

Historically Speaking

P.O. Box 1 • St. Paul, NE 68873 • www.historichc.us • E-mail: historichc@historichc.us

School Days, Dear Old Golden Rule Days



Students on the playground of District 50 around 1952 are, left, Dorothy Michelizeck (with the bat), Linda Wagner Peterson, Helen Jurzenski Svoboda, boy in the hat is unidentified, Raymond Hansen, Jeanette Wagner Peterson, Phyllis Michelizeck, boy in the hat is unidentified, Faye Hartman and Gene Anderson.—Photo courtesy of Linda Peterson

*Written by Julie Spilinek,
Historical Society Secretary*

By the time you read this, school bells will be ringing around the country; not the kind located at the top of a building or by a teacher's hand as she or he stands by the front door. They will be automated buzzers that are programmed to indicate the beginning of the day and to alert students

when to change classes. Although most institutions have experienced major changes during the last 100 years, the school system has seen some dramatic ones.

If you were in grade school between 1916 and 1946 you were likely attending a one room country school with grades one through eight with an unmarried or newly married female as the teacher.

A Message From the President

Kaye Tomlinson

Hi from the St. Paul Historical Society.

It has been fun being the president and learning more about the Society and watching a lot of things fall in to place. The Gruber House is shaping up really well. All of the buildings are looking good and we have had a lot of visitors to all of them.

Our brand new building is coming along and we will be in it before winter. We are lucky to live in an area where everyone wants to help out.

If anyone has anything that you would like to put in one of our buildings, please let us know. We will label them with the names you give us and the things will fit right in to our village.

St. Paul is very proud of our Historical Village and it shows—many people have worked hard to get it to where it is today.

We have the Christmas event every year. Alice Osterman does most of that event. There has been caroling down there during the holidays. A few weddings and church services have been held down at the historical church. All of this helps St. Paul to be the great city that it is. It is open every weekend in the summer and we do get quite a few visitors.

So until next time, stay happy and come out and join our Society.

Although a few schools hired young men, most were women. The day would begin with opening exercises which included the flag salute, roll call and perhaps an announcement of some kind. A patriotic song may have been included.

Each class of each grade would receive a prescribed amount of instruction. The primary grades would learn their letters, numbers, simple words and simple arithmetic. Those first readers were likely paper back copies featuring Dick, Jane and Sally. The middle or intermediate grades would

continue learning to read in addition to spelling and grammar and add the real functions of arithmetic. There may have been some science and geography. The upper grades were introduced to literature, history and more advanced science. All grades were exposed to penmanship with its exercises of lines and ovals.

There would have been two 15 minute recess breaks—one in the morning and one in the afternoon. A lunch hour was scheduled at noon. That lunch was probably from a tin pail that may have held syrup or other food item and had been prepared by Mom or someone in the home that morning. If a student came from a somewhat poor family the main item was likely a slice of homemade bread spread with lard and sprinkled with sugar.

A homemade cookie or piece of cake may have been included. More well to do students may have had the pleasure of a piece of fruit. Drinks would be water from a bucket or crock and a shared dipper.

Those students attending a town school pretty much followed the same routine except there would have been only two or three grades per teacher. He or she was still responsible for any music instruction and playground duty. Those students who lived in town went home for lunch; those living a short distance from town probably brought their lunch.

The position of janitor for the one room country school was part of the teacher's job description. Prior to the opening of school in September volunteers from the community would gather to dust, sweep and get the building and grounds ready for use. School did not start until after the Labor Day holiday. Although the larger town school had one janitor hired, some schools hired local women or older teens to sweep the floors and dust if necessary each day. During the weekend they might wash the blackboards. Cleaning the erasers was a coveted job among younger students; they would go outside and pound them together or against the building.

Instructional aids that were available to teachers a hundred years ago were very limited. Worksheets and tests had to be handwritten. Textbooks were available to the students but they wrote out answers to problems and questions on tablet paper that they brought from home or



The Wagner School in 1898 was located south of Wolbach across from the present Highway 22, on the west side of Spring Creek. The boy with an x on his shirt is identified as John T. Wagner (between the two girls in the right front row). The two boys in the buggy are Fred and Will Wagner. The Wagner school building remains in the family today and is on the Barr farm, south of Wolbach.—Photo courtesy of Linda Wagner Peterson

answers were given orally during their class time. The blackboard and chalk were utilized throughout the day for explaining or providing examples from various subjects.

By the 1950's the one room schools were disappearing and the town schools were getting larger. The mimeograph machine became a standard for many of these schools and made copying much easier and faster—even if the task was somewhat messy. A special process was required to make an original copy. Next came the zerox machine which really made copying easier and also allowed for copying material from books, magazines and other sources. Even these machines continued to be improved to the point they can now copy two sides in one motion, colate and staple sheets together.

