

Victoria Home Guard Historical Society
Celebrates

Pioneer Schools



THE COUNTRY SCHOOL

Nellie McClung

*Weather-beaten and gray it stands,
Tiny dot on the harvest lands,
Not very much to see.
Porch at the end, where gophers play,
Smelling of crumbs on a summer day,
Row of windows, two or three,
Inside walls of somber gray;
Hung with torn and crooked maps;
A broken blind that taps and taps;
Not an attractive spot, you say,
No, but here in this lowly station,
Slowly is working an ancient law,
And a temple is rising - we call it a nation -
Without the sound of hammer and saw!*

The Schools

Probably the central point of any pioneer rural community was the schoolhouse. These one-room country schools served as a classroom Monday through Friday and then doubled as a Community Centre on Saturday nights and for Sunday School and Church Services. To those who have given any study to the phenomenon it is quite easy to understand why the original settlers protested so vehemently when these innocent-looking buildings were closed by bureaucratic order in the name of progress. Not only in name, but the school was indeed the heart of the community. The school was also the gathering and distribution point for the district's news. Before the days of the telephone, messages were sent by way of the children to the parents and others. There was a very real closeness between the teacher and the pupils.

Before the origin of the enlarged school units or counties, each school had its own territory or district from which to draw its pupils. These "districts" were usually about four miles square and the school, in theory at least, was located as near as possible to the centre. There were known cases where influence by politicians could have the school located more favourably to accommodate some prominent party member's desires, but in most cases efforts were made to be fair to all concerned. The school was supposed to be located so that any six-year-old child would have no more than three miles to walk -- that's right -- walk, to school. Sometimes a barn or some such shelter was provided at the school so that those fortunate enough to have a horse to ride or drive would have a place to stable it.

Eight prospective students within that three mile radius were required before a school could be organized. Average attendance might be between fifteen and twenty-five students although there are recorded cases of more than forty attending a one-room school, taught by a single teacher. By law, the teacher was required to teach anyone between six and fifteen years of age and in grades 1 to 8. In some cases grades were sub-divided and on occasion, if there happened to be a light enrollment, a teacher might by her own choice teach a pupil grade 9 or even grade 10. Very rarely was a grade higher than 10 taught in a one-room country school.

The interior of most of the schools was very similar. It seems they must have had one set of plans for all of them, or else they found the plans so suited to the situation that it was impractical to change. Although all these one-room schools were co-educational right from the beginning, the cloakrooms were segregated as to sexes. Entering the main or front door, one found oneself in a small hallway with doors opening on either side to the right and left. These led to the boys' cloakroom on one hand, and, the girls' on the other; and these rooms were out of bounds to the other sex on the strictest possible terms. This cloakroom was the blonde's, with the long golden ringlets, only safe refuge when chased by a boy with a snake or frog which he threatened to put down the back of her dress. Walking through the cloakroom into the school one would see

four or five rows of desks in descending order facing the far wall on which there was a wall-to-wall blackboard. Back to the blackboard and facing the children was the teacher's desk. A big wood-burning heater was usually located at the back of the room between the cloakroom doors. Facing the blackboard, the wall to your left was all windows, built in this manner, supposedly to give light to the work paper.

Such then, was the edifice that was the little red schoolhouse -- forerunner of the consolidated, composite structure -- which brought promise of enlightenment, and heralded the move towards equality of opportunity based on the belief that all children are educable.

The Christmas Concert - 1930 Style

In 1930, preparations for the school Christmas concert began in early December. The teacher, the main organizer, conductor, musician, drama expert, master of all, assigned suitable parts to all children. Then for the rest of the month the schoolhouse buzzed with activity. Parts assigned to you had to be committed to memory for this once-a-year occasion. And as practice makes perfect, practice time had to be fitted in between lessons and after last recess. After all we would be actors and actresses for one evening, presenting our best for our parents, friends and neighbours.

A parent, one of the fathers, brought some planks and boards. With the help of the older boys, a stage was built in one corner of the school. For making the curtains, the girls brought in their mothers' best white sheets. These were strung on a wire and during the performance of the Christmas concert, they were pulled back and forth as needed by two pupils hidden behind, one on each side. For the singing group, planks were placed in tiers so that all children could be seen. During the last few days before the actual performance of the concert, we practiced on the stage to familiarize ourselves more fully. We had to be as perfect as possible.

