

## The Sheldall School

The Sheldall School in Scott Township was the first public institution of learning in southern Hamilton County. Pupils came from adjacent townships and from the northern part of Story County as well. Being the only public building in the vicinity, it was frequently used for church services, elections, and other meetings of public character.

The schoolhouse took its name from Lars Sheldall who owned the site where it was built in 1860. The building was erected by Lars Henryson. Most of the material used in its construction consisted of native timber brought from the Skunk River woods. The sills and joists were hewn from oak logs, and the framework, also of oak, was fashioned in the required dimensions in Dan McCarthy's sawmill near Story City.

The great majority of the pioneer patrons were Norwegian immigrants who had come across the sea in sailing ships and thence over the plains in prairie schooners. Some came as early as 1855. There were also a few Danes and a sprinkling of English-speaking families most of whom had emigrated from the eastern States.

All the immigrants were inured to hardships and



plain living. They took hold energetically to establish themselves, but did not always find it easy to pay the school tax or to supply the children with the necessary books and clothing. By practicing thrift, however, they saved enough to rig out the children comfortably and fill their dinner baskets sufficiently to satisfy healthy appetites.

Kentucky-jean coats and pants, hickory shirts, and heavy top boots for the boys were much in vogue. Calico dresses for girls had not gone out of fashion; and many pretty faces peeped out from beneath sunbonnets. The suits and dresses were made to order at home by hand. Woolen stockings and mittens were knit by mother.

The dinner basket bulged with layers of bread bountifully interspersed with butter and molasses. Sometimes there would be egg, meat, or cheese sandwiches. Pie and cake belonged mostly to the Sunday dinner menu, but cookies, doughnuts, and kringla were not uncommon.

Usually the pupils were required to eat their dinners quietly in the school room, but occasionally there would be a rush-and-grab for a slice of bread, then a huge mouthful taken, enough to choke a dog, and out they would charge with bat or ball in one hand and a fistful of crumpled bread in the other, entirely too busy to eat. Though they were forgetful at times, the children had all been taught never to waste any



food. Hence, when a teacher threw the remnants of his dinner into the fire, the pupils looked on with horror.

The pioneer teachers were serious minded men and women, and left as a heritage to their pupils a stamp of character which has helped make them a useful, upright body of citizens. They were also good disciplinarians, and where order and system prevail half the battle is won. To impart as well as receive instruction then becomes a pleasure.

To willing workers there was opportunity for advancement then as now. The courses of study were, perhaps, not so full or as well planned as they came to be later, but with diligent application under intelligent guidance there was nothing to hinder the pupils from making good progress.

Seldom have I noticed a more contrasting play of emotions than were expressed in the sobs and tears, the yells of glee, the howls of pain, the hard fought games, the funny antics, the sallies of wit, and in the laughter and very joyousness of living displayed in and about the old Sheldall School. Sometimes Old Adam would bob up in spite of all vigilance, whence the application of the switch. On occasion the offender would be required to go forth, cut down, trim, and prepare his own rod of punishment. This in itself was enough to humble almost anybody. Sometimes a mischief-making future bishop or bank pres-

