

district
number
seven

I wish I could somehow add a touch of glamour to the little white schoolhouse, known simply as District Number Seven in Lime Creek Township, where I arrived for the first time on a September morning in 1899. I should like to be able to say that a little vine covered building snuggled hospitably in a charming grove of maple or cotton-wood trees whose leaves were already

touched by the witchery of an early frost; that bright-colored chintz curtains framed the windows; that a bit of white smoke curled lazily from the red-brick chimney; that the shining morning faces of the other children welcomed a newcomer into their midst; that, in fact I was not scared to death and very, very lonely. But I would not be telling the truth. As my father left me at the door and waved good-bye to me before he set out for home, I was surrounded by my future playmates, who, I observed, seemed curious about my arrival, if not openly hostile. There were no vines over the school-house, no curtains at all at the windows, and the only smoke seemed to be coming out of the door of the tall, round-bellied stove where the teacher was trying vainly to get a fire started to take a bit of the chill off the morning air. Nor was there any pleasant grove in the background, only one huge maple tree on which I was later to learn to "skin the cat," a few scraggly wild plum trees, and those two little structures standing modestly well apart and labelled in no uncertain terms, "Boys," and "Girls."

But there were compensations. The teacher, Miss Martha Byington, was marvelous. She knew just the right things to say and soon had me feeling right at home. The seats were all double ones, and for a seat-mate Miss Byington gave me a good-natured, brown-eyed boy named Elza Shook. I liked him at once and we became great friends. He was a year or so older than I and knew the ropes, so to speak, and assured me that this was a pretty good place to go to school after all.

Besides Elza, some of the others who were in school that first year were Hugh and Anna Tietjen, Willie Olson, Gertrude and Fern Prescott, Elmer Russell, Ruth Leach, Olive Shook, Maude Davis — on whom I soon developed a terrific crush — Etta Pearce, Daisy Van Kleek and two or three others whose names I can't recall. For a few weeks a boy attended, who, they said, had run away from home sometime previously but had been caught and put in jail while the police waited for his folks to come after him. He used to refer casually to the episode. "When I was in Yale," he'd venture, thinking to impress us. But we all knew he meant "jail" instead and intended the little play on words for a joke. We considered him quite a man of the world and were actually a little afraid of him.

The first year at District Number Seven went by rapidly. No doubt we learned the things we were supposed to, but with Miss Byington showing us how, it was a pleasant and painless process.

Sometime during the winter term she broke the news that we were to gather on a certain Saturday at the Talmadge Studio in Mason City to have a group picture taken. We were there at the appointed time, all seventeen of us, and after a good deal of jockeying for position, the photographer finally got us all sober faced and looking in the general direction of the camera. Miss Byington even had the courage to appear with us. I still have the picture and it's almost as clear as the day it was printed.

What a resplendent bunch we were! My white wing

collar and enormous vari-colored bow tie were only slightly off center with relation to my Adam's apple. Hugh Tietjen wore a stiff white turnover collar that must have been at least four inches high. Willie Olson went in for a starched stand-up collar with a knife-like edge that sawed none too gently on the under side of his chin and which was clamped firmly around his neck with a ready-tied four-in-hand. With his black hair parted slickly in the middle and well plastered down over his temples, he had a certain Rudolph Valentino look. Elza also endured the raking of a stand-up collar. One side of his bow tie persisted in popping out of place under the lapel of his coat, giving him a slightly one-sided look.

I'll not try to describe what the girls wore. It was winter time, and they all came in what now appear, so far as I tell from the picture, warm, wooly-looking dresses that must have scratched something terrible as we sat about the warm studio. There were positively no plunging necklines.

As we posed for the picture I had managed to maneuver myself into a seat directly in front of my current love, Maude Davis. But in so doing I had carelessly left my right flank exposed, so to speak, and another girl whom I distinctly did not care for at the moment — she had stringy hair and large, prominent front teeth — got herself located next to me, and before I could do anything about it, the photograhper had recorded the situation for all time. No doubt this girl has grown up to be a good-looking woman by this time, but back

in 1899 I had a feeling that I was being run after. The human male — even at seven years of age — does not like this.

Miss Byington left our school at the end of the spring term the following May. I remember her yet as one of the best teachers I ever had. On the last day of school she stood at her desk and gave us a little talk. She said she'd always be interested in each and every one of us. That made a great impression on me. I have often wondered how many of us she was able to keep track of in later years. If a good teacher could only know how much she affects the lives of her students what a satisfying thing it could be to her. I hope Miss Byington has had a long and happy life, and this is the only way that the man who was a little boy back in 1899 has been able to tell her how pleasant she made those first days in the little country school.