Now for the tree. A huge tree was brought in by a parent. Out came the decorations placed in storage after the performance the year before. Almost immediately the shining star was perched majestically on top of the tree. The girls then turned their attention to placing crepe paper streamers and icicles, plus the new shining tinsel that had been bought to supplement what was left over from the year before. According to my recollection, the tinsel was thick and fluffy. And oh how it sparkled and glittered. We were ecstatic. Decorating the tree was such joy and excitement.

The day of the Christmas concert arrived. Children were sent home earlier. Some didn't even come. Those who lived further away found it very tiresome and hectic, and so stayed home for extra rest.

For the trip to the Christmas concert, Father had the double box

padding with a layer of straw and hay. For extra warmth he placed horse blankets over the top. If the weather was really cold, a heated rock would be placed inside the blankets for additional warmth. For seating, a bench was placed on both sides of the box. A feather quilt covered our legs. I recollect how we children (there were five of us) would nestle together as snugly as possible.

For the Christmas concert we had to be dressed in our finest. The boys wore their best suit of clothes. We girls would wear our shiny new black patent slippers. We were always certain we would get a new pair of slippers for Christmas. The girls wore white dresses with garlands of tinsel sewed to the bottom of the hem. Only for such occasions did we wear our long white stockings. And there were also changes in our physical appearance. It was one of the occasions on which we would have our hair curled. Mother would labor long and hard to curl it with a marcel iron she heated on the wood stove. But it was worth it. We thought and felt we were movie stars. And when the teacher put a bit of her lipstick and rouge on us, we were beyond ourselves. How prim and proud we felt.

Dressed, we were ready for the two and a half mile ride to the schoolhouse. Once we were settled, Dad would take the reins and off we would go. The shining moon would provide the necessary light while underneath the steel runners the frost crackled.

Parents and children were coming in on every road leading to the schoolhouse. One could hear the jingling of bells on the horses' harness coming from every direction. It was not too long before the school yard was filled with sleigh boxes and horses.

On the evening of the Christmas concert, the janitor came in earlier to get the pot-bellied barrel stove burning to provide the heat. And when the audience arrived there was warmth all over and the smell of burning wood permeated the entire schoolhouse. As usual, the schoolhouse was packed to the rafters.

Seated on the front benches, the children waited patiently, but excitedly. Only a few of the older ones were permitted to go behind the "curtains" to help the teacher. Now and again they would peek at the audience.

The moment arrived. The curtain opened and there stood the boys and girls, their faces beaming. The girls were in their white dresses and stockings and the boys in their best suits of clothes. They were ready for "O Canada." It was truly an evening of rejoicement.

Back and forth went the "curtain" as each group performed. The girls staged a drill, each holding a shiny star on a stick, their halos shining as brightly as stars. The boys performed "The Rooster Fight." The costume was made of gunny sacks. The roosters' combs, made of cardboard and colored red, moved and jiggled with every step. The legs were of tan sacks and the foot was made into claws. The act was accepted very appreciatively.

