

Sholes School

Narrative of a Day in the Life of a Rural School

by Fay Stone

You are sitting in a schoolroom that is like almost all schools were in the United States a hundred years ago. There were many of these little schools built as the pioneers moved here. In Kane County alone, there were 135 of these schools! Most people lived on farms--not in cities or towns--and these schoolhouses were built by the farmers to educate their children.

Each school was began when 25 men signed a petition asking permission to have one in their area. Money to build them came from the sale of a special section of land in each township. Of course, there wasn't a lot of money, but it was enough for a start. Can you imagine building a school today for only three or four hundred dollars? Each little schoolhouse was built according to the desires and needs of the parents and neighbors who used them. Therefore, each one was a little different.

This schoolhouse was built on the farm of David Sholes around 1870. (That's where the name Sholes School came from.) Usually it held ten to fifteen pupils with one teacher. Often five or six of the pupils were from the same family. They started school at age five or six to begin to learn reading, their sums (as arithmetic was called), and writing. They usually attended for three or four months in the winter. You can guess that this is when they weren't needed for work around the farm or in the fields quite as much as in the spring and summer. Of course, getting here was more difficult during the winter months, so attendance may have been somewhat poorer than yours today.

The schoolhouse itself, as you look around, has very little in the way of comforts, although certainly better than the dark, windowless log cabins that came before. The windows, as you see, were placed on the left side, to light the desk well--that is, if you were right-handed!

The teacher had her desk up front where she could keep an eye on everyone, and the stove was at the center or the back of the room as this was the only source of heat for the entire school. The children themselves, or the teacher, if she had time, would go to the nearest neighbor to get a bucket or two of water to fill the drinking crock out in the front hall. The water was also poured into the hand basins for washing purposed. This was all there was for everyone. You can imagine that if it was a warm day and everyone was thirsty, you might run out before the day was over. We did, and usually were told to get our next drink at home. Teacher didn't want to take time out of classes to send someone for water again.

Two outhouses were generally somewhere out in the back of the lot for use as a bathroom. I can remember how frightening those dark, smelly buildings were to the littlest ones.

Some schools had cloakrooms in the front, such as this one, to hang your outdoor wraps and store your lunch pail. There was usually no heat out there, and lunches were known to freeze during the morning of a cold winter day.

Earliest schools often had no more than crude, home-made benches. To these were added shelves against the walls for writing. Soon these benches became desks in the floor facing the teacher. Next, real desks with smoothed and varnished tops and seats, with varying sizes, were manufactured. These were the choice of school boards whenever they felt the district could afford them. They cost six to eleven dollars apiece! At first, they chose double seated desks as they were cheaper. Teachers soon found, however, that it didn't help study habits when two children were sitting together where they could pinch, poke, whisper, and giggle whenever teacher wasn't looking! So desks were then made into separate ones, such as the ones you are sitting in. They were screwed to the runners on the floor to hold them steady, and to be able to move them from side to side for cleaning. Most of this cleaning was done by the children and teacher. Sometimes at the beginning or end of school, the children would have to wash the blackboards, clap the chalk dust out of the erasers, empty the waste basket, fill the inkwells with ink, sharpen the teacher's quill pens, and pass out corrected papers and slates. There wasn't much paper, so books and written work were scarce. Teacher relied a lot on recitation to know how a child was doing in his studies.

The teacher, of course, was the only one to conduct health and physical education classes - held during recess usually. Often, it was a game of "Rounders," "Pom Pom Pull Away," "Hide and Seek," or the like. There was little equipment, and little knowledge of bodily needs. Besides, all the children got plenty of exercise walking to and from school and doing many chores around the farm early and late.

There weren't very many books, as I said, and usually children were expected to provide their own. Often this resulted in quite a variety of books.

Lights like the ones in the lovely decorated tin ceiling above you were not usually found in schools until about 1935, when they got rural electrification. Mostly, there were just wall-hanging kerosene lamps, such as the one you see in our front hall. There was always quite the danger of a fire from these, so they were rarely used during the school day. You just looked harder and squinted if it was a dark day.

