grounds and their farms and yards. Ever building."

Right: "Elmer Lingo, John Snyder, Philip Smith, Wallace, Philip King. Still at it. An acre that has never been cared for, an acre of hill at that, is quite a job."

Far right: "Beautiful and useful: back side or front." (The caption of another photo of the arch reads: "Our new arch with seats on either side and new hitching post at the front in place of a board gate that was rotted flat on the ground, and a decrepit stile.")

An excerpt from a report by Mary Smith, age 10:
"We made an arch and have seats fastened to the posts on either side and we planted a Wistaria vine and a syringa. We have a very nice lawn mower named Daisy. We got it at Clarinda. And we have a nice lawn. We have made it smooth by the use of the lawn mower. We all cleaned up the yard and piled the rubbish in a corner and the boys got dry goods boxes and hauled it away. All of us worked with willing hands. We have been at work on the grounds and the school house two years and we hope to make it more beautiful and useful."





Selected entries from Huftalen's diary reveal long hours and slow progress — and a schoolteacher perhaps too exhausted at day's end to worry about complete sentences or correct capitalization.

Apr. [1910]. Scrubbed floor and cleaned — this used me up — 30 pails of water.

May 26. Sow alyssum around cannas. Staked the canna bed. hoed weeds, mustard! Put in 3 doz. gladiolus. also sow petunias, pansies, bachelor buttons, phlox, poppy etc. Took up tulip bulbs.

June 2. Mr. Huftalen spaded large, deep, round bed near

well. I put in castor oil beans, cypress, poppies, sunflowers, etc. in beds and at west side of building and around trees. Hoed trees — and mustard!! Hoed roses. Chickens scratch out some gladiolus and flowers coming up.

June 3. Cut mustard with sickle — all west of walk and building — hard. from coalhouse to north fence.

June 4. Took up daffodils and hyacinth. poor place for bed. I cut mustard!!! hoed mulberry and put stakes around beans and cypress bed. Set trumpet creepers at two east corners of coal house. . . .

June 7. Philip King cut *mustard*. I mended back board fence.

removing barb wire and limbs and brush and putting on boards.

June. Philip mend door lock. I go nearly every day to weed. Weeds are so bad they require continual attention.

June 29-30-July 1. Philip King 18 hrs. to help make the arch to go on posts in front, to patch roof with shingles, and mow weeds. I paid him \$2.70. I furnished lumber for arch \$1.75. . . .

Aug. 22. Children and I weed one afternoon — very warm. Did a lot — all under trees at north. . . .

Aug. 26. Have been over every day to hoe and pull weeds.

Sept. 5. School began. 1st week. pull weeds. 2nd week. hoe and

pull weeds. break up brush.

Sat. 24. John came at 7 a.m. & about 8:30 Phillip Smith went too and then I about 8:15 and we worked until 5:30 We were *tired*. I sawed boards most all day. wet, poor saw, & no place to hold them. Got the outbuildings enclosed & sills laid ready for floors & roof to board and shingle.

Tues. 27. . . . I can only wonder some times why God sent me to this old neglected school yard and buildings. If I had the means I would donate the whole thing

because it costs such an effort for me to ask for anything. I worked at school from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. tired.

Mar. 13 [1911]. Mon. p.m.
Raked the yard. 1/2 da.

Apr. Clean up shingles all over yard and brick etc. such a mess. Dallas & Phillip spade, stake & rake flower beds.

Apr. 14. Pick up little sticks and stones and shingles. 10 daffodils and hyacinths begin to bloom.

May 9. cut weeds. hoe flower bed S. of house. Children put in some wild flowers last week. . . .

Inside we are getting ready for last day, exam. finishing studies, reviewing and making special language booklets. Very busy always.

May 18. Have things in pretty fair shape. Boys mow yard with lawn mower. scrub outhouse. Girls ditto. And hall. carry chairs etc. tired.

May 19. finish studies & practice for social. House *full*. Good program.



Above: "The teacher and her flock eager for work or play."



**"How We Beautified
Our Country School House
and Grounds"**

(a school report by Opal Wallace, age 12)

Well, I don't hardly know where to begin. But I can tell you what we have done. First when our teacher came the yard was a weed patch. The weeds were higher than her head.

Every summer a man would come and mow the weeds down just before school began. Then when we came to school we would stub our toes and cut our feet. Teacher said when she first saw it her heart went to the bottom of her shoe, but she said it will look nice when it is cleaned up.

We took rakes, hoes, spades, saws and other things and cleaned till the yard was clean. Then we began to make flower beds and plant flowers. We earned a prize map for greatest improvement so I think what is worth doing is worth doing well. When school was out we all promised we would

Students wrote reports about their improved school-yard. Left: A greeting card pasted on construction paper frames the title of this report. Below: In Huftalen's words, "We loved our new welcoming front."

come and work in the summer. After school was out quite a while each family received a card which said, "You may come and help pull weeds. Bring your lunch and hoes. I have asked the rest." And so we did and pulled every weed in sight. But before this we took down our old rickety, rotten stile and put up an arch instead. Teacher painted on it "Norwich School" in black letters upon white.

When the next term began we had a program and got us a lawn mower. Two years ago we came over and mowed the lawn and kept the yard in shape. Men came with teams and scrapers and fixed us a terrace 48 ft. by 96 ft. level for a play ground and a cement wall 97 ft. long and steps and one cement flower bed.

Teacher and our big boys made the two outbuildings and the arch.

Now we have a fine school yard.

First when we raked the yard it took us three days. The second time it took us one day and the third three hours. We are improving, aren't we?