I recollect my contribution, a recitation, "Hang Up the Christmas

The Smoky Lake School Division 39

- 75 Victoria (1886-1952) NW 21-58-17-W4
1433 Lopstick (1905-1952) SW 27-58-18-W4
1476 Provischenia (1905-1949) SE 4-58-15-W4
1477 Bavilla (1905-1953) NW 1-58-15-W4
1632 Edwand (1907-1957) SW 24-59-16-W4
1935 Toporoutz (1909-1952) NE 16-59-17-W4
1942 Riverland (1909-1950) SE 12-59-19-W4
*2051 Jackpine Grove (1920-1957) SW 3-58-20-4 W4
2073 Errol (1909-1957) SW 27-59-13 W4
*2136 Old Radway (1910-1950) NW 9-59-20-W4
2325 Kotzman (1910-1956) NE 30-59-16-W4
*2342 Myrtle Creek (1910-1950) SE 27
2407 White Mud Creek (1911-1952) NE 1-60-28-W4
2408 Ruthenia (1911-1958) NE 1-59-17-W4
2419 Waskatemow (1913-1921) NE 7-59-19-W4
Waskatenau (1921-2003) *Town of Waskatenau*
2500 Quiet Nook (1911-1958) SE 6-58-13-W4
2508 Stry (1911-1950) SW 26-58-13-W4
2532 Irondale (1911-1950) SW 7-59-14-W4
2678 Clodford (1914-1953) *1 1/2 miles west of Waskatenau*
2766 Sprucefield (1911-1953) *north of Waskatenau*
*2869 Namepi River (1913-1950) NE 36-59-21-W4
2898 Bear Lake (1913-1956) SE 15-60-16-W4
3133 Pine Knoll (1914-1954) SW 26-59-14-W4
3185 North Bellis (1914-1953) SE 9-60-15-W4
3241 Warspite (Ralston) (1915-47-66) SE 15-59-18-W4
3245 Brighton (1915-1956) between Warspite & Waskatenau north
3285 Cache Lake (1915-1951) SW 22-59-12-W4
*3295 Martin Centre (1920-1952) NE 13-58-21- W4
3316 Lilyfield (1915-1956) NW 28-58-14-W4
*3385 Shakespeare (1916-1956) SW 3-60-20-W4
*3452 Darling (1916-1955) NE 20-61-19-W4
3520 Pakan (1917-1950) *Riverlot 7*
3581 Northern Moose (1917-1957) NE 21-60-18-W4
3582 White Earth (1917-1957) SE 16-60-17-W4
*3632 Thorhild (1918-present) SE 6-60-21-W4
3650 Wild Deer (1919-1955) SW 5-61-17-W4
3681 Gold Creek (1918-1950) NE 28-57-14-W4
3880 Smoky Lake (1919-present)
3881 North Kotzman (1920-1955) SW 18-60-16-W4

3886 Sokal (1919-1951) NE 8-60-12-W4
 3908 Green Lake (1920-1952) NW 19-57-13-W4
 3914 Sunny Knoll (1920-1954) SE 6-59-13-W4
 *3931 Hollow Lake (1920-1957) SE5-61-19-W4
 3933 Volunteer (1920-1951) NW 11-59-16-W4
 *3934 T. Woods (1920-1955) SW 27-60-22-W4
 3961 Radway (Mazeppa) (1920-present) NW 32-58-20-W4
 3984 Dickiebush (1920-1952) NW 23-58-15-W4
 3983 Vilna (1920-present) NW 20-59-13-W4
 3985 Sidehill (1920-1956) NW 11-58-13-W4
 *4016 Level Hill (1921-1951) SE 26-60-21-W4
 *4017 Tudor (1921-1957) SE 6-61-21-W4
 4024 Low Level (1921-1950) SE 18-59-15-W4
 *4135 Gouldsboro (1922-1951) NE 19-59-21-W4
 *4162 Newbrook
 *4163 Balsam Grove
 4320 Spedden (1927-1984) *within townsite*
 *4411 Lexden (1929-1952) NE 10-61-21-W4
 *4414 Mapova (1929-1952) SW 30-61-21-W4
 *4427 Spruce Canyon (1929-1953) SW 26-61-19-W4
 4468 Cossack (1930-1952) SW 6-61-16-W4
 *4524 Low Bush (1931-1952) SW 4-61-20-W4
 *4555 Wisla (1931-1950) NE 33-61-21-W4
 4571 Two Lakes (1931-1953) SE 2-61-13-W4
 4585 Mission Hill (1932-1952) NE 35-60-19-W4
 *4598 Moose Horn (1932-1957) NW 12-62-22-W4
 *4607 Birchfield
 4644 Kildonan (1934-1957) NW 11-60-14-W4
 *4650 Brier Lake (1935-1947) SE 18-62-18-W4
 4656 Wayetna (1934-1956) NE 28-61-13-W4
 *4666 Danube (1935-1956) SW 27-62-21-W4
 *4713 Tobermar (1935-1956) NE 11-60-23-W4
 4773 Castle Park (1931- 1955) NW 16-60-13-W4
 *4816 Land's End (1938-1954) SE 16-61-22-W4
 *4875 Abee (1940-1958) SE 2-61-21-W4
 *4887 Weasel Creek (1941-1952) NW 24-60-20-W4
 3884 Bellis (Yuma) (1915-44-97) SE 28-59-15-W4

* these schools became part of Thorhild Division in 1947

Home Mission Schools

Kolokreeka (1908-1931) 1 mile north of Smoky Lake
 Wahstao (1904-1937) NE 32-58-15-W4
 Radway (1921-1935) Village of Radway

Stocking." The applause I received, it seems to me, I can still hear. What an impression it made on me.

