

Back to School

As summer winds down, it's soon back to school for students from kindergarten to those in college. Education has changed over the years, both in theory and practice as well as with the physical structures of the many "school houses" that once dotted the Martin County landscape. In taking a glimpse back at education Martin County, it is interesting to compare it to the world of education today and to observe the many changes that have since taken place.

In an article prepared by Mrs. M. H. O'Conner for a meeting of the PTA at Lincoln School in Fairmont in the 1920's entitled "Teaching In Old Days Was No Bed Of Roses," she identifies some of the interesting aspects of her career as a country school teacher. She said that she began teaching in a little frame box of a building with the corners resting on boulders. This, she said, gave the icy winter winds a good opportunity to swirl around the building causing their feet to freeze. In fact, it was so cold that the water pail for drinking was frozen and the students had to break the ice to get a drink.

The size of her classes varied; in one instance she had only one student in class during planting season. On another occasion, she had a class of thirty-five pupils ranging in age from four to twenty-one. Although she had little time to devote to each student, she made the following observation: "I dare say my methods were primitive, but I believe the facts I pounded into their rather thick skulls stuck as well as though they had been inculcated by modern methods." Mrs. O'Conner's assessment would probably create quite a controversy today.

Teachers of that era usually had to find boarding places if one wasn't provided for them. O'Conner said that boarding was often difficult to find, and in some cases not always very desirable. She stated that "Frequently I had to wash my face in the kitchen in the common wash basin and wipe on the roller towel with the hired men. The bed I occupied had numberless occupants who made sleep impossible." It seems that this would appear to be another somewhat controversial situation.

The country schools of that era did not have custodians. Consequently, the schools were cleaned in the middle of the school year by the teacher with the help of her students. The older boys would bring a large kettle, build a fire, and then melt snow so that they would have hot water for cleaning. The girls would bring the soap, and then all would help in cleaning the school house.

O'Conner concluded by saying that conditions improved as time went by and that country schools finally had such fine conveniences that both teachers and students should be happy, and that the work might be almost ideal. As this was written in 1932, she would certainly be astounded as to the current educational systems and standards.

Another interesting account was written in the October 14, 1933, edition of the *Sentinel* by C. L. Blanchar. This article is Blanchar's recollections of a pioneer Fairmont teacher, Miss Maria Willard, who had recently passed away. The writer quite eloquently articulated the following: "I cannot forget her kind and gentle way, for she gave me the only whipping I got in school. Even to this day of old gray hairs I am ready to take oath before all the gods of the universe that I was innocent." Her standards of discipline apparently made a rather significant impression on the writer of that article whether or not he was, in fact, guilty of whatever might have prompted the "whipping."

Teachers in those early years may have seemed stern and strict; however, they themselves had somewhat stringent rules to follow as well. Some examples from 1872 are as follows: Men teachers may take one evening each week for courting purposes, or two evenings if they go to church regularly; Women teachers who marry or engage in unseemly conduct will be dismissed; After ten hours in school, teachers may spend the remaining time reading the Bible or other good books. Some rules from the early 1900's specifically regarding women teachers include the following: Wear at least two petticoats; Do not go out with men; Never get married; Do not stay downtown in ice cream parlors too long; Never dye your hair; and wear dark colored clothing. Apparently some rules did not necessarily apply equally to both male and female teachers.

Ah yes, the "good old days." There was a time when Martin County had in excess of 100 schools districts and teacher salaries approached \$200.00 annually. Education has evolved considerably from the days discussed in this article. Pupils and teachers are treated much differently than in the past. There are a multitude of opportunities available to both the teacher and the student. However, those of us that may have attended country schools survived, adapted to change, succeeded in spite of some of the hardships faced at that time, and became contributing members of society. Even with all the modern technological advances, theories of education, and the many opportunities available, perhaps in some ways today's students face as many or conceivably even more challenges than the graduates of those country schools of the past.

For more information on this topic, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.

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Mamie Browning - Teacher



