

School Days of the Seventies

Like a traveler returned from a journey, I have been asked to share with you some of the scenes and experiences of my childhood days in the country school known as Subdistrict Number Six, Coffins Grove Township, Delaware County, Iowa. The new school building, the first to be erected in the district, was situated on a hill a mile and a half from my father's home. I was four and my brother, Henry, was six when we began the first term in this building. My aunt, Harriet C. Hawley, who lived in our home, was the teacher.

I recall only a few things about this first term at school—the teacher reading the Bible and kneeling by her big armchair every morning; the song, "Precious Jewels", which I remember to this day; and the playmates whose faces and names I easily recall. The girls wore crisp new calico dresses and aprons. We looked very like little women and little men. There were about twenty-six children in school that summer, most of them beginners, with boys and girls approximately equal in numbers.

These pupils were the children of pioneer parents in Iowa and grandchildren of pioneers in

New York and Michigan and from their thrifty and industrious forebears they had learned to live frugally. Textbooks were appreciated and were accepted as rewards. My mother raised turkeys and "took in sewing" so that my brother and I might each have a set of schoolbooks.

Henry, my brother, was twenty-two months older than I, but we entered school together and were kept together until the academy we attended later was absorbed into the public high school. We were not only in the same classes; we were dressed in suits of the same color and if one had red mittens the other had the same.

My mother, the eldest daughter in her family, had learned the various trades of millinery, tailoring, dressmaking, and even shoemaking from itinerant tradesmen. She also crocheted, did tatting, dyed, spun, and wove cloth, did embroidery, using a homemade stiletto of bone, and knitted socks, stockings, and mittens, and often hoods. She made even our heavily lined overcoats and cloaks; and my father, brother, and I never wore clothing purchased in the stores until after my mother died in 1888. When I was a student in the academy, I remember, mother made me a pair of high-topped, buttoned shoes. They were of heavy pepper-and-salt cloth, to match my brother's suit, and had morocco tips.

Shoes for girls were made of leather or of black prunella cloth, always high-topped. They might be either laced or buttoned. Some had a star cut out at the top with red or blue morocco underneath. Boots for boys came to the knee and were decorated at the top of the front with a piece of red or blue morocco stamped with some design, perhaps a fleet-footed deer or a horse. Small loops at the sides aided the owner to pull them on, no easy task if the previous day had been wet, for the leather hardened as it dried. Getting boots off was another problem, usually requiring the use of a homemade jack having one V-shaped end held from the floor by a cleat nailed underneath. Both shoes and boots intended for everyday wear had copper-shod toes.

As a matter of course all boys and girls went barefoot in summer. Even after our mothers thought we were too old to go barefoot, we often took off our shoes so we could run faster. It was also more comfortable to go barefoot for our shoes were heavy and often ill-made. Sometimes we put on our shoes before going home; it was easier to wear than to carry them and, perhaps, avoided a reprimand.

Our sunbonnets were of the mover-wagon type, having a wide hood section with slats of heavy paper to hold it out around the face. A crown was

stitched or buttoned onto the hood part, gathered at the nape of the neck, and hung in a cape around the shoulders. Strings tied under the chin held the bonnet in place or, sometimes, allowed it to dangle across the shoulders. A narrow ruffle or points made by folding pieces of the calico trimmed the front of the hood and the crown. The whole bonnet was stiffly starched. As can be imagined these bonnets were warm on a hot day and we girls often removed them and carried them by the strings, with our dinner buckets, though our mothers objected, saying we would get tanned.

Our dresses were of modest length, and usually made in the princess style. Summer dresses were of calico, chambray, and challie, while those worn in the winter were made of wool, tweed, and cashmere. Over our winter dresses, we wore aprons with long sleeves and high necks. Summer aprons might be smaller and fancier, with pockets and ruffles. Underwear for winter was homemade of Canton flannel or wool. Summer underwear, if any, was made of cotton goods, perhaps unbleached muslin. Stockings for both winter and summer were knit by hand.

Most of the children in Coffins Grove Township were comfortably clothed, but once a family moved into the district whose children wore patched and ragged clothing and who brought

scanty or no lunches. I admired the red hair and freckles of one of the boys and pitied him for having to wear trousers with a hole where such garments usually wear through. In spite of his handicap, this boy grew to manhood and became a well-to-do farmer and a good citizen.

Girls in that early school wore circle combs of black rubber to keep their hair from falling over their faces, for we wore our hair bobbed until we were ten or eleven. Often the combs were perforated along the band and ribbons could be woven through the perforations. Older girls wore their hair long, braided and hanging down their backs.

The teachers usually wore dresses with high necks and long sleeves, full skirts and tight-fitting waists. Needless to say the skirts were long as well as full.

Of course we took our lunches. Homemade bread or biscuits and homemade butter made the sandwiches. Cold meat, fried chicken, pickles, hard-boiled eggs, pie, doughnuts, and cake were possibilities. Apples were a luxury. Some of us carried milk for drinking and in winter the milk and apples often froze and had to be thawed in the long drum of the box-wood stove, where they sometimes sizzled. There was no well at the schoolhouse and we children took turns carrying

a pail of water from the well in a pasture a quarter of a mile away.

Reading, writing, arithmetic, history, and grammar were the serious business of our school, but "lay aside your books" was always welcome. Recesses and the noon intermission were devoted to games — pom-pom-pullaway, King William, needle's eye, ante over, dummy on a rock, dare base, fox and geese, and many others. We "kept house" in rooms laid out with stones. In winter there were snow battles and skating on the pond. Girls as well as boys joined in all the games, even baseball and one-old-cat. The teacher seldom played with us or came out in the schoolyard during intermissions.

The pupils found much interest in exploring the natural surroundings. The schoolyard had once been a coral reef and we gathered curious stones which we called "deer's horns" and "rosy stones". Just north of the schoolhouse was a field beautiful in summer with all kinds of flowers — purple violets, wild honeysuckle, pasque flowers, and shooting stars — which our childish fingers eagerly picked and formed into tight little bunches. There were also flowering grasses which we pressed and used for bookmarks.

The virgin prairie on which the schoolhouse was built abounded in snakes, such as the blue racer,

and killing snakes and gophers was considered good sport. The boys made fiddles of cornstalks and whistles of willow twigs, or carved tiny baskets of hazel, hickory, or walnut shells. Girls found beads an ever-present means of recreation. Lucky was the girl who found a hair from a horse's tail (preferably a white one) in the road. On such hairs beads were strung in various designs. These trinkets were exchanged among the pupils with much friendly emotion.

Discipline was not a problem at the Coffins Grove Township school. Occasionally boys were whipped for mistreating other children, but the usual punishment was keeping wrong-doers in at recess or at noon, while others played, or after school.

Competition in school affairs found expression in "spelling down" on Friday afternoons. School programs consisted of readings, dialogues, essays, and songs. My brother and I gave the "Mr. and Mrs. Caudle" dialogue several times. There were no evening entertainments. Our mother used to tell us of the lyceums, singing schools, and penmanship schools she attended, but we had none of these in Subdistrict Number Six.

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