With the conclusion of the last act, and before the singing of "God Save the King," we were told that Santa Claus was on his way. It did not take him long to arrive after the singing of the anthem. Ringing his bells and with a merry "ho, "ho,ho, ho" he announced his arrival. With his big pack on his back, he headed for the stage, and when he arrived there he placed his pack next to the big box under the tree.

I can recall Santa asking the children to be patient. He had been busy all year, but he had a gift for all. The name of each student was called and as each came up he or she received a bag of goodies, candies of sorts, mixed nuts, plenty of peanuts and Jap oranges. To a youngster, his gift had to be the most rewarding thing. My gift was a cut-glass necklace. It was my first necklace and how I cherished it.

With the evening's performance and Santa's visit finished, back home we went. The bells on the harness on the horses' backs jingled, but somehow not as merrily and enthusiastically as earlier in the evening. And as we got further and further away from the schoolhouse, the bells on the other teams' harness grew fainter and fainter, until the sounds were no more. The only sound was the sound of the frost and snow crackling under the horses' hooves as they chomped on the bit, hurrying to get home.

We were snugly wrapped in our blankets, but sleep would not come. The thrill and excitement of the Christmas concert was just too much. Once we arrived home and mother got the fire in the heater started, we dug into our bag of goodies.

The Christmas concert had to be the most beautiful and memorable event of the year.

*by Sophie Kosakewich
taken from the Thorhild History Book*

A Teacherage I will Always Remember (or, I shall never forget)

Quick, reader, tell me what important structure you associate with the little red schoolhouse.

No, no! Not the two-holer (although the structure I'm thinking about was often hardly more spacious than that outdoor commode!).

Uh! Uh! Not fair. You've read the title.

Okay, Okay! Teacherage.

But for those of you under thirty years of age you'll surely ask: what on earth is a teacherage?

Well, let's start at the beginning.

Any study that pretends to be serious, or, at least of all, to be included in a community history, must needs have a definition of terms.

"Teacherage" is one of those curious words that defines itself in its appurtenance of the edifice sequestered in a corner of a specially designed glebe, the primary purpose for which is to assist the maturing of tender primate young folk in the genus: *Homo*, species: *sapiens*, in the order of creatures who aspire to become professionals at the art and practice of teaching.

Now that all of that is finally out, we can say that a teacherage, in other words, is a structure existing beside a schoolhouse in which a young teacher ages. Quickly!

The term is peculiar to the profession. Can you imagine what umbrage would be taken at the word "liarage" -- the abode of the practitioner at law? Or at "shrinkage" -- the domicile of a head doctor? Or think of the ecclesiastical unease with "pastorage." A shepherd's place?

The name-makers never called the teacher's dwelling place a "house," curiously reserving that noun for the school building he or she taught in. Thus: schoolhouse, because any dictionary will tell you that "house" defines a structure for human habitation.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not saying teachers aren't human, and it's true teachers do habitate! It's just that, in the past, teachers rarely habitated long enough alongside a school to earn for their dwelling place the more dignified label. And just as well. "Teacher-house" is a mouthful. Better "teacherage," for it certainly characterized their temporage there.

Oh, there be people around also who called the teacherage a "shack." But they were either adventuring romantics or cold-nosed realists -- those terrible miscreants! They knew better. The school inspector and his trustees never, never used the term "shack." Shack lacked appropriate formality or dignity; its connotation smacked too much of the backwoods, the fringe -- remote, inaccessible, primitive. Of course everyone knows that "teacherage" is poly-syllabic; it sounds sniffingly Latinate. Shack? It's blunt; a bit rude, like spitting in the palms to shape a tighter fist when one wants to get a better hold on things. Or, on those rare occasions, when one has the urge to punch someone in the puss.

John W. Chalmers, who has written much about teachers in the foothills Province, once said that teacherages boasted "not more than two rooms, totalling perhaps 300 square feet of area, bereft of basement and storm windows, and, as January blizzards emphasized, quite innocent of any insulation. The tenant of such an edifice, however, did enjoy a modicum of privacy, whose other names were "loneliness and isolation."

Bon! Right on, John! But you might have said that there was a certain consciousness of class, or, at least of pecking order. For teacherages were of two types: one for the young bachelor, and one for the married man -- usually the principal -- the latter edifice often boasting three rooms.