The teachers who followed Martha Byington were her sister, Carrie, Henrietta Hubbard and Pearl Radford. Carrie was a beautiful penman — or do you say penwoman? She was a wonder with colored chalk and put gorgeous drawings on the blackboard. It was, perhaps, our first training in art, and we liked watching her at work far better than digging into our arithmetic or geography books. Sometimes she had to warn us to get at our lessons instead of sitting, entranced and open-mouthed, wondering what the picture on the board would turn out to be.

Miss Hubbard was a bit too easy with us I think. Of course we liked her for it, but I have an idea we worked

more than we should on what we called sewing cards rather than on our history and spelling.

I was about ten years old when Miss Radford came to teach. She was small, dark-haired and brown-eyed, and I must have fallen quite in love with her for I wept when she left our school at the end of a year's teaching. Thirty years later I wrote the poem, "To A Country School Teacher," remembering her days with us in District Number Seven. The poem was printed in the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*.

In those early days all the kids walked to and from school, except in the coldest weather when one of our fathers would hitch a team to a bobsled and pick up a load of us. I usually cut across the fields as it was two and one-fourth miles by road. I had several favorite routes.

On the way to Lime Creek No. 7 there was a creek that meandered through our pasture and the fields of our neighbors to the north. I liked to pretend I was an explorer mapping a new river, and there was nothing of the creek's banks that I didn't know. I knew just where I could jump across and where it could be safely waded. I was always on the lookout for quicksand though, for I had read of the horrible death one could come to if caught in that treacherous stuff.

In the spring it was really fun to walk to school. The wild flowers grew in abundance in the creek pastures, and at that time some of the fields were still original prairie. The tall, rank growth of grass on these few remaining reminders of pioneer days was something to see. It stood shoulder high later in the sea-

son, and a school kid had little trouble getting lost in it. In the lower ground we called it "slough grass," and sometimes cut it for hay to put on top of stacks that were in the open, for the hard, wiry stems made good protection against rain.

About the third or fourth year that I was in the country school I was the only boy attending. It seemed that all the neighboring families ran to girls. I didn't like this at all. I wanted some boys to play with. I finally rebelled so much at being the only male at No. 7 my folks agreed it wasn't a good situation. My father went to see the director of the Falls Township school a couple of miles east of our own district and explained why I wanted to change over. I don't recall who the director was, but he must have been a reasonable man. Probably said, "Us men have got to stick together." Anyway I was granted permission to go to this school which a number of my good friends attended. There were the four Heinold boys, Louie, Artie, Oscar and Elmer; Eddie and Loretta O'Donnell; Willie Chute; Clarence Jensen and his younger brothers and sisters; the Heintzelman children, and a few others whose names I can't recall. Harvey Moule was the teacher, and a good one. I had myself a fine time indeed during the year that I attended this school. Harvey was like one of us, entering into our games and contests. Our favorite game was prisoner's base, or prisoner's "gool" as we called it. Many times this game got so exciting that Harvey, playing with us, looked at his watch to see whether it was time to ring the school bell — it

would be during the noon, or recess, periods — but let us go on for several minutes overtime.

Our special Friday afternoon fun was always either “spelling down” or “ciphering.” We would take a vote to see which one it would be. Then we would choose up sides, and the battle would be on. Almost everyone is familiar with the spelldown because it is still common, even in state-wide contests. But perhaps ciphering requires some explanation. After we had chosen sides, one member of each team would go to the blackboards on the wall at the front of the schoolroom. One or the other of these two students was then given the privilege of telling the teacher what kind of ciphering he or she wanted to do. This might be addition, subtraction, multiplication or division. The teacher then read a problem, which each competitor put on the board before him. The one finishing the problem first with the correct answer was the winner. The side with the most winners, of course, came out ahead. It’s one thing to figure out an arithmetic problem quietly at your own desk, and quite another to work tensely at a blackboard in front of the whole school while your opponent is chalking figures up noisily just a few feet away from you. All we needed to really get ourselves keyed up was a cheer-leader for each side. Fortunately nobody thought of anything like that.

The big school entertainment event, which, incidentally, was supposed to and did make money, was the annual basket sociable. In later years it was considered much better form to say “box social.” We held

some stem-winders in the early 1900's. At the Falls Township school we had enough pupils to put on quite an evening of dialogues and "pieces." Musical numbers were not much in evidence, for hardly any school had an organ or any other kind of instrument. Harvey Moule coached us in an elaborate program the winter I went to this school. Some of the dialogues were quite complicated. The grand finale of this particular evening's entertainment was a skit purporting to represent a meeting of the Frog Hollow Lyceum. Even Jim Chute, an older brother of Willie Chute, who was not even in school had a part in this. At one point in this allegedly humorous sketch I was to stand up and say, "Mr. President, I rise to a point of order." Then Oscar Heinold was to shout, "Can't see the point!" This was supposed to be funny and probably would have been if Oscar hadn't got excited and called out his line before I had a chance to say mine. Naturally the crowd attending the performance failed to see anything humorous whatsoever in the two lines.