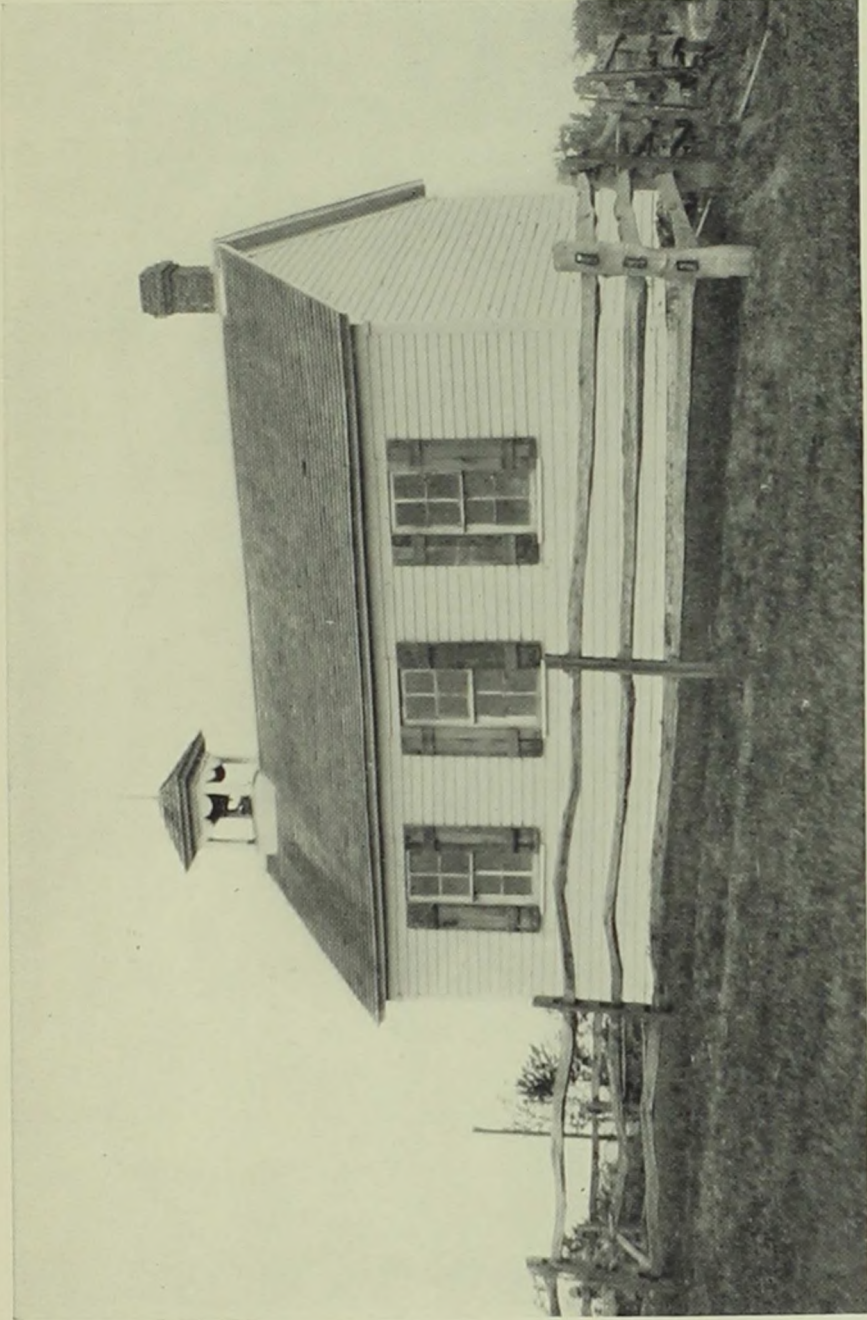


ident would be escorted over to the girls' seats and made to sit between two of these pretties, much to his distress and mortification. At other times wrongdoers were confined at recess and the miserable culprits would sit prisoners, sad in soul and spirit, listening to the jubilee outside where all was freedom and happiness. Often the truant would be stood in front of the whole school till his legs ached, an abject example of the wages of iniquity.

We used to play Anti-over, Blackman, Drop-the-handkerchief, Needle's eye, Norwegian ball, yes, even Sock-ball. In Blackman, Needle's eye, and Drop-the-handkerchief the girls joined, but Sock-ball, which simply consisted in throwing the ball as hard as possible where it might hurt the most, was sport only for the bigger boys. It was a foolish, cruel sport. A few of the boys happened to be hit hard blows in the abdomen, and each had much ado in regaining his breath, let alone recovering from the pain which would linger for days. Fortunately for the school, the teacher found us out and peremptorily put a stop to the rough sport.

Once there came an orgy of coughing and spitting among us, which kept the whole school in an uproar while it lasted. Every one seemed to have taken cold very suddenly and all vied to do it now and be rid of it. This was during school hours, and the teacher, being very wise, decided that such an epidemic needed





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THE SHELDALL SCHOOLHOUSE



drastic treatment and kept us at our books during recess. This cured us.

A pinching mania assailed us later, spread through the whole school, and persisted for a considerable length of time. One would steal behind another and pinch his or her arm with might and main. Though the pain was maddening, few would let on, but craftily watched their chance to get even. Our arms were black and blue for weeks and weeks afterward. It was all done so cleverly that the teacher was only able to note the result, not the cause.

Sometimes we would walk on stilts, but only a few proved to be expert at it. One of the older boys was long, lanky, and athletic to a degree, and when, with his enormous stilts, he swung alongside the schoolhouse, shook hands with the chimney, and sat himself down beside the belfry to eat his lunch, we thought he was the greatest acrobat ever. He would rise and crow gleefully like a self-confident rooster when through with his meal, then stride majestically forward. But on one occasion he was too cocksure in his movements, causing him to break one of his stilts. The mishap flung him forward thrice the length of his body before he was properly flattened out on the ground.

The glorious old game of Norwegian ball remained ever the chief amusement among us boys. None of us will forget the master hits of a muscular new pupil,



when with his hickory bat he sent the ball soaring to meet the sun, thus enabling him to make a home run with time to spare before the tantalizing ball would reach the hands itching to catch it and put him out. One of the boys wielded his batting-stick so that the ball would hop over his head rearward, where nobody thought it necessary to be on guard to meet it. He, too, made his base. Another batter's terrific drives sent the ball hurtling, cannon-like, straight ahead, and woe to him who got in its way. The skillful hitter loped along for home in leisurely fashion, smiling all the while as the out-fielders hunted frantically for the ball last seen bobbing up and down far beyond the school yard in the Sheldall meadow. To see one's side lose a game just because some awkward performer failed to ply his legs in properly measured tempo when about to touch the base, and then to hear his despairing yell as the ball unmercifully bored into his flesh and put him out, was trying, to say the least. Sometimes the teachers would join in the games, and often they acted as umpires. The better the games, the better the spirit throughout, and as long as such amusements were not overstressed they were beneficial to the school work in general.