Well, reader, let me tell you of one edifice that accommodated a single suitcase half full of your writer's earthly possessions, and a head full of silly dreams and soaring ambitions. I was a bachelor way back then, but Fate

decreed that I should inhabit a three-room place in my first year. Such quintessential luxury -- the absolute lap of joy illuminated.

But it became quickly a winter of discontent, the first year I taught in a one-room rural school with that three-room teacherage beside it. That was the winter of 49 which is seared in my memory. Correction, which is frozen in my memory. All of January and all the way down to Valentine's the temperature never rose above minus 20 degrees Fahrenheit.

Every weekend that winter I walked home, a dozen miles away. On Sunday afternoon I walked back to the teacherage, an army knapsack over my shoulder weighed down with three or four shirts, socks enough for the week, a dozen eggs, a loaf of bread, a supply of Lipton's noodle soup, a few tins of sardines, some chops, and maybe some baking, including even such luxuries as two or three apples wrapped against the cold, some peanuts and candy bars.

My teacherage was tucked into the corner of the schoolyard. The area was landscaped with hardy perennials like Canada and sow thistle. Behind was a lovely rock garden -- of stone, the ordinary field variety. There, at the veriest edge of nature, the rock-pile became the sanctuary for all sorts of fleeting wild things like ground squirrels, field mice, weasels, and a frequent guest that spring -- a very sensitive skunk which deigned to accept me as communer with her of nature's finer things, like her colours and --smells.

Teacherages of my memory are always one-storey places, painted a Marshall Wells cream with olive green trim, and capped with rows of curled-up cedar shingles which, before the Flood, had been stained black.

My teacherage was Marshall Wells cream, all right, but the trim, a peeled Bapco white. Grey shingles betrayed a pre-diluvian stain -- likely black, because black was supposed to retain the heat.

As I've already said, my teacherage quite openly bragged of three airy rooms, one behind and attached to the other, and all in a row like some kind of old railway locomotive. At the head-end was the bedroom with its black tin heater feeding pipe upward and delivering smoke to the attic chimney, ever puffing a plume of poplar-wood smoke, bravely, through the winter months.

In the middle was the kitchen-cab boasting -- also airily, I'd say -- a wood cook-stove, complete with its overhead warmer and copper reservoir at the side. Opposite the stove, at the wall, was a varnished veneer washstand, its two doors closed tightly, hiding the "slop" pail, the closest one came to sewer services.

On the top of the stand there was room for a water pail and a porcelain-beige tin wash basin, fitted neatly in a hole cut out in the top. Right beside the stand was the kitchen suite comprised of a much-painted-over, cream-coloured wooden table, and two cream-coloured wooden chairs, vintage wired-up early Canadiana.

Chugging along behind the monochromatic colour-coordinated kitchen (Marshall Wells cream walls, ceiling, floor, and furniture -- all three pieces) was the third room which was unheated and where wood and kindling was stored, some coal for the night, kerosene for the mantle lamp, and a few packing boxes that were left there when the last mad tenant made his escape.

My teacherage, as you've already said, Dr. Chalmers, had no storm

windows, probably because all of the windows faced north. The walls, indeed, were "innocent of insulation." During the winter's cold spell, I, and the water in the kitchen pail, regularly froze over. The heat, huddled smartly around the stove and the heater, ventured nary a foot away from the source. Two feet away from each, on any side of the stove or heater, and you were right back in the middle of the Arctic front that stayed and stayed, the unwelcome guest through the long first winter of my professional career.

Well, I suppose I could go on and tell you, reader, about the night the v-joint in the wall around the smoke pipes caught fire and woke me up with its smell: acrid with smouldering cedars and cream -- of Marshall Wells.

I could tell you too, about the night my hair became attached to the wall against which my bed was inclined to lean. Plain blame attached! Well, no, what I mean is frozen. To the v-joint in the wall. And what fun I had that morning trying to persuade that sneak, Jack Frost, to let go of his grip or there'd be fur flying -- er-uh -- hair flying.

Then there was the day in the spring I chose to mend my ways and not drink ever after. You see, the ancient pump in the schoolyard water well brought up a drowned and bloated field mouse -- and it brought up, also, that morning's breakfast.

Oh, there are those that say our domiciles both reveal our persons and preen our separate egos. But forty years ago we teachers hadn't heard of Freud. Heck, you were not even a person but a teacher. And ego? What was that?

by John Hawrelko

taken from the Thorhild History Book

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