



Early School Experiences in Nebraska: Prize Stories of 1940 Contest

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

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Article Contents: Loulie Ayer Beall, "A Webster County School"
Hervey S Robinson, "A School Child in the Blizzard of '88"
Anna Bemis Cutler, "The First School at Sutton"

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Early School Experiences in Nebraska

I. A Webster County School

LOULIE AYER BEALL, LINCOLN*

Seman Van Doran, who came to Webster County in 1878 with his family of five children, settled on the south side of the Republican River, near the "Guide Rock" bluff. During the school year of 1878-1879, he kept a private subscription school in his residence. Other settlers to the south and east of his place wished to co-operate in an opportunity for the education of their children.

The building of a sod schoolhouse was decided upon. The site chosen was behind a bluff that skirted the edge of the "first bottom" of the river. This location was thought to be out of the view of Indians that customarily followed the banks of the river.

Will Pettit would break the sod, for the schoolhouse was to be on his land. Seman Van Doran, John Columbia, Osborn Ayer, Sam Pettit and others lent their aid in hauling the sod by ox team, cutting the sod and laying the walls, felling trees for the ridge-pole and roof supports, and getting out limestone slabs for the chimney and doorsteps. The Columbia sawmill furnished the rough cottonwood lumber from which the door and window casings were made. Willows that skirted the bluffs of the "second bottom" were secured for the foundation layer of the roof, upon which earth and sod were thrown.

It was not until 1880 that School District No. 81, Webster County, received its proper designation from the authorities at Red Cloud. The number of the district and the right to organize were all that it did receive.

"The Big Spring" in Pettit's pasture, only a few rods from the schoolhouse, was a valuable asset to the district. For years it was the only source of supply for the water bucket beloved by

* Winner of First Prize in 1940 Contest, Native Sons and Daughters of Nebraska.

the pupils. It was a Mecca for wild animals and migratory waterfowl, especially when streams went dry, or when the rivulet running from it was frozen over. The spring itself would never freeze, but the thin, trickling ice sheet about it would frequently give way under the weight of the copper-toed boots of early childhood memory.

"Teacher, please may Libby and I" (or more frequently "me") "get a bucket of water?" How often I timidly raised my hand and made that request! What motivated the asking for the privilege? Sometimes it was merely for the relief of weariness in my dangling legs which carried me over the two miles from home. Benches were made from sections of cottonwood logs, split into two parts, and supported above the floor by four sticks of the proper length. These benches seemingly were made to fit exactly the legs of my older brothers and the other boys, but they were exactly misfits for mine. Sometimes we would raise a hand for the privilege of gathering the acid sheep sorrel which might satisfy the pangs of hunger against the time of "dismissal for noon." Perhaps, at times, I sought the privilege of leaving the room just to get ahead of the boys who invariably brought frogs or snakes into the schoolroom, releasing them at the rear of the room where wraps and caps were hung. The bucket of water would be solemnly carried to its place near the teacher's desk.

The big boys — how I used to fear and admire them! There were the Van Dorn boys — Judd and Jean, John Pettit, Will Hardy, my own brothers, and later many others. "Boots" (John) Brooks, Jimmy Phillips, Frank and Joe Wright, Otie (Otis) Battles, and Lon Diehl, are on my memory's page.

Back to the sod schoolhouse. We played "teeter" by placing one log across another. (The logs were destined to be chopped into short lengths to fit the box stove around which we hovered and shivered in the winter time.) The under log was held in place by flat stones. These were sometimes removed by a prankster, that he might see the merry bunch of players thrown to the ground. That "teeter log" was very unstable. The larger girls would sit sidewise from a sense of modesty — such strict observances were prompted by the moral code of the time. Many of the larger girls were considered young ladies and wore hoopskirts, which prevented them from participating in many games.

I recall very well the appearance of these girls, assembling to watch those who were taking part in the various sports. Proudly they carried muffs — some made of beaver skins: for many years the beaver was trapped from the millrace. There were Belle Van Doran, Winona Gates, Ada Hardy, Orpha Fish and Lucy Battles, who never took part in any of the rougher sports. They threw snowballs, played “drop-the-handkerchief” and similar games. How I studied those large girls — their dresses, slender waists, swollen ear lobes in the painful stage of recovery from the piercing! What secret grief I experienced when told that I was not to have my ears pierced!

I thoroughly enjoyed the noon hour and the recess periods, during which times I took part in almost every game. My brothers, older than I, often reported to our parents that I was “a regular tomboy.” But I knew that the long talks with Father when alone were understanding admonitions that I should guard well my conduct.

One of my interests outside of school was the hunting of snakes. A rocky outcrop upon the side of a ravine was the location of a rattlesnake den. This place I passed twice daily in going to and from school.

The girls usually ran away when the boys killed a snake and followed them with the dangling body held up by the tail. Once in a while I killed a snake myself; but I enjoyed following them as they moved gracefully along, sometimes tickling them with a stick, observing them draw themselves into a coil, and noticing their bright, beady eyes and darting tongues. I hunted and cherished the skins of snakes. These were shed every season.

