



A One Room Schoolhouse

as told to Betty Goldthwait

The first schools in America were one-room schools, and we are as yet not far from the days in which one-room schoolhouses were plentiful. Some of the buildings are still to be seen in Clinton County. One of them, for example, stands just south of Cliff Haven on U.S. Route 9, a little stone building now used as a private home. Another was until very recently standing on the same highway at Valcour. Still others can be found, sturdy and attractive, mostly now lived in by individuals who purchased them when central or consolidated schools were begun.

A retired resident of Clinton County, who prefers not to be named, has told us how it was to attend a one-room school. His was in Chenango County, halfway between Oxford and Norwich. The six children of his family lived with their parents on the old homestead which was carved from the wilderness about 1800. The family had come from western Rhode Island in ox carts.

The children had one teacher for all eight grades. Their first teacher was a man. He smoked a corn cob pipe. They used slates instead of paper when they were in the earliest grades, with slate pencils, which were round sticks made of slate, about six inches long and wrapped with red and white paper, striped like a barber pole. Paper was too expensive to be used by children just learning to write and draw.

Older children used paper and learned to write with steel pointed pens. They kept these in pencil boxes which

every child had. After a time, gold-tipped fountain pens came into use. The fountain pen could be filled with ink by unscrewing and taking it apart, holding the point in ink, and squeezing the rubber bag which held the ink. Pens were not thrown away when dry like today's ball points, but were filled up again and again.

The children sat two to a desk. Each desk had its own ink well, a hole with a cover and glass insert that was kept full of ink.

To save money, most children also used penny pencils for their writing. The lead was rather hard. There were also five-cent pencils, which were better, containing softer lead.

Some schools in those days were heated with the usual stove in the middle of the room, which burned wood. However, this school in Chenango County had a special stove with a "magazine" which could be lowered into it during especially cold weather, and in the magazine anthracite coal could be loaded, which would make more heat than wood could give. By means of the magazine, a fire could be fed as the coal was burned, so the stove could continue heating the building all night or even from a Friday to Monday. The older boys were proud to be allowed to care for the fire and remove the ashes.

There was no plumbing at all in the building. There was a double toilet out in back, one side for girls, the other for boys.

The larger boys were allowed to take the water pail to a neighboring farm for water, and were proud to do so. Two boys were necessary as the pail was heavy. One tin dipper was provided for all, about twenty students. Some parents provided their children with collapsible metal cups.

In the entrance hall there was a place for the water pail, and a shelf with an enameled wash basin. A single towel hung beside the pail of cold water and the wash basin, and there was also a piece of yellow home-made soap. About once a year, someone took the towel home and washed it!

To the left of the entrance hall was the small room where the coal and wood for the fire was stored, and to the right was the "cloak room" where all the students hung their coats and hats or caps. Over the hooks for these there was a shelf where the lunch pails were kept. Most children carried their lunches in tin pails in which lard or some other product had come from the store. No one had vacuum bottles.

School began at nine o'clock and was kept until four, but children had to get up much earlier than that. Boys had to help milk the cows, clean the stable, and feed the cows and horses before going to school. Girls had duties in the kitchen. In good weather the children walked to school, but when the snow was too deep or the river was flooding, the father or mother would hitch up a horse and give the children a ride to school.

The first thing that happened at school was the flag raising ceremony. The children proudly took turns at the rope raising the flag, and the other students stood at attention, right hand held over the heart in the "sign of fidelity." Then indoors the teacher called the roll, read a passage of the Bible aloud, and the children recited the Lord's Prayer. Afterward, they sang hymns or patriotic songs. The day had begun.

After an hour and a half of lessons, there was a fifteen-minute morning recess, and another at 2:30 p.m., and of course an hour at noon. The children after eating their lunches would play hide and seek, tag, baseball, and climb trees and perhaps pick an apple at the nearby farm. In winter they could skate on a pond, or coast on a hill in a pasture not far away. They had home-made sleds and "skipjacks," made from a barrel stave with an upright piece of two-by-four about a foot high on which there was a board for a seat. Skis, also made at home, were of barrel staves.

During the school year there were some special occasions. About once a month the best spellers were allowed to "choose up sides" and have a spelling bee, lining up the teams chosen on opposite sides of the room and seeing which team could "spell down" the other—that is, spell the greatest number of words, taking turns, without making a mistake.

Every year on Arbor Day the schoolchildren planted a tree on the school grounds, with appropriate "exercises" and "speaking pieces." Thanksgiving and Christmas were also occasions for ceremony. At each Christmas the students had a large Christmas tree and made all of the decorations for it—paper chains made with red and green links, popcorn strung on string and wound around the tree. At the Christmas exercises, six or eight students would take part in a dialogue, and every child also would have a piece to speak. The parents all attended. There was no electricity for Christmas tree lights, and candles were not used because of the fire hazard.

At the end of the school day, the flag was lowered with the children again standing at attention. Then they were dismissed to walk the two miles or so to home, having spent the day learning things which still stay with them seventy years later.

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