



the district school

Our schoolhouse was nearly two miles from Old Orchard Farm, but during good weather we shaved off nearly half a mile by taking a short-cut through the fields. We always had to walk to school and back home again unless a big rain came up in the late afternoon. Then some of the folks would come after us in the big wagon so we used to wish hard that it would rain and we

would get to ride home. Every once in a while it happened, too.

Pap or one of the older boys would come driving up just as school was out, with a heavy wrap of some kind for each of us. The harder it rained, the better we liked it. We enjoyed huddling under blankets while the wagon sloshed along through the mud and water. All the neighbor kids who could possibly hang on would clamber onto the sides of the wagon and ride, and we let them off in front of their homes.

Sometimes one of the horses would step in a water hole in the road and squash up a great stream of muddy water that would splash all over the kids hanging on the sides. They would set up a yell and we all would laugh.

One time Frank came after us in the wagon when there had been a regular sockdolager of a rain, so that water was running everywhere and the big creek was out of its banks. When we drove up to the wooden bridge south of our house about forty rods, the whole lake bed was covered with water. An area about a hundred yards wide was all cluttered up with driftwood, fence rails, and limbs of trees. The water stood across the road and over the floor of the bridge.

Frank rolled up his britches and waded out to where the bridge ought to be, but it was gone. The black water was all over the place, running like a scared cat. There wasn't anything to do but sit there until the water ran down, so that's just what we did. We spent a couple of hours throwing sticks into the flood, wading along the edge, and petting the horses. Then Frank pulled down

a panel of rail fence and drove into the pasture below the road, declaring that he was going to ford the creek down there. The water had gone down a good deal by then and it looked reasonably safe.

It was a ticklish job to drive into that creek. For fifty feet or so the horses waded through slick mud where the water had been over the banks, and then they plunged up to their ears into the main creek. Old Pete and Fox heaved and floundered. Their heads came up about the same time and they turned to head upstream. The wagon swung around into the swift channel and went down just like it was loaded with rocks. It was a good thing there were several of us along for our weight kept the wagon box from floating off. We stood up, waist deep in water, while the horses struggled to get a foothold on the bank. It sure was an exciting moment.

Frank couldn't swim and neither could any of the others except me, and I would have been lucky to have gotten out of there alone without trying to help anybody else. The girls were scared and they commenced to whimper and cry and ended up with screams that made things look worse than ever. We saw Pap running down toward us from the barn, with a pitchfork in his hand. Pap never could run very fast and before he reached us the horses got their feet planted on the bank. In a minute we were all safe and sound.

We had two months of school in the spring, two in the fall, and three in the winter. The schoolhouse was a one-room building, with the girls seated on one side and the boys on the other. There generally were about thirty

or forty of us and the course of study took in about everything from the alphabet up to the fifth reader. The classes would be called up to the front seats to recite. A slate blackboard ran all across the end, and there were several maps and a timetable for recitations. It was a poor place for studying, with recitations, shuffling feet, coughing, sneezing, passing water, or the hiccoughs, going most of the time. How we ever managed to learn anything under such circumstances was a question.

All our school teachers in those times were menfolks, as far as I ever heard. My first schoolmaster, a Mr. Huggins, must have been seventy-five years old when he started teaching our school. He stayed with us for five or six years.

He was as clean as a pin and used to take his penknife and scrape out under his fingernails several times a day. One of his thumbnails had been smashed and was all roughed up and two or three times thicker than it ought to be. He used to spend considerable time whittling at it, but he never did get it down to the right size. His hair was as white as snow and he had a long white beard. Huggins had a full mouth of false teeth — the first we ever saw. They shone like the enamel on a coffee cup. He had a habit of kinda prying the lower plate loose with his tongue like he was fishing for something underneath. He had a way too, of munching at something most of the time when he wasn't very busy, but we never found out what it was.

Huggins always wore a pair of carpet slippers at school, and could creep around amongst the seats with-

out making any more noise than a cat. Once in a while he would find some boy in some kind of devilment. Then the culprit had to stay after school was out, with no company but "Ploudin" Huggins, and maybe a dozen of the hardest problems in arithmetic to work out as a penalty.

He always wore a kind of knitted blouse, something like a sweater, but it had buttons up the front and a pocket on each side. He carried his barlow knife, wallet, spectacle case, and three or four pencils in those pockets. Their weight caused the front to sag away down, so that it was several inches longer in front than behind. And as the back got shorter the front kept getting longer 'til it got to be a funny looking garment. He always carried around what he called a "ferrule" in his hand, and a lead pencil stuck behind his ear.

Generally about the middle of the period between taking-up time and the first recess, Old Ploudin would fall asleep in his chair. He had a bad case of palsy, and his little white hands always shook when he was sitting still. When he was awake or busy about something he could keep them fairly quiet, but when he dropped off to sleep he shook a lot worse. Soon the ferrule would drop out of his hand and whack on the floor, and he would jump and come awake. He would slyly reach down and get his ferrule, and try to make out that he hadn't been asleep at all.