Many a winter morning I would watch the schoolroom ceiling (if the layer of willows above could be called a ceiling), because a bit of falling earth usually indicated that the warm air had encouraged a snake to limber up. He might crawl downward so that I could see the pale yellow of his belly. He might even thrust his head below the matted twigs and earth. Every youngster knew that if a snake did appear, we were to enjoy a respite, with plenty of excitement. We had only to “tell teacher,” and promptly all the boys would arm themselves with sticks. The teacher assumed the distinction of using a pitchfork, kept for the purpose of transferring fuel (modestly called “chips”) to the

stove. With these weapons Mr. Snake was prodded and pried, and was usually dislodged and pulled down from his position to be despatched. Sometimes the hunt would last an hour or more — if it could be prolonged the boys managed to do it. Girls huddled in groups or stood on benches which were dragged to the farther end of the sod-walled, dirt-floored schoolroom.

One morning early in December a shrill voice sounded a warning. "Oh, teacher, a snake, a snake!" The hunt was on in no time. Back and forth the reptile wound his body among the brush, and in and out went the prodding sticks. Suddenly the teacher gave an alarm that sent some of the more timid out of doors. "It's a rattler, and a big one," he said. "Keep away, children!" Well he knew the danger; and to us, the boys who dared to face it were heroes. The harsh rattling of the snake spelled danger right there. For a time all lost track of him, which made the situation all the more tense. The teacher, Dean Smith, a fine young man, cautioned us again and again: "It's the hidden enemy that's dangerous!"

I shall never forget the scene that followed. A buzzing sound, a long, thick body flashing downward from the ceiling, and the shrieks of the terrified watchers, combined to intensify the excitement. The rattler had wormed his sinuous way through the brush, had stretched his clumsy length on a log midway between the ridgepole and the wall, and there he lay watching his tormentors.

Perhaps it was half an hour, perhaps two hours that we all sat motionless with mingled uncertainty and terror, for none could be conscious of the passing of time during this tense situation. As the fury of the reptile reached a climax his body gradually assumed a spiral form, from which the head was raised for the strike. But in the uncanny motion of the instinctive coil he lost completely his unstable equilibrium on the log, so that the "strike" was transformed into a sinuous, writhing plunge that came to an awful termination upon the stove, the top of which had become, since morning, a dull crimson. The alternate, lightning-like expansions and contractions of the body in his last effort to strike the enemy, the warning rattle, the writhings, and finally the searing, smoking body curled into a sizzling mass like

a frying bacon-rind in a spider of hot grease, completed this scene, as well as fixing some memory impressions.

During occasional nights that followed this experience, my dreams were occupied in various attempts to pour cold water upon some animal or person in the throes of intense heat. I had been indoctrinated with the orthodox teaching of the day, namely, that the "wicked" would be consumed in "unquenchable fire;" and so, to this day, any allusion to the biblical story of Lazarus and the rich man brings to my memory the writhing misery of that rattle-snake on the red-hot stove.

It was customary for the children to ask Teacher to pronounce the "difficult" words. The pupil raised his hand and waited to be recognized. One day I entertained myself by looking at pictures in my primer and reading the simple stories. I ventured to do what I had seen the other children do, so I found a word that I thought looked "difficult" enough to warrant the venture. Up went my hand, and with a feeling of accomplishment I glanced around the room to see who might be looking at me. The teacher apparently was busy, but noticing my upraised hand, he nodded and said, "In a moment." I had never before heard the word "moment," so I sat and waited, feeling, however, that the word had the implication of time. Through the remainder of the afternoon I kept myself in readiness to spell my word when the "moment" should arrive.

After school I walked soberly and thoughtfully home and to where my father was working, bent upon clearing up in my mind the question which troubled me the most of that afternoon. "Father," I inquired, "how long is a moment?"

"About as long as it will take me to get a kiss," he replied, as he lifted me up and kissed me. In vain I defended my teacher. A "moment" was a long, long time; in fact, it was not over yet. Father had a keen sense of humor. "Oh, I see; you must ask the teacher about it tomorrow." I did.

Of the teachers who taught in that sod schoolhouse I remember but three: Seman Van Doran, more renowned for his ability to play the fiddle for neighborhood dances than for his skill in teaching; Dean Smith, a son of a pioneer doctor; and Emma Hughes. Miss Hughes would take me by the hand during the recess period, lead me over the prairie near by, point out the

wild flowers to me, and teach me their names. She it was who taught me :

If ever I see on bush or tree,
 Young birds in their pretty nest,
 I must not in play steal them away,
 To grieve their mother's breast.
 My mother, I know, would sorrow so,
 Should I be stolen away.

Unfortunate indeed was the lot of a child who had not learned, somewhere along the way in his education, the full significance of law, order, obedience, and industry. No doubt there is some foundation for the maxim, "Spare the rod and spoil the child." The experiences of the pupils who, during the pioneer days, attended the school in District No. 81, Webster County, are similar to experiences of children of other early schools in Nebraska. Stay in at recess, stay after school, stand on the floor, and sit at the teacher's desk—these were the four big S's.

When the district was fully organized, the old "soddy" was replaced by a frame building. The first teacher to preside there had an eighteen-inch hard rubber ruler. He was stern and dictatorial. He frequently counted "three," "five," or "ten," across the palms of offenders. A sickly, undernourished boy left the room without permission. He was asked to go to the desk for punishment, whereupon he grabbed his cap, jumped through a window and made for home. One of the larger boys was asked to overtake the culprit and return him to the "master." But the boy positively refused to obey, saying, "I won't do it!" before an assembly of forty pupils.