The schoolhouses were, of course, always packed for these sociables. There was nothing else to go to during the winter. Most of the lighting for these evening affairs came from lanterns brought by farmers of the neighborhood. The school rarely owned even a decent kerosene lamp. Looking back it makes me shudder to think of what might have happened if a lighted lantern had been knocked off its hook and had exploded among the folks crowded into every inch of these schoolrooms.

The box lunches which all the women and girls

prepared for the sociable were in many cases most elaborate. A shoe box was the container for most of them. Fancy colored crepe and tissue paper transformed these prosaic boxes into such eye-catching bits of merchandise that when they were auctioned off after the program they often brought several dollars apiece. And those were days when dollars were almost always extremely hard to come by. Occasionally a more daring female would fix up a heart-shaped box or something out of the ordinary. Another with a flair for the original might wrap her lunch box in a big red handkerchief. This always got a laugh from the crowd and a good price, too.

The men and boys present did the bidding of course, and it was considered great fun to make some young swain pay a good price for the basket of his lady-love, that is, if he knew which was her basket, and somehow or other he usually did know. Sometimes a well-heeled farmer would buy two or three baskets, to the great disgust of some of us young fellows, who never had any money to speak of. I remember buying my first basket for 40 cents at the Falls Township school. It was all the money I had. Naturally, I hoped that some cute little country girl had fixed it, for after you bought a basket and the auction was over you sat and ate lunch with the girl. But to my chagrin I drew an elderly, married woman of the neighborhood. To make matters worse, she had a reputation for being a rather untidy housekeeper and an indifferent cook. I could hardly eat a mouthful of that lunch. The bread was sour and the butter stale.

Usually a considerable sum of money was raised at these sociables, and it was used by the school to purchase lamps, a second-hand organ, books, a globe of the world and many other things that the country schools of that day needed so badly. The average price of the baskets and the total amount spent for them was always announced at the close of the evening by the teacher or the auctioneer, and there was great rivalry among the various country districts to see which could make the best record.

One day in March while I was still attending the Falls Township school, I walked home in the late afternoon with the Heinold boys. As I was slowly approaching the corner about a quarter of a mile east of our house, Eddie O'Donnell came splashing through the mud on horseback to meet me. He was riding one of the O'Donnell work horses bareback. He told me my mother was not feeling well and that I was to go home and stay overnight with him. I thought it rather queer and argued violently with him for a while. It seemed strange that my folks did not want me to come home if there was illness in the family. But Eddie was insistent, and I finally went with him. As soon as I got to the O'Donnell place I started getting homesick. It worried me to be away from home if my mother was sick. I could hardly eat any supper that night.

Eddie and I slept in a south bedroom downstairs. Or rather I should say, he slept while I lay awake most of the night. It was one of the worst nights of my younger days. I even considered sneaking out of the house in the middle of the night and high-tailing it for home.

Finally morning came as it always does, and I went off to school with Eddie and his sister Loretta. I kept wondering why I wasn't wanted at home. Of course when I got there that night I soon found out. The house was full of women folks, all of them just busting to tell me about my new little brother. It was Roger Ivan, in person. I don't know whether he gave our mother a bad time the night he arrived, but I thought I had had a pretty bad one myself. I remember thinking "My gosh, haven't my folks got enough to do without having *another* one?" I was only ten years old at the time so my judgment was not the best. It wasn't long until I was as proud as could be of the new baby.

TO A COUNTRY SCHOOL TEACHER

*She taught our district school in years gone by,
When I was but a lad of nine or ten—
How fast the time has slipped away, and now
I wish that I could be a boy again.*

*How far it used to seem across those fields,
Our shiny dinner pails were such a load;
And I remember how with stubby boots
We drew quaint figures in the dusty road.*

*She had a smile for every one of us,
She helped us hang our coats out in the hall,
And if she ever had to scold it seems
As though I can't remember that at all.*

*We hunted flowers for her in the spring—
Sweet Williams grew along the railroad track;
We foraged far and wide for violets,
Until the schoolhouse bell would call us back.*

*And then there came a day along in June
When school must close and she must take her leave;
We loved her dearly, for she loved us all—
I tried to dry my tears upon my sleeve.*

*We children wept, and maybe she cried too,
It seemed no one could ever take her place,
And I recall that when I started home
She kissed my grimy, freckled, tear-stained face.*

*I have not seen her since, and where she lives
I cannot tell, but I'd like her to know
That I still think of how she taught and loved
Within that prairie schoolhouse, long ago.*

Courtesy THE CEDAR RAPIDS GAZETTE