

Forest Grove School Alumni Reunion . . . The Restoration Begins March 6th, 2012

By Chris Agy

Tuesday morning, March 6th, a group of former Schoolhouse #5 students, ranging from the age of 61 to 94, gathered to discuss their experiences about a form of education closely associated with Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House on the Prairie. The one room school, with many grades under one roof, within the same four walls, with curriculum matching each grade level, had one teacher, an only one, wearing the many hats of instructor, nurse, custodian, furnace stoker, lunch room attendant, counselor.

First came Larry, carrying his manila envelope of artifacts: pictures, report cards, newspaper articles, certificates. He's animated, enthused about this opportunity to share a part of his life that climbs all over his family tree. His mother went to the same school for the first eight years of her schooling, as did his brother, his three cousins, and . . . others came and we lost the thread of conversation.

Larry brought out a picture just as Helen and Dottie arrived, sisters who both attended Forest Grove School, as did their father. The three of them poured over the picture calling out names. Amazing. When one of them would wonder who that person was in the picture, another would supply a name or several options. Always first and last name. Impressive.

When Chuck arrived, Helen introduced herself as the girl he sometimes ferried to school on the back of his bike. A flush and a smile broke out with recognition. Chuck, too, started concentrating on the picture. It showed the teacher at the standard wooden desk, placed in the center of the room, with the students standing on her left and right and lined up behind her. My expectation of a 15 student class size was a serious underestimation, as I counted 30 students.

When I remarked on the large class size, Helen rebutted with remembrance of a year with 40 classmates.

Thirty boys and girls, ages 5 to 13 or 14, taught by one teacher, who was often young and just out of school. A few teachers stayed for multiple years. Marianne Hansen taught this group the longest, but many stayed for just a year. It's so hard to imagine how any teacher, inexperienced or seasoned, would go into this room daily and deliver instructions for nine different levels of curriculum. Larry's report card illustrated a plethora of subjects taught: English, math, reading, writing, spelling, geography, history, among others. Skill sets were evaluated in reading. Citizenship was graded, accompanied by a written annotation.

Dottie told starting school, her kindergarten year. She was absent approximately half of the year, a half day at a time. About 11:30 each day she'd be stricken with a stomachache. Helen, who was four years older, would walk to the Blunk's, the nearest farmhouse, to use the phone to call their mother. Dottie would go home for the afternoon. All was well when she started 1st grade, the stomachaches disappeared as she was happy to spend the full day at school.

Others shared similar thoughts about the length of the day during kindergarten. Chuck remembered his first day. At lunch time, having evaluated the classroom situation and summing it up as boring, he left school, without permission to go home and help his father. Once, however, was the only time he was allowed to act on this conclusion.

All mentioned the uninterrupted routine of the school schedule. Very few days off, and never for snow. They might get a ride to school if the snow was deep, sitting in a neighbor's wagon as they were delivering the day's milk. All the families had a milk cow and without modern refrigeration it had to be delivered each morning. The school year started after Labor Day and ended near Memorial Day, when they had reached the 182 day school year requirement.

The school day started with the same ritual. The eight o'clock bell would be rung by a student. Two lines would be formed; girls on the left, boys on the right. The flag was raised, and the Pledge of Allegiance recited. As they entered the school, coats and lunches would be left in the outer room. The organization of the classroom never changed, kindergartners in front, with desks and students graduating in size and years behind them.

Alberta, an oh-so spry 94-year-old, walked in after we had visited for an hour. She added sparkle and a new set of connections, along with presenting her certificate for perfect attendance, with no tardiness. She had gone to school with several of the others' parents. While looking at Larry's picture of his mother's class, she started rolling off names. We found her high energy and enthusiasm weren't recent acquisitions, she told us she was often the lead in the Christmas plays. None of a young girl's shyness plagued Alberta, her voice carried to the back of the schoolroom.

We grouped together to ask a few questions, where we could all hear and record the responses. "What is your favorite memory of your years at Forest Grove?" No one said spelling...or math...or a book they had read...a research project...or even a teacher. Rather they remembered games and activities. We learned about playing on the Giant Stride, where a tall pole with chains, affixed with handles for hanging on while running, spinning the smaller students flying off the holds. Annie, Annie Over was a favorite recess game. Boys on one side of the school, girls on the other. All was well unless the ball went in the boys' outhouse.

Dottie relayed a charming story of their father, Walter. He was a tinkerer, always building a gizmo out of found parts. One day he was engineering the parts behind a book, splayed upright on his desk. He was so engaged in the project that he missed his class being called to the front for instruction. A sharp rap on the head ended the assemblage, but not the end of his embarrassment, as he joined the group with his social studies book instead of his history book.

Books, they told us, were purchased by the parents each fall. A local store in Princeton stocked them. The former students didn't remember the cost being a hardship for the family. The books might be 10 or 15 cents each. They weren't returned as used or resold, but families did save them from one sibling to the next. "If they hadn't changed the books," several chorused. The schoolhouse library was a small walk-in closet, which doubled as a hide-out when you needed a bit of time alone. They remarked on the library storing enough books to be adequate for their needs.

Box socials were a common occurrence. The girls brought decorated boxes, filled them with a lunch for two, and the boys would bid on them. We wondered about the money, and although they didn't remember the specifics, it was to be used for the school.

All remembered Christmas programs, a much loved tradition. Helen remembered her father playing Santa, and wondered at the time about the similarity of Santa's and her father's shoes. Helen also remembered her eighth grade teacher showing her how to crochet, a skill she has used for a lifetime. Her singing voice was not given as much tender care, as she was asked to pull the curtain during performances and told not to sing.

The second big day was the last day of school in late spring. They gathered families for a picnic; even the ever busy farmer dads, would leave the fields for a few hours. Moms' brought the food. It would be held away from the school, at the wedge of pie-shaped field, perfect for the baseball game. There wasn't much of an outfield, but otherwise it was well suited for the game. The fence at the back of the field marked home runs, the steps over the top made for easy retrieval of the ball.

When Walter Monsey, the superintendent of Scott County Schools came to visit it was different type of special day, best behavior, demonstrating academic progress was required. Graduation from 8th grade was marked with a ceremony at the Masonic Temple along with 8th graders from other Scott County Schools.

Chuck was at Forest Grove from 1940 through 1949. Kindergarten through eighth grade. Then he rode the bus to Davenport to attend 9th grade at J.B. Young middle school before his three years of high school at Davenport High School. Imagine leaving a room of 30 students in grade 8, then attending high school with 2000 students.

The trip to Davenport took him to a central transportation center, where he caught another bus to J.B. Young. He remembered times of missing the school bus in the afternoon and running down the hill to catch the second bus to finish his trip home. Other reminiscences about getting to school were shared. Most walked to Forest Grove School, living within a half mile of the school. Of course, we had the "walked a mile there and back, uphill both coming and going, barefoot." It turns out the barefoot was not such a stretch as this was during WWII and shoes were rationed. One pair a year. If you could save the leather by going barefoot, that was the practical thing to do. The pain of thistles entering tender soles wasn't an issue as the bottoms of their feet toughened to leather likeness.

Alberta also went to Davenport to high school. She attended during the Depression years, so lived with relatives in town during the week. She rode the Davenport/Clinton train home for the weekends.

We were much past our coffee hour when scheduled commitments began to disperse the group. The positive experiences these five former Forest Grove School students had remembered and shared, created such a feeling of well-being among us. The need to capture their thoughts about

this unique form of education is critical. A restored Forest Grove School will be the perfect setting to house the written, recorded memories.