Quickly the teacher snatched up the long black ruler and stalked to the boy's desk, declaring, "We'll see about that!" A hush pervaded the room; all eyes were turned in the direction of the scene about to be enacted. A calloused hand was outstretched before the teacher-dictator. A moment's hesitation, and then *whack, whack, whack, whack, whack*—the strokes numbered five. "Now will you go?"

"Never!" was the only word spoken.

Again the ruler was raised. Not only one but a dozen boys sprang from their seats as if by signal, seized the uplifted arm, wrested the ruler from the master's hand, and thrust the hated ruler into the stove. An indescribable stench came from the burn-

ing rubber. Pupils scrambled to the windows for air. The larger boys caught up the teacher and carried him out of doors, rolled him over and over in the snow, and admonished him to "study his lesson" for the rest of the afternoon. School kept as usual the next day, with no reference to the incident. My parents refused to listen to the remarkable drama of that day, and little comment was made concerning it in the neighborhood.

"Never miss a day or be late for school, except in case of sickness," was the law in our home — as unalterable as the laws of the Medes and Persians. Here I pay tribute to my pioneer father and mother, who not only taught the importance of regularity and punctuality at school, but who made sacrifices unbelievable today. They were unselfish in their efforts to help the needy. The children of our nearest neighbor, all girls, were piled into our wagon, when the weather was stormy, and taken to school.

One week in January, 1888, I had missed school because I was ill. I think that I regretted my absence from school the more because I was losing ground in my spelling, as I was near the head of the class. All day long I tossed about in bed, wondering if John would get that prize. I kept saying to myself, "I want to go to school; I must go this afternoon." Towards evening my fever abated, and then I felt sure that I would be able to go the next day.

I arose early that morning, summoned all my energies and performed my usual tasks. I prepared the lunch for all four of us with some trepidation, fearing that at the last moment I should be told that I was not well enough to go. I admit that I was somewhat dizzy and a little weak, and that I really was foolish to venture those two and a quarter miles — especially since a light snow was falling.

After washing the breakfast dishes I commenced to change my clothes for school. Mother began her admonitions by asking me why I was changing. I recall the look of indecision that stole across her face. I was pleading a case that must not fail. "Please, please, I must go," I begged. "It means one place nearer the head of the class!"

"You will have to ask your father." Mother spoke gently. I seldom had that chance of appeal to a higher court, but was determined to make the most of it. I dashed out to the straw-stable

where Father was working. He heard my plea, looked up to the clouds through the light falling snow and said:

"I guess you may go—if you wear a pair of boots." I pulled on the boots, but carried my shoes in my satchel, so that I would avoid any embarrassment upon entering the schoolroom. My little sister was suffering from a severe cough, so that she remained at home, but her lunch was left intact in the dinner pail. I shall never forget how I must have appeared, bundled up in a coat made from my father's blue army blanket, my head in a red-and-black hood, hand-quilted, with a "nuby" (nubia, or scarf) wound around my neck—and those copper-toed boots on my feet.

No record is left on memory's page of that day's event until the hour of 2 p. m. Then a blast of indescribable fury struck the north and west walls of that schoolhouse, rattling the window panes, forcing bits of snow through every crevice, and sifting wet particles throughout the room. So thick was the driven snow that objects outside the building were completely obliterated. Our teacher, Frank Cooper, emptied the contents of the coal scuttle into that round-bellied stove.

Without any formal dismissal, recess was declared by a general movement towards the source of heat. As I recall, there were thirty pupils in school that afternoon. Mr. Cooper organized a hand-to-hand line of the larger boys to bring coal from the coalhouse, which stood only a few feet from the door. There were six or eight steps from the ground to the threshold, which materially increased the difficulty of the task; but a large pile of coal was deposited upon the schoolhouse floor.

Then the first conscription of this kind that I ever knew about, was ordered. The food of each dinner pail was given up to form a general store, and to be used in case of a long siege. The extra supply that we had in our bucket was left to eat on the way home. In the supply was an apple, strange as it may seem—a rare delicacy at that time; but everything had to be given up for the common good.

The girls' privy, which stood at the extreme northwest corner of the "school acre," went tumbling past the schoolhouse, in consequence of which there was a distressing situation. An improvised "rest room" was quickly arranged by tying the sleeves

of garments together to form a very satisfactory screen across a corner of the schoolroom.

