

The One Room School

by Ida Belle Salsbury

The first school in Fulton County is believed to have been established in Pike Township in 1835. Realizing the importance of education for their children the early pioneers continued to build the one room structures until they dotted the entire county. The first ones were of logs but later they were of frame or brick construction. The first frame structure is thought to have been District #1 in Swancreek Township in 1839. A familiar sight during the last half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century was the little schoolhouse at the crossroads about every two miles in any direction. As school busses were unknown, the children walked to school some traveling more than a mile for their formal education through the eighth grade. Meanwhile high schools had been established in the nearby towns and here many rural students continued their next four years in high school if they were lucky and could afford the cost of tuition.

In 1919 there were 83 one room schools in the county, 3 two room elementary schools and 9 with both an elementary and a high school.

In 1912 the first centralized school in North West Ohio was erected in Fulton County at Ai. That was the end of the one room schools in Fulton Township.

In 1916 Chesterfield opened a new centralized school for their children in grades one through twelve. Their crossroads schoolhouses were abandoned for educational purposes in favor of the new building. As time went on other township schools joined the town schools until in 1976 there are only seven districts in the county, Archbold, Pike-Delta-York, Evergreen, Gorham-Fayette, Pettisville, Swanton and Wauseon.

The one room school of the past exists mostly in memory. A very few may be seen today. Those that remain have been converted into dwellings, used for machinery storage or

boarded up and just stand as a silent sentinel, a reminder of an era gone by.

Many schools were named for the farmer who donated the land or for a prominent family in the district. Some examples are, Pfund, Abbott, Whitcomb, Morris, Clark, Ritter, Stamm, Powers, Raker, Davoll, Fankhauser and Patterson School.

One school still standing in Franklin Township was first known as the Gimmeny School, later the Wentz School and finally a very fine and beloved teacher, Elmer Bailey, gave it the name East Franklin School.

Upon entering the one room school one probably would see the American flag stretched on the wall at the front of the room with a picture of Washington and Lincoln on either side. Desks were either single or double with an ink well in the upper right corner. This was a little round hole with a glass container for ink with a shiny metal cover hinged to it. Oftentimes a girl's long braid got the end dipped in the ink by some mischievous boy sitting behind her. In some schools the teacher's desk was on a raised platform so the activities could be supervised. The potbellied stove was in the center of the room or at the side. It was necessary for the teacher or one of the older boys to keep feeding wood or coal into it during the winter days. The same was true of building the fire in the morning, either the teacher came early and did it or some boy was hued for the janitor work.

Some schools were lucky to have a well and pump, others had to carry water from the nearest farmhouse. So the water pail, dipper and wash basin occupied one corner of the room. There wasn't too much worry about sanitation. It was expected that if one pupil had the measles the whole school had them.

Restroom facilities consisted of two little out-houses at the rear of the school grounds, one for the boys and one for the girls. Travel there provided outdoor exercise and many trips were made either of necessity or as a good excuse to get away from the strict discipline and tedious tasks. Formal physical education classes were unheard of and considered unnecessary. Walking to school and morning, noon and recess periods spent playing games

was enough physical activity. Baseball was a favorite sport. Some other games were pom-pom pullaway, go-sheepie-go, three deep, gray wolf for looks, ante over the woodshed or schoolhouse, leap frog, I want a beckon and old sow. The latter game was a fascinating one. Another name was pig-in-the-hole or sowbelly. Each player arms himself with a stick preferably one with a knob on the end. The boys would cut their sticks where one branch joined another and leave a little of the joint on the end. Next each player fashioned a hole in the ground and stood with his stick in the hole. In the center of the group was an extra hole. There was one extra player who was "it". It was his job to try and knock a tin can into the center hole, while the other players tried to prevent it by knocking the can away. But if a player took his stick out of his hole another player or "it" could take the hole by placing his stick in. Then the first player must hastily seek another hole for his stick. Meanwhile if "it" could get his stick in a hole he was no longer "it" but rather the one left without a hole for his stick. Should be successful in getting the can in the center hole he could choose someone to take his place and the game continued.

In winter there were games of fox and geese, dog and deer, duck on the rock and plenty of snow-balling.

A hot lunch program, as such, was another non-existent thing. However, one could say, it had its beginnings in the one room school. Sometimes children brought the ingredients for soup and it was cooked on top of the pot-bellied stove. How good it tasted on a cold winter day eaten from a cup or bowl carried from home in a dinner pail. When a jacket enclosed furnace type stove replaced the former stove, the children brought raw potatoes and placed them on the ledge just inside the door to bake. A hot potato with some butter brought from home also was good on those wintry days.

The morning began with opening exercises consisting of the pledge of allegiance, a Bible reading and on certain days singing, one day current events were required, another was designated for memory gems such as,

*He who has a thousand friends,
Has not a friend to spare;
But he who has one enemy
Wilt meet him everywhere.*

or

*If you have a task to do,
And mean to do it really,
Never let it be by halves
But do it fully, freely.*

The teacher often read books to the children during the opening exercise and following noon recess. What pleasure it was to return from strenuous play and listen to the next chapter of an exciting story while you relaxed and cooled off. Many times the pupils begged for one more chapter but there were lessons to be learned. There was no time to waste since there were classes for all grades, one through eight in reading, writing, arithmetic, spelling, language, history, geography and orthography. Occasionally there were no pupils for a certain class which lessened the load. The older ones helped the younger ones and all learned from hearing the others recite. Classes were called to the front of the room for recitation while they sat on long benches called "recitation benches".

On Friday afternoons there were spell-downs and arithmetic or geography contests. It was a change from the tiresome sitting to choose up sides and stand up on either side of the room for a spell-down. The teacher pronounced words alternating from side to side.

When a word was missed the speller sat down, so some didn't stand long if they missed the first word. Sometimes several people went down on the same word. The one who remained standing and was still spelling when everyone else had missed was declared the winner. Oftentimes it required some pretty tough words to get, a pupil down. Such words as asafetida, mignonette, chrysalis, periphery, acetylene, fossiliferous or ecclesiastic.

Sides were likewise chosen for arithmetic contests. One player from each side went to the blackboard. The teacher gave a problem to add, subtract, multiply or divide. The first to get the correct answer remained and the loser sat down. A challenger from the loser's side went up and had a choice of problem. They either chose what they could do best or what they guessed was hardest for their opponent. They who could stay up and put all others down on the opposing side won for themselves and their team.

Geography contests consisted of naming states and their capitals or naming the counties of Ohio or the townships in the county. Other contests involved geographical facts concerning mountains, rivers or countries.

Highlights of the year were the Christmas program and the last day of school celebration. Since people did not travel far from home, local activities especially in the school were their main entertainment. At Christmas parents turned out to hear their children recite pieces, say their parts in dialogues act out plays and sing songs. There was a gift exchange from an unlighted tree trimmed with strung popcorn, cranberries and balls of cotton. The children drew names so each one got a present plus something from the teacher including a box of candy and nuts.

Oh the joy of that last day of school! Mothers came with a basket dinner. Dads came if they weren't too busy in the fields and even then they might drop by for dinner. There was a closing day program and a ball game. Sometimes the men took time to play ball, too. The children got their grade cards and that coveted award for perfect attendance or perfect spelling. There might be an eighth grade graduation ceremony and their certificates awarded. There was joy and sadness. Passing the eighth grade meant rural school days were over and for some the end of their school days. For others it meant on to high school in the nearby town. There was gloom too, for those who learned that they had failed to pass on to the next grade. Even so, school was over and a summer of freedom ahead. Who could be sad for long?