The blackboard itself has gone through a few transformations. For a time some schools switched to a green board but the function

remained the same. Then came the whiteboard and erasable markers. This was considered quite an improvement except the markers would dry out and need to be replaced. Now they, too, are being replaced by the Smartboard which is connected to a computer so an entire list of spelling words can simply appear with the click of a mouse. Yes. Spelling is still taught; cursive, however, is not.

Instead of text books many of the students carry a personal computer or iPad that contains all the information from a given textbook including tests and worksheets. If a teacher is absent, it is possible for the class to communicate to him/her through these devices. Another teacher does have to be present in the classroom.

Elementary teachers no longer are responsible for music and physical education; special teachers are hired for this. The recess time is almost eliminated.

Another change that occurred during the 50's was the placement of desks in the room. The country schools and some town schools had a row of desks permanently arranged along parallel boards with, maybe five or six desks in the row. Several rows would be placed in a room. The sizes of the desks varied to accommodate various sizes of students. These were replaced by individual desks which could be obtained in a variety of styles and sizes.

To add additional material to a subject the early teachers used filmstrips, then came VHS tapes that morphed into DVD disks and now there is an unlimited amount of additional information available via the internet. Those volumes of encyclopedias are collecting dust on school and home shelves, including mine.

Virginia Matousek Hirschman of St. Paul had an unusual situation in her country school experience. She attended District 27 through the fourth grade. Due to lack of students it closed and she attended District 18 for three years. When #27 reopened prior to her eighth grade year, she finished her elementary education there.

One memory she related was the time a family of civet (skunks) cats moved under the school house. To avoid the smell the teacher moved the students to a far corner of the school ground.

No one ever mentioned the use of the dunce hat in their school experience—county or town.

Following are memories from three individuals who attended a rural Howard County school.

School Memories of District 13

By Evelyn Dvorak

I have many wonderful memories of my country school days. All through the years I had two classmates, Shirley Nielsen Johnson and Leona Jensen McHargue and we did many things together.

One thing still stands out after all these years is May 1st, May basket day. Shirley and Leona went home with me after school the day before to spend the night and were we busy! We made May baskets for everyone in the school, even ourselves, hoping to keep it a secret. They were probably made from the pages of a wallpaper sample book and pasted together with a mixture of flour and water. The baskets were filled with home-

made fudge and plum blossoms. We left for school very early the next morning, walking across fields, which was about a mile from my home. We arrived before the teacher and entered the school through the west basement entry, left the baskets and hid in a ditch close to the school. We appeared at school at the usual hour; I still wonder if they knew who left the baskets.

There was always a school picnic at the close of the year. We gathered at the McCracken pasture under plenty of shade trees along Turkey Creek. Plenty of food was brought and following dinner there was baseball and horseshoe for the men and older kids. The teacher had races for the younger ones with candy as prizes and most of the women just visited.

Later in the afternoon we had lunch from the leftovers; the potato salad and other food seemed to keep very well under the trees. Many enjoyed my mother's kolaches which she brought in a dishpan. We were the only Czechs in the district so this was a treat as well as the ice cream the district bought. It was brought in a metal container wrapped in heavy canvas padding.

I have many more memories of District 13 and I wish to thank the teachers who taught us well.

Memories of District 41

By Joyce Ward

When my family moved to a farm south of St. Libory, I started first grade and continued through the eighth grade in this single room school house. I was the only one in my grade all eight years. One teacher handled all eight grades plus kindergartners. She also had to do her own daily janitor work. Once a week she put an oily compound on the wood floor. After all of us kids skated around and worked the oil in, it was swept up and thrown out. She also had to start the heat on cold mornings using cobs and coal in a pot bellied stove. Usually the kids were assigned the jobs of filling the coal bucket and water bucket in the entry way. A dipper was used to retrieve the water for drinking.

I think my mom was always president of the school board, along with Ray Atkins, Bob Evers and August Schultz. Some of the teachers would stay through the week at Schultzes who lived a short distance from the school.

As I remember, Maggie Christensen was the



School District 50 was located about a mile north and six miles west of St. Paul on the river road to Elba. Students standing in front of the school in 1950 were, left, Eugene Anderson, Raymond Hansen, Faye Hartman, Jeanette Wagner Peterson, Dorothy Michelizeck, Ray Spilinek, Linda Wagner Peterson, boy in hat unidentified, and Helen Jurzenski Svoboda. —Photo courtesy of Linda Peterson

county superintendent while I was in grade school. She would show up for unannounced visits to check on how the teachers were teaching us. They (the teachers) had to have lesson plans for each class in each grade. We got to paste a star on a chart for each day of attendance.