Suddenly a pounding aroused the attention of all within, and when the door (inward swing) was opened, a man appeared so coated with snow and ice that his features could not be recognized. He soon proved to be Sam Pettit, a neighbor already mentioned, who had fought his way from home, desperately making his way along a wire fence. His hands were bare and torn by the diamond barbs of the wire, and blood from the deep wounds was frozen between his fingers. Upon his back he had strapped a bundle of wraps for his three children, Fanny, Ada, and John (the last my adversary in the spelling class). Mr. Pettit had heavy eyebrows and beard, black as coal. These were encrusted in a sheet of ice from his frozen breath. Fortunately he encountered the line of boys engaged at their task of bringing in coal, and Herbert Ayr succeeded in guiding him to the door. In a short time he started out with his three children, but it was only by heroic efforts that he was able to reach home in safety. Then the two daughters of William Pettit, my younger brother and I, started out in a storm of the severity of which we had but faint realization. The struggle was almost too heartrending for description. We got lost in a pasture; and it was apparently by the merest chance that we came upon William Pettit, who also was lost in his attempt to reach the schoolhouse. Had it not been for the ample supply of blankets and robes which Mr. Pettit had in his sled, and the unerring instinct of his horses, it is very unlikely that we could have reached home. Mr. Cooper with twelve pupils stayed over night in the schoolhouse, as the distance they would have to go, as well as the direction, made it extremely dangerous for them to venture forth. It was most remarkable that out of about thirty pupils in school that day, not one perished in the Great Blizzard of 1888.

School life proceeded through the years in that box-like schoolhouse. There were good teachers and poor ones. The one who taught singing was Hattie Bradd; the one who stressed total abstinence was Mary MacIntyre; the one who slept through the school hours is not named here; and the one who had the unusual privilege of riding a pony was Gladys Harris. It was she who suggested a teacher's career for me; for while she staked

her pony, Fly, she let me hear the reading lessons of the younger pupils, and thereby the spark of ambition was kindled.

Advanced education was difficult to achieve for the greater number of farm girls. Two years of high school in Superior, Nebraska, and two years at the old Peru State Normal enabled me to get my first certificate. Later, the flourishing Lincoln Normal, of happy memory, and Fairfield College, of perhaps still happier memory, and then Cotner College, from which institution I was graduated, encouraged me upon my modest educational career of some forty years.

But the dream nurtured at that box schoolhouse of District No. 81, Webster County, never dimmed; and my years of teaching service constitute my return for the sacrifices of those heroic pioneers to make possible the education of Nebraska boys and girls.

II. A School Child in the Blizzard of '88

HERVEY S. ROBINSON, LINCOLN*

It was January 12, 1888, about the middle of the afternoon. Recess was over. From her desk in the little school house among the Seward hills Lena Schlesselmer gazed through the window at the falling snow — great feathery flakes such as children love to watch. The weather was mild, with not a breath of wind to stir the light snow that had been falling steadily all day and now covered the ground evenly to the depth of two feet.

Lena was only eleven years old but had seen much hardship during her short life. Her father, a victim of smallpox and now several years dead, had lost all his money prospecting for coal in the vicinity of Milford. That Lena, too, had been victim of the dread disease, her small scar-pitted face bore witness. Her mother, since her father's death, had presented Lena with two step-fathers and several half-brothers and sisters. The last step-father had driven her from the house, and so she had come to live with the Webbekes on the little farm among the hills of southeast Seward. The Webbekes were distant relatives of Lena's parents and, like them, were German immigrants. They were very poor. Their house, a mere cabin, had but two rooms, one of which served as a woodshed, the other as living quarters for the entire family — the father and mother, three small children, and Lena, who was now known as Lena Webbeke.

Lena had never heard the English language until she started to school. Now she was in second reader, could write a fair hand and was doing well in numbers, but the English language gave her trouble and she spoke more freely in German.

Thus she sat, this January afternoon, watching the falling snow through the window. Soon school would be out and she would follow the path up the hill to the northeast, across the stubblefield that had been partly plowed that fall and to the pasture at the top of the hill, then down the other side, across a deep ravine, and on up to the little cabin that for the last six months

* Winner of Second Prize in 1940 Contest, Native Sons and Daughters of America. (Special mention is due this story for the reason that it needed no editing.)

she had called home. The distance was about three-quarters of a mile.

Perhaps Lena was thinking of that long lonely tramp over the hills, and of the farm chores to be done in the fading light of a January afternoon, when she was startled by a sudden roaring sound that seemed to come from the west. She turned her head in time to see through the west window a wall of white sweep over the top of the hill and down upon the little building in which she was sitting. In a moment all outdoors was a mass of thick white snow, driven by a howling satanic wind. All pretense at school work was at an end. Teacher and pupils rushed to the windows and gazed out at the whirling storm. Not even the nearest objects were visible. Everything outside was enveloped in snow.

Most of the children were small, and they clustered about their teacher in a frightened group.

"Miss Badger, how can we get home?" they asked.

Stella Badger, the teacher, a young girl herself, reassured them.

"We must all stay right here in the school until the storm is over, unless someone comes for us," she said. "It is safe and warm here, and the storm won't last very long. Some one will be sure to come as soon as it is safe to venture out."

Thus she quieted them while they continued to watch the storm. The wind seemed to increase in violence and presently the air in the room began to grow cold in spite of the roaring fire in the big stove.

Before long a stamping of feet was heard and the door flew open, admitting an icy blast of wind, a cloud of snow, and a man who lived a short distance south of the school. He had fought his way on foot through the snow to get his children.

Miss Badger began muffling his children in their wraps, talking as she did so.

"Is it safe to venture out with the children in such a storm?" she asked. "How can you find your way?"

"Well," he replied, "I had some trouble getting here, but we will have the wind at our backs going home. I could find my way home from here in the dark. What are you going to do? Say, Miss Badger," he continued, "all these little folks live down our

way. Why don't we wrap them up and take them along with us? They will be safer in my house than here."