But in five minutes he would be dozing again. When he finally got to going strong the pencil would slide down from behind his ear and I have seen him shake

off his nose glasses. He snored, too. Between the snores and dropping pencils, there wasn't an ounce of study left in us.

Ploudin Huggins was an unusual teacher. He claimed to have earned a Master's degree and to have taught in Nebraska, Texas, and other states, but his thirty dollar a month salary was an average one for Iowa in those days. I learned the alphabet from him, as well as my addition, subtraction, multiplication and division.

Above all else, however, we learned good manners from Huggins. He was a stickler for teaching courtesy in everything, such as always letting the other scholars drink out of the dipper first. He was the only teacher we ever heard of who put such emphasis upon courtesy and manners. Frequently he lined us up on the front bench to have us repeat in unison, "Papa, potatoes, poultry, prunes, and prisms." Again and again we repeated those words. They shaped our mouths properly, Huggins claimed. Years later I discovered this routine in one of Charles Dickens' novels.

We often carried apples to school with us to nibble on during "books." It was a simple thing to slip one out, take a quick bite, and shove it under the desk cover without being detected. We had to eat the cores and seeds, however, to prevent the schoolmaster from finding any evidence of our forbidden fruit. But we found that we could eat the apple cores if we had to, and the seeds didn't taste too bad after we got used to them.

Every scholar in the school liked to go after a fresh

bucket of water. The water bucket always sat on a wooden bench by the front door. A single tin dipper hung next to it and everybody except the teacher drank out of it. He had a little pewter cup, not much bigger than a good sized thimble, which he carefully wiped with his handkerchief before putting away. As often as forty times a day some student would hold up his hand, snap his fingers, and ask: "Kin I get a drink of water?" Nearly always the teacher would nod and the scholar would go tripping up to the bucket and take a sip or two, and pour the rest back in the bucket. He didn't really want a drink. It was just another way of changing from one thing to another, for we got restless shut up in one room too long.

Sometime between noon and the last recess it was the rule that somebody could fetch a bucket of water. The teacher would walk back and take a look in the bucket, and if there wasn't much more than a dipperful or two, he would nod at the boy that he could go. The boy would choose a partner and light out for either Bomboy's or Old Tom Darbyshire's, each house about forty rods away in different directions.

We usually liked to go to the Darbyshire well for water, for if Old Tom were around at the time we would get to hear him "By Goll" something. Generally the water carriers took up a half hour anyway, putting in as much time as they could. At the end they would bounce into the schoolhouse with quite a spurt to let on that they had hurried.

Right away some girl would ask to pass the water,

and make the whole round of the scholars. But she didn't take a separate trip for each dipperful. They all made it go as far as it would, and sometimes as many as five or six would get a swig before it ran dry.

One time the Buchanan boys brought a half dozen percussion caps that were used to make shotguns go off. They placed them on a flat rock and smashed them with another rock. Each one popped most as loud as a firecracker. But pretty soon the teacher heard the noise and came right out and put a stop to it. We just went off down the road a ways, out of hearing, and finished up the rest of the caps. It was great sport for all us youngsters, for the Buchanan boys claimed you had to do it just right or get your head blown off.

The next day three other boys brought some caps, and before a week went by there wasn't a gun cap left in the school district. I searched all around our house before I found any, but finally did run across some in Joe's box up in his bedroom. They were made for a musket and were three times as big as the ones the other kids had furnished. But I was awfully stingy with them and made them last three weeks.

Ploudin Huggins' health began to fail when he was around eighty-two, and he had to quit teaching school. Our directors hired another man right away by the name of Shenahan — David E. Shenahan. He was a short, stocky man with black chin whiskers, and only one good eye. But we found out in a hurry that he could see more with one eye than most people could with both.

We started in by not liking him a bit, for he was so

awfully different from Ploudin Huggins. But we wound up admiring him more than anybody we knew. He was what the directors called a *disciplinarian*, and they hit the nail right on the head. He had the scholars under his thumb right from the start.

He was the best educated man that our neighborhood ever had. In the six or seven years that he taught our school, we never could think up a question that he couldn't answer right off the bat. Of course, we had no way of telling whether his answers were right, but we always believed they were. He could write a beautiful hand, too.

He wasn't bothered with the modern notion that ornery kids at school shouldn't be whipped. Instead, he seemed to think it was necessary as food and sleep. He called it corporal punishment. At first we didn't understand what that word meant, but many of us soon found out. He always carried a ruler in his hand, and he knew how to use it. It was a dull day at our school when he didn't whip a half dozen kids for some devilment.

He would slip up behind a lazy boy lolling over a book and not looking at it a bit, cuff him over the scalp, and wake him up to his studies. He called the worst cases right out in front to dress them down. Big and little, boys and girls, all fared alike. He would have made a wonderful carpet beater.

But we learned fast under David E. Shenahan. The directors used to come on Friday afternoons to hear us recite. Finally a good many parents got to coming, too. It was the talk of the district how we learned.

Oral drills were great hobbies with Shenahan. It was the quickest and surest way of getting learning to stick in our heads. At one time I could name all the rivers in the world, tell where they started, and what they emptied into. I knew the rest of geography just like that. I learned all about syntax up to rule nineteen, and could parse nearly anything that was ever written down.