As I said, the stove was the only source of heat in the wintertime. The fire was often started by an older boy in the community, or the teacher herself would start it when she came to school. Getting the wood was a very important part of a student's family's responsibilities. They brought or stored wood in the woodshed over the course of the wintertime. If they didn't contribute their share, sometimes the teacher made that child sit the furthest from the stove!

And so began the school day. The children walked or were driven by the cart, wagon, or some brought their own horse, to remain tied outside until school was over. Then, after the excitement of greetings and exchange of news, the teacher or her helper rang the bell for classes to begin.

Depositing lunch sacks or buckets on the proper shelf, hanging up any outer clothing, the children entered the classroom and went to their seats. I'm sure this sounds familiar to you all. However, there would be a major difference--some of the children in your room would be beginning readers, and others might be full-grown men and women who were coming back during a slack work time to resume lessons. Sometimes these young people had to try for years to learn enough to pass one grade! Often, they became discouraged, and as soon as they mastered the simplest reading and arithmetic, they quit for more important things--things that earned money, or got more pressing farm work done.

Anyway, the school day usually began with something of interest to everybody, like saying the Pledge of Allegiance, or singing. Then the reading lessons began. At first, when everyone brought their own books, the teacher would have each child recite out loud so she could tell that they were really working. Imagine the noise in those school rooms! In fact, they were called "blab schools!" However, soon all could see that this was hard on everybody and not a good way to learn, and books were graded and given to a group of children who were at about the same ability. Then the teacher would have each group or grade up to the front to recite quietly with her, while the others sat in their seats and prepared for class. By recess, all had completed reading, and were ready for play. Often the teacher would play, too.

After recess, the lessons resumed with arithmetic, science, geography, or whatever the teacher had decided upon. Then came lunch time. This was usually an hour, but no one had the time or a way to get home, so everyone sat in their desks and ate. Sometimes some mothers might prepare hot soups, sometimes a child might bake a potato on the hot stove, but most just brought something from home. Noon hour was our favorite time for play, and we had a lot of fun ice skating on a nearby pond, walking in the woods, or playing games.

Then came the long afternoon, when more lessons were studied and recited. We usually had an afternoon recess, too, and stayed in class until 4:00 in the afternoon. Then we had to get home as best we could, usually walking, and do our evening chores. Homework was expected and we did

that until bedtime. Our parents wanted us to work hard at our studies then too, even though we had a lot of work to do around home.

In the afternoon we had science or social studies. However, it wasn't taught in the earlier rural schools because it wasn't thought to be important. After all, a child was raised in an area where all his family and relatives were. He was expected to probably become a grown-up in that area. Roads were nearly impassable for a lot of travel, so the idea of an excursion was to go to church on Sunday or to the nearest village for supplies, or to visit relatives. Farming with livestock, especially cows that had to be milked twice daily, always meant you had to be home both times. So, there was very little need or desire on the part of farmers to go away or to learn much about the world beyond their own community. And in science, there wasn't a great deal that was thought appropriate. Perhaps at the high school or university level, but not before. Since everyone spoke a common language in the community (though not always English), other languages, except the necessity of English, were not needed. Before the advent of electricity, there was no thought of such wonders as radio, television, video, computers, or any of the communication sciences.

Later, rural schools did have something known as the Radio School of the Air, which was used to bring some of the fine arts to country children. They also had access to a traveling monthly library from a county library. Usually these were brought by the teacher. You can see how much she had to do. Good teachers would--and cheerfully. Lazy teachers didn't and their children suffered in their education, not just for a year, but for all they would ever get!

This, then was the life in and around the one room schoolhouse, such as the one you are sitting in. You would have done your chores, walked to school, be expected to do your lessons all day, walk home, do more farm chores and study your schoolwork after dark, probably by candle or lamplight. Your teacher was usually a neighbor, or she would board with each of you during the school year for a week at a time. The members of your school board would probably be neighbors or parents. This Board ran the school with a very tight rein. Any special merits or misdeeds were always noted by the school board and therefore were known to the whole community.

You were raised with the sense that this was YOUR school and you must take care of it and take care of it for your young brothers and sisters, just as your older brothers and sisters had done for you. Indeed, those older ones might well be sitting there in the room to see that you did! Thus, many strong traditions were carried from one age to the next. Most were very proud to have been here and a part of that tradition.

We hope you feel the same way.