The teacher hesitated. "What about these two?" indicating Lena and an older boy who lived not far from the Webbeke place.

"Oh, I'll be all right," said the boy, "and I can look after Lena."

With some misgiving the teacher consented, and she and the rest of the children and the man set out.

It appeared afterward that the two children must have disagreed about which road they would take. Poor Lena, with her broken English, was timid in company. At last the two set out, she to follow the path over the hill alone. The boy chose to follow the road. Guiding himself by wagonwheel ruts he eventually reached home safely.

Lena struck out across the fields in a northeasterly direction, carrying her dinner-pail and her reader. The snow was blinding, and the wind nearly snatched her breath away, but for a time she managed to keep to the worn pathway. By the time she reached the top of the hill she realized she was no longer on the path — that she was lost in the whirling snow. Had she known it, at that moment she was within a quarter of a mile of her home. Dazed and thoroughly frightened she tried to retrace her steps to the school house. She actually did return to within twenty rods of the school, but, unable to see in the blinding storm, stupefied with cold and fear, she fell, exhausted, into a furrow of the plowed stubble field. Covering herself with her cloak as best she could, she lapsed into unconsciousness. The driving snow quickly covered her slight body, shielding it somewhat from the icy blasts of wind. There, beneath the snow, she lay during the rest of that frightful night.

At daybreak she awoke. The storm was over. The sun was shining. She tried to rise but found herself frozen to the ground. With a great effort she tore herself loose — such is the strength of little children in their extremity.

Above the hill in the direction of home, she saw a wreath of smoke that rose from the chimney. She struggled to her feet, only to fall after a few stumbling steps. There was no feeling in those little legs. They were frozen. On hands and knees she crawled toward that distant wisp of smoke. Alternately rising and falling,

stumbling, crawling, dragging her little body over the snow-covered ground, she at last reached the top of the hill and succeeded in descending the other side. Before her lay that deep gulch, full of snow that had drifted on the other side. Helplessly stiff from the bitter cold, she could crawl no farther. Giving up all hope the little eleven-year-old child sank down to die — within sixty rods of her home.

Meantime Mr. Webbeke had been to the school on the afternoon of the terrible storm to bring her home. Finding the building empty he started home and on the way back he too became lost, having wandered far to the south of the path. Finally he reached home, convinced that Lena had either gone to a neighbor's house, or was hopelessly lost.

Next morning he mounted a horse and started out to search for her. Before he was out of the barnyard he saw on the hillside across the ravine something lying in the snow that looked like a human body. He shouted:

“Lena!”

The body rose to its knees and lifted both hands. One held a reader — the other a dinner-pail!

Leaping from his horse Mr. Webbeke clawed and clambered through the deep drift and across the ravine to the little girl. Lifting her in his arms he struggled back through the snow to the house. Stiff and speechless, she lay in his arms, her hands still clinging to her reader and dinner-pail.

All that day, from eight in the morning until almost night, Lena lay in a stupor. No medical aid was to be had. Eight miles of huge snow drifts blocked the road between the Webbeke cabin and the nearest doctor.

It was several days before Dr. G. W. Brandon of Milford was able to reach her. He found the family destitute, and the child with her right foot in such condition that he was forced to amputate it at once. From then on Doctor Brandon visited the Webbeke home every day until the weather and Lena's condition made it possible to move her to Milford where she was placed in the home of Mrs. Reimer, a quiet, cleanly German woman who gave her the best of care.

Meantime the *Nebraska State Journal* published Lena's story. Contributions poured in from all over the country. County Super-

intendent Burkett was made trustee of the fund, which grew to almost four thousand dollars. Later Mr. Burkett was appointed Lena's guardian by order of the court.

The *Milford Nebraskan* of October 26, 1888, carried the following story on the case:

Last week Superintendent Burkett placed Lena Webbeke in the primary department at the C Street school in Lincoln, where she will remain during the winter. She is very inefficient in English and her guardian thinks she ought to have the advantages of a one-grade primary school.

Little Lena can walk quite well now, by means of her artificial limb. Mr. Burkett has loaned out thirty-seven hundred and fifty dollars of the Webbeke Fund on good real estate security, at eight per cent, on long time. It is expected that after this year the annual income will support and educate her.

Though little Lena survived her terrible experience in the blizzard of '88, she did not long enjoy the prosperity that had come to her. She died while still a child, probably from the effects of her fearful ordeal.

III. The First School at Sutton

ANNA BEMIS CUTLER, YORK*

School Days, School Days!
Dear old Golden Rule Days!
Readin' and writin' and 'rithmetic
Taught to the tune of a hickory stick.

Please do not tell, but it is now just fifty-six years ago that I made my trembling appearance in the old Court House at Sutton, Nebraska. Yet as a first offender after a most tumultuous and losing county-seat fight in which Clay Center won, Sutton thriftily put the empty court house to use as a one-room school where all the town's grades below the High School were housed and divided into primary, intermediate and grammar grades, with many subdivisions but only one instructor. The fact that Company E, Nebraska State Militia, with the Silver Cornet Band, used the second floor as an armory did not militate against the place, either with the school board or pupils, the latter of whom occasionally were regaled with a tune as some unusual event sent the band for uniforms and instruments during the day.