In arithmetic we started in with aliquot parts where Huggins left us, and went through greatest common divisor, least common multiple, cancellation, and then right into fractions, partial payments, simple and compound proportion, and finally all those problems in the back part of Ray's *Third Part Arithmetic*. We even mastered this one: "If the velocity of sound be 1,142 feet per second, and the number of pulsations in a person twenty per minute, what is the distance of a cloud if 20 pulsations be counted between seeing a flash of lightning and hearing the thunder?"

Dennis Bowman was our prize scholar. His pap sent him off to the Academy at Mount Pleasant, where he disappeared and was never heard from again. Some thought he was kidnaped, and some believed he fell in an old well. Anyway, we never got anywhere in a wide and anxious search.

Adolph Overman and Moritz Fisher were both good at reading lessons, but they were better known for their fighting. These two had many fist fights and most of the time had black eyes and red noses.

The first girl I ever took a liking for went to our school. She was pretty as a picture and it made me feel

good just to have her dress brush against me as she moved down the aisle at school. We got to passing each other notes in school time, but Shenahan got onto it and put a stop to the practice. He whipped us both at the same time, right before the whole school. A little later I put up a "segar" box on our line fence and used that for a post office. I started it with a letter and she came and got it. Then she mailed one and I went and got it. I used to hide behind the straw stack and watch her come for her letter, and my heart would thump like everything.

But I soon lost her. Jodie Williams, an orphan making his home with us at the time, put a dead cat in our private mail box with a paper tied to its tail. He wrote as near like my writing as he could, "I used to think of you as a sick kitten, and now look!" And he signed my name to it. She put it back in the segar box and never spoke to me again.

Shenahan finally married Jane Darbyshire, a daughter of Old Tom "By Goll." He had boarded there all the time he was our teacher. The wedding was a surprise to everybody. A short time after that he got a job on the *Burlington Hawkeye* and moved away, and we lost the knowingest, fastest, most tireless, painstaking, thorough, and all around first-class school teacher we ever had.

We had some wonderful exhibitions at the end of the winter term. Weeks of time were spent getting it ready. Then when the time came we would build a regular stage, just like a theater, with curtains and every-

thing, and make false faces and costumes for the main parts. We always held these exhibitions at night and brought coal oil lamps and tallow candles to put up around the stage so you could see the performers. Everybody in the district would be there, packed in that little house like sardines, and each one strained his neck to see when his kids came out to perform.

Generally we started with Allen Lee playing a piece on his fiddle. He played all the old tunes like "Jenny Get Your Dumplings Done;" "The Arkansas Traveler;" "Gray Eagle;" "The Irish Washerwoman." He had a way of putting in some extra frills that sure could make the fiddle talk.

Then the curtain would be slid back and Amanda Bowman would come out and speak a piece about maybe, "O where, O where is the sailor man who sailed the wintry sea," and for ten or twelve verses recite the sad story of winter storms, shipwreck, broken hearts, and a lot of sad stuff. Then the twin Harcourt girls would speak a piece in what the teacher called "unison," dressed exactly alike, and looking as much alike as two peas. Their piece was "Lochinvar," and since their lips moved right together and they waved their hands alike, pretty soon you began to think there was only one girl up there.

Then came the school paper with a lot of neighborhood news, all made out of whole cloth. It made some of the folks squirm in places. Lots of folks couldn't keep from laughing right out loud.

The school play was the main thing on the program.

One year we gave "The Country Cousin." Another year it was "The World Against Her." Then there was "Her Grandmother's Ghost," the best thing we ever tried. Our home folks liked it so well that we decided to repeat it at White Cloud schoolhouse, two miles to the west, and charge ten cents to see it, children in arms free.

The directors at White Cloud allowed us to have the use of the schoolhouse if we would furnish our own lamps and pay for the firewood we used. That seemed reasonable enough so we fixed a pasteboard announcement and tacked it on the schoolhouse door. When the evening came for the play we hauled all our traps out there in a big wagon and were all dressed up and ready as much as two hours ahead of time. We waited there 'til nine o'clock before we gave up and went home. The only person who showed up was one of the directors who came to collect for the wood we burned. It was only two bits and some of the big boys in the play chipped in and paid it.

When we asked the director why he thought the folks failed to show up, he allowed that if it had been their own kids giving the play they would have been there, but that they were not much interested in what other kids could do. That put an end to our plans to go on the road with our show, and we felt lucky that we hadn't gone very far from home the first try.

We both hated and loved that district school. We cursed it and praised it. We starved and mistreated it. We thought of it as a necessary evil that had to be endured, and never half appreciated what it did for us.

That school stirred our intellects, exercised our youthful imagination, taught us how to find out things for ourselves, and forced real knowledge into our heads.

I hope that nobody ever tears down that old Darbyshire schoolhouse. I wish it could be kept painted and preserved as long as any of us live who wriggled through a day at that wonderful school. To us, it was a whole lot more than a school — it was a university.