There was much sociability among the people in the early days, and this spirit communicated itself to the children at school. They loved to go a-visiting. Sometimes the school would tramp in a body to a neighbor-



ing school just for a friendly call, or to be present at some program. The pupils would have a royal time getting acquainted, and in combining in one grand aggregation during a game. Some of the boys, rather new to each other, reminded us of strange dogs accidentally thrown together that sniff and smell around, hair bristling and all that, but finally make up and nearly run their legs off in their eager show of friendliness. When such visits were made during winter we would pile into bob-sleighs and scud through startled neighborhoods to the accompaniment of bells and a general vocal hullabaloo.

Though there were difficulties to overcome then as now, the new country with its promise for the future gave zest to the active and ambitious. Children and all were imbued with buoyant hopes for the days to come, which enabled them to enjoy all the more the little pleasures and advantages within reach. Thus, when the whole family turned out to the school exhibitions, the air was so saturated with happy joyousness that it was a little difficult to breathe, especially just before the curtain went up. And I doubt if the Roman gladiators held their honors in happier esteem than did the hero of the debate or spelling match. It was worth while exercise for it brought the qualities of concentration and studiousness into play, and served as a means for social getting together.

The oratorical outbursts at the debates were at



times both lofty and ludicrous, all according to the occasion or degree of ability. There was, all in all, however, much common sense expressed, and even considerable display of skill in discussion. The patrons, teachers, and pupils all took part.

In going to spelling matches in the evenings we would generally fill up Henry L. Henderson's big sleigh drawn by his powerful mules, and off we went with a flourish, the champion speller and owner of the outfit at the reins and his henchmen huddled in a heap behind. The exhilaration of the ride and the excitement of the contest helped rouse us to action and initiative. Rarely, if ever, did these spelling matches or debates deteriorate into anything objectionable. The teachers as well as many of the patrons attended; and the great majority of the pupils themselves had no desire to utilize the occasion for any other purpose than good instruction coupled with opportunities for wholesome recreation.

On one occasion our school had a visitor who had been our teacher's former companion on mutual trips of adventure in the wilds of the Dakotas. They spent the afternoon in reminiscent talk, and the children were allowed their freedom to listen or play as they chose. Being thus fired with stories of frontier life, of Indian encounters, and other adventure, the boys had to make a feint of imitating the narrator's deeds. Forthwith followed a fever for making war-like weap-



ons, especially bows and arrows. The bows were of a varying pattern and make, but had sufficient elasticity to speed the arrows so that they were dangerous enough, especially for the eyes and ears. An arrow sent at random past a corner of the schoolhouse hit an oncoming "red-skin" in the temple just as he was rounding the very corner and was congratulating himself upon having escaped a missile in the rear. He promptly fell to the ground stunned out of his wits, but got up after awhile with a fistlike swelling northeast of his left eye. It may have been the same fellow who, later, with a wide grin was challenging his opponents in a snowball match and received as reward for his bravado a perfect hit between extended jaws, gagging him, thus halting further expression on the subject.

Though there were no bullies or "rough-necks" in our school, human nature expressed itself there as elsewhere, and "boys be boys". When a passing spark happened to touch tinder, there would be a sudden rumpus, unexpected as a bolt from heaven, subsiding, however, almost as quickly as it had come. The teacher, as a rule, kept an eye out for such performances and, of course, forbade them. Nevertheless the belligerents would forget and get into trouble again and again. And then how the buttons would fly. The girls were all regular ladies, of course, but they certainly knew how to scratch.



Occasionally the teachers would delight the children by taking them to the woods for a holiday. The schoolhouse being so near the timber gave a fine opportunity for hikes along the "Chicauqua", the Indian name for our beloved stream, which, having been translated into English, resolved itself into plain "Skunk". Once we took a half holiday to visit an Indian camp near its banks. There must have been fully a hundred Indians, men, women, and children in the band. We watched them make camp, watched them as they roasted their skunk sirloin over the fire, saw them feed their little ones and put them to sleep papoose fashion, heard the song of the cry-baby and wondered why he chose the same refrain as our babies do. We looked till we were tired. The Indians did not mind us, but went quietly on with their business of doing little or nothing. They really preferred to remain unnoticed, nor did they appear to be the least bit curious about us. Nevertheless they saw everything that was going on without seeming to see anything.

Thus did our teachers instill in us an added interest in our fellow-beings, in nature, and in the various things surrounding us that would be apt to broaden our minds. Then as now it was of great benefit to the children to learn that the art of useful, noble living is of the highest importance and that our studies, exercises, and games should be directed toward that end.



Quite a large number of the old pupils have taken courses at higher institutions of learning; some have entered the learned professions, others have gone into business, but the majority have remained on farms in the vicinity or taken up farming elsewhere. An overwhelming majority of the girls have chosen the best of all professions, namely, that of becoming good housewives and mothers.

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