Our teacher, Miss Martha Ellen Torrey (may God forever bless her!), knew every boy in the organization, and if any of them lingered too long above our heads (where they entered by an outside stairway, unseen but not unheard), her dark eyes would snap. Raising the window she would call up the stairs, and no pupil obeyed her more readily than did those militia boys.

We entered an anteroom from the outdoors, and in it there were rows of hooks for our wraps, a shelf above them for dinner pails, and a long bench under the hooks which contained a water pail with a dipper floating in it, a wash basin sitting sociably close by it, with a cake of laundry soap, one wash-rag and one towel for the fifty or more pupils; and on that shelf — yes, I affirm it — a bottle of castor oil! When a child came to school complaining of sore throat, headache or cold, this predecessor of the school nurse was promptly administered by our teacher who must have

* Winner of Third Prize in 1940 Contest, Native Sons and Daughters of Nebraska.

been a pioneer in school nursing, for I never have heard of that procedure in any school.

We were taught nothing about germs in those days, but must have come in contact with countless numbers of the liveliest kinds. That dipper which rested in the water pail was passed about ten o'clock in the morning and two-thirty in the afternoon, from seat to seat, held by the lucky one who got to "Pass the water." Each child who wanted a drink leaned forward and sipped his fill, then on to the next one until it was empty. When the last one had been served the cup was thrown back into the pail, water and all if any remained, after coming in close communion with the mouths, chins, hands — even some noses — and clothing of half a hundred far from immaculate drinkers.

The dinner pails opened at noon held a variety of viands, ranging from the lunches of those children whose mothers wanted to show off, to the poor little children who had nothing worth trading and slunk to one side when they opened theirs. Often now when I smell cucumber pickle I am carried back to that noon-day scene, and that article of diet must have been an inveterate accompaniment of the lunch pail.

The main room was decorated with pictures, mostly the cards which came with baking powder or coffee; but on the front wall, close to the teacher's desk, was one large framed picture of a locomotive with the printed advice, "Go west, young man!" Behind this frame, hidden from the casual eye but well known to the inmates, was a willow switch. I have seen the girl teacher in her teens use it vigorously on a man in his late twenties without a protest from the aforesaid pupil. Grown men of Russian and German descent were sent to school to learn to speak English as well as read and write it, and recited sociably with small girls five or six years of age.

My kindergarten course was short — in fact, completed in one day, for it consisted of being given a little pack of colored pieces of wood and told to separate them according to their colors. This took all of five minutes and then I was promoted to the first grade, C class.

Here I stood with my toes neatly placed against a crack in the floor (wide cracks between boards, filled with dust), and, taking a pointer in hand, was told to put it on the kitty on the

chart. This I did successfully; but when, being asked to read the word beside the picture, I naturally said "kitty," it was a surprise to have the next reader say "cat" and pass above me in the line. However, this experience told me to pay attention to the letters and words on the chart. I had long since learned my letters, sitting on the floor in the evening with a slate and pencil and copying from the newspaper in my father's hands above me, "The Chicago Tribune," "The Des Moines Register," or some big headline. One of these I remember because of the consternation it created among my elders: "President Garfield is Assassinated." I soon had learned the chart by heart and was passed to the B class.

We sat two in a seat, and sometimes when the room was crowded a child sat on a board placed in the aisle between two seats and shared the desks at either side of him, already filled with the impedimenta of its rightful owners. We also shared other things, such as a "slate-rag" which was used to wipe the slate dry after it had been moistened with liquid provided by nature for the purpose. Speaking bluntly, they were usually called "spit-rags," and never was any child warned not to use another's germ-laden property. I was naturally squeamish and kept an extra for lending, but it reposed companionably close to my own. If contagious disease entered that school every one of us must have been exposed. No comfort station used space in the building, but not far from the back door and the *pump* we had a small square building which was regularly knocked over each Halloween night.

In the back of the room was a big round stove, red-hot all winter, it seems to me. Teacher herself put in a big chunk of wood, or in severe weather a scuttle of coal, and so far as I can remember she did all the janitor work. Boys and girls alike used to beg for the privilege of helping her, and as a special favor took turns in cleaning erasers, sweeping, ringing the small hand-bell at opening, noon and recess, and even scrubbing the floor and washing the windows when a program loomed near.

Books were not supplied by the district but each pupil bought his own. Mine were inherited from an older brother who had passed that way and, since the publisher was not changed for years, were standard; but when a pupil came in from another

town or state, there was apt to be confusion if his were not the same. Reading went all right and we greatly enjoyed his different stories, but in arithmetic poor teacher must sometimes hear a separate class or else let him "sit together" and study with some child for the duration of the term. This was not always a peaceful solution of the problem, some children being eminently unfitted to be lenders and others to be borrowers. Well do I remember the irate father who appeared one morning and conducted his blitzkrieg before the whole school. "I paid three big dollars for that book and only five years ago and one year it ain't been used and Eddie he says he can't use it no more and has to have a new one like what other boys have and I won't have it no matter what!" he said, all in one sentence.

Poor teacher gently explained about the uniformity of class recitations and examinations, and when she had finished, the same declaration came hurtling back at her, over and over, with the joyful result that the rest of that year we who spoke of "five apples, take away two," were regaled with "The monkey picked up two pennies and could not find two. How many did the lady throw?" How I did wish I had that book! To this day I wonder where it came from, for it abounded in unusual situations in the mathematical world, so far as lower grades were concerned.

One problem all of us learned together and tried it on our folks at home. "I walked down to Uncle Henry's house to borrow a cup of sugar. Aunt Kate had none and I walked two miles on to Aunt Jen's house. When I got home I had walked eleven miles. How far did I live from Uncle Henry?" In our second-grade ignorance none of us could solve that one and I still think it belongs in the puzzle department, but that book was entertainment all winter.

We sang everything: the multiplication table, the names of the presidents (I cannot say them in order now unless I hum a little), the alphabet, ending with "Now you've heard my A B C, Tell me what you think of me," and others. I firmly believe that Miss Torrey wrote words and music for many things we put into song. Some of them were extremely personal, such as hints about the town drunkard and how awful it was to drink. They were never found in any musical literature of the day, I know.

How we loved to sing! At least the musical children did,

and Miss Torrey was surely an accomplished musician. In fact, after teaching for many, many years, she was married and moved to University Place where, even after she was confined to a wheel chair, she taught music until the day she died. No instrument graced our room, not even a pitch pipe, but when a visitor entered at any time, we instantly put away our books and prepared to break forth into song:

Dear friends, we're glad to meet you
Within these walls today.
With songs of joy we greet you;
Our hearts are happy and gay.
We come, we come, we come!
Our hearts are free and
Happy are we — yea, happy are we
To see you.

Our repertoire comprised everything, ranging from "Sweet Bye and Bye," "Beulah Land," "Silver Threads Among the Gold," to "Pilli Willi Wink, Dies ist Mein Fifi," — if that is the way to spell it. That one had lots of gestures, as we pantomimed the different instruments in a strolling German band. Good little children were sometimes allowed to select what we could sing, and when (rarely) it was my turn, I always chose "Jolly Boys," for in the chorus we gave a loud clap of our hands on the word "slap" and a hearty pound on the desk when we came to "bang."

Among the pupils was Herbert Johnson, now the nationally known cartoonist of the *Saturday Evening Post*, who with Wilson Tout (at present the august editor of the *North Platte Tribune*) and myself, could sing "second," as we called it. When we wanted to we ganged up on the others and sang either quickly or slowly as it pleased us, forcing the rest to keep our tempo. Miss Torrey must have enjoyed it, for she allowed it sometimes until with a nod she stopped us. Incidentally, speaking of Herbie Johnson, his talent was surely born with him, for there was always a circus parade of animals adorning the flyleaves of his books, and portraits of classmates and teacher were on blackboard and slate. Once, at our house to play, he went under the porch and with a piece of chalk decorated the brick foundation with birds, flowers and people, making it a show place for our playmates.

Next to singing I cared most for reading, and I believe Miss Torrey must have had unusual ability when it came to teaching that subject. I can hear her voice now as she used to say, "Ask

the question as if you mean it and want to know." One day we reached the page where there was "a really-truly poem," and I rose to read:

Where did you come from, Baby dear,
Out of the Everywhere, into the Here?

One verse ran, "Where did you get that pearly ear? God spoke, and it came out to hear." With super-eloquence I shouted, "Where did you get that pearly ear, God?" with the idea that I must make it heard in Heaven.

One side of our school room looked out upon the road which must have been a section line, for I remember emigrant wagons passing and occasionally there would come an immense drove of long-horn cattle, driven up from the south on their way to eastern markets. We were allowed to go to the windows and look out at them, with an awe of those long-horns I should feel now if I met one. Wire or picket fences lined the roads usually, and I have seen the road even full of a stream of moving big bodies, horns tossings, horses plunging, men yelling (not always printable epithets), and the end of the herd obscured by the dust of the vanguard. Now when I meet a truck containing a few aristocrats being carted to a train where they will spend a few hours between York and Omaha, I recall the "good old times" of their fore-runners.

Another sight unknown to the present schoolyard was the Indian encampment which appeared, spring and fall, on the banks of School Creek within sight of our playground. Wigwams were set up, ponies turned loose to graze, papooses and dogs were plentifully distributed throughout the beautiful natural park, and no moving picture of today can equal in interest that scene for me. Squaws went to the surrounding pastures to gather the substitute for buffalo chips (now all gone), which they used for their cooking fires. Putting this fuel under the big iron pots which hung over the embers, with the same unwashed hands they shaped balls of dough and dropped them into the delicious-smelling liquid in the kettles, usually containing for its main ingredient (or so we firmly believed, and I am dubious on that point yet) dogs!

The braves did attend to the ponies as a rule, but aside from

that they followed a policy of "Let the women do the work," and confined themselves to going from house to house with outstretched hands, begging for bread, fruit, vegetables — anything the frightened housewife would give them. They never knocked but walked in and said "How!" and then pointed to any food in sight. They were inveterate thieves but otherwise harmless, and went West to hunt in the spring and back to the reservation in the fall.

I believe they were Pawnee, for that was the tribe most prevalent. Dressed in blankets, long braids of coarse black hair hanging on either side of their copper-colored faces, and often carrying a bowie knife in sight, they were not welcome guests to a housewife who was alone and she was apt to be generous with great promptitude.

The small papooses did something I never have seen a white child do. In early spring or fall there might be ice on School Creek and light snow on its sloping banks. Begging shingles from my Grandfather's lumber yard, they stood upright in their bare feet and slid to the ice below, then flew down the creek as far as their start and shingles would take them. Other feats they performed were duplicated by our own boys but never that one — perhaps because our less robust juniors wore shoes.

And this reminds me of what I wore to school in winter. When I started to school on a sharp morning I was encased in a home-made red flannel union suit (much more itchy than malarial mosquitoes, I swear, although I never tried the latter), a red flannel petticoat, a cotton-flannel petticoat, a white muslin petticoat trimmed with lace and embroidery, heavy hand-knitted woolen stockings, woolen anklets and wristlets, a heavy flannel dress, a woolen cloak, a woolen hood with a cape which came down over my neck behind, woolen mittens fastened together with a knitted yarn string which went around my neck and down each sleeve; and over my high shoes, arctic rubbers with fleece linings which came half way to my knees. In addition to such prudent measures against cold I usually had a woolen scarf wound around my neck, and on a cold day a blue or brown veil of heavy material tied over my face, upon which could be seen the position of my mouth and nose marked by frost from the breath it took to hold up all this apparel. I look with interest upon the half-clad chil-

dren of today and also with envy, for candor compels me to say they are just as healthy as we were, apparently.

Eeeny, Meeny, Miney, Moe,
Catch a nigger by the toe;
If he hollers let him go.
You're OUT!

This was the way "it" was chosen for sides in the games we played: "Pum, pum, pull away," Crack the whip, Tag, London Bridge is Falling Down, or Catch. Marbles, with wicked boys playing for keeps, were in evidence in spring, and "ante-over" with a ball, but I do not remember baseball or softball — at least in connection with school. No time out for football games! Teacher frequently played with us and always supervised. How she watched our manners and morals as well as our minds! Henry Blank (I believe his name was not) went fishing on Sunday and was drowned. To his funeral the whole school was marched and treated to a view of Henry in his coffin — a sight I could see for weeks afterwards when alone in bed, for the coffin had to be made twice as large as Henry normally had been and his swollen, distorted face was dark blue. I supposed all dead people looked thus and never doubted that Henry, an inoffensive child not more than twelve years old, had gone down when he died to where Satan stood with a red-hot pitchfork to hurl him into a lake of fire and brimstone. I'll guarantee that Sunday fishing took a setback for some time after this tragedy.

On Friday afternoons we invariably had a program with recitations, declamations, dialogues and pantomimes. Gems from McGuffey's Sixth were given by the older pupils — "Spartacus to the Gladiators," "The Burial of Sir Thomas Moore," "Curfew Shall Not Ring Tonight;" while little girls lisped short stanzas about birds and flowers or dolls and small boys about soldiers. Sometimes we had a speaker come to visit — many of them Civil War veterans, it seems to me, but perhaps because they were so numerous then. My grandfather, H. W. Gray, was a captain, and in his blue uniform with sword at his side he came to tell us about Decoration Day. John B. Dinsmore used to orate very freely and later ran for governor. J. W. Johnson had taught and graded the schools previously and inspected us. He was later prominent in politics, living in Lincoln. R. W. Brown was senator

and my own father, G. W. Bemis, was district attorney and later, at York, mayor, city attorney and judge of a minor court. All of them could be oratorical, waving the flag freely and appealing to God. I wish I might hear one of them now.

Programs and spelling bees were the high-lights of the week. Each day in spelling class we stood in line and went below or above each other as we missed or spelled correctly the word pronounced. Reading lessons had the hard words listed at the beginning and these were mastered before the reading began. Once each week we chose sides and spelled down, a few dropping out at the first word but some of us staying until the spelling book was exhausted as far as we had gone that year. Each syllable was spelled and pronounced separately: "C-o-n, Con; g-r-e, gre, Congre; g-a, ga, Congrega; t-i-o-n, shun, Congregation; a-l, al, Congregational; i-s-t, ist — Congregationalist at last in triumph!

Tiny oblong cards with "Reward of Merit" printed on them were given to us each night, *if* we had earned them by good lessons and good conduct, and at the close of the term they were given back to Teacher and a prize awarded according to the number saved.

On my way to school I read the signs: John Grosshans, Grain; Linton Bros., Livery Stable; Joseph Grice, Harness; I. N. Clark and Co., Hardware; Markus Wittenberg, Gro. All the town was on one long street called Saunders Avenue, as it is yet.

Early in June came the "Last day of School," a community event. Everybody came to the school house in the morning and we gave an exhibition in spelling, in reading, in mental arithmetic, after which we had singing, marching and speaking. No dancing! The blackboards were decorated with Spencerian writing, drawing, and poems we had learned, and slates with written work lay on each desk for inspection. Report cards were distributed. At noon we repaired to the beautiful natural park given to the city by the Clark brothers (Dr. M. V. B. and Isaac N.), where the picnic dinner was spread. Some child was sure to whisper, "Lemonade, made in the shade, by an old maid," as we clustered around the five-gallon jar. Down on the ground we sat, with red and white checked tablecloths, blue and white dishes, and all the things there were to eat. It seems to me now everybody was there, from Grandmother to a month-old baby, and everybody was happy and good!