Some of the mothers would come and visit for a couple of hours to see how their kids were learning. We sometimes had young teachers, who were enrolled in Normal Training, come to our school to practice teach.

We had Christmas programs using a makeshift curtain hung on bailing wire to provide a “stage”. There would be plays, poems and music. We had to memorize our parts and songs. Family members were invited and co-op lunch served. Oranges, apples and peanuts were provided by the


school board. And Santa would appear.

At the end of the year we had a picnic followed by Fairmont ice cream from an insulated canvas container. Baseball was played with some of the dads joining in. The women just visited with each other.

During the school year we played ball, Anti-I-Over, Cops and Robbers, 23 Skidoo, May I, Red Light Green Light and other games. In the winter we made snow men, snow forts and had snowball battles.

Each fall before school started, the school house got a thorough cleaning which included starching the curtains, scrubbing the desks and floor and cleaning the two outhouses. Since the school was along Highway 281, the outhouses got lots of use by travelers, even gypsies. They were

sometimes dirty, even junky; we girls were usually assigned to help with this.

We walked to and from school most days. We carried our lunch in a bucket which was placed on a bench in the entry way along with a rack for our coats and hats. Each day was opened with the Pledge of Allegiance and flag salute. This was followed by penmanship, including ~~scribble~~ .

We built a dug out and one day one of the boys had matches and started a grass fire. The teacher and us kids carried water and luckily put it out.

Our only piece of playground equipment was a merry-go-around. We had art on Friday afternoon and some of this was exhibited at the County Fair.

Some of the kids had fights and picked on each other but we didn't consider it bullying.

My Memories of District 15

By Donita Meyer Anderson

Not long ago, I heard about making coffee with an egg, and I was immediately transported to the basement of District 15, where a group of strong, well-dressed women stood around a large blue enamel coffee pot, carefully adding a large egg to a pot of coffee, which the grown-ups exclaimed was "delicious". The coffee was served with a "lunch" after an evening school event; each mother brought a plate of sandwiches and a cake or a plate of cookies or bars. The lunch was bountiful and tasty, but we children were usually too excited by having our parents at school, or seeing our friends dressed up or in costume, or being out so late in the evening, to eat very much. We did get thirsty from running around in excitement, and usually were given Kool-Aid or lemonade to drink or, in the winter, hot chocolate.

My memories of District 15 are dominated by the social events—the Christmas Program was the grandest event of the year, but there was always a Halloween Party, with "Best Costume" prizes for children and adults, and an "End of School" Picnic, which ended the year with assorted three gallon containers of ice cream served after a huge picnic lunch. I recall several one-time events, such as a Box Social in the evening, a carnival with a cake walk and games devised by parents and teachers, a daytime Mother's Day tea, and an Easter Bonnet Contest for students and mothers.

Every year in the spring, we had a field trip with parents driving us to exciting places such as

Robert's Dairy, KMMJ Radio Station, or the Grand Island Independent printing plant; after visiting "educational sites", we would have a picnic lunch in a Grand Island park. Once, we rode the Union Pacific passenger train from a stop that it made at the crossing near the school to the St. Paul Depot, where parents were waiting. And every year we had a "Hike" near the end of the school year, taking in the nearby sod house, then walking to the banks of the Loup River, where we roasted hot dogs and marshmallows, played organized games, and ran about looking for frogs, impressed that we were dressed in casual clothes, instead of our usual starched school dresses.

The end of the school year was especially important, marked by special events, and getting a final report card and finding out if we "passed" to the next grade. But I was often sad to see the school year end, as I missed my friends and the school as the center of the social life of our community with event after event attended by carefully dressed parents, grandparents, even aunts and uncles, arriving early to get a seat. But summer had other activities and went by fast, and August meant planning for the County Fair, which meant meetings for parents to organize a float for the Fair parade. An especially memorable float featured a water tank and brown paper fashioned into a pie with children jumping up and singing "Four and Twenty Blackbirds Baked in a Pie" in front of the judges in the grandstand. A significant County Fair event was seeing our work on display in the School Exhibit Building—some teachers tactfully included an exhibit for each student, but it was always a matter of great anxiety if work would be displayed and if it might win a ribbon.

September meant school starting, which, in spite of my reluctance to see it end in the spring, meant the challenges of stiff new shoes and the long, often hot, days of September. Early in the school year, we were visited by the "School Nurse". We were each measured and examined and given necessary inoculations. The starched uniform and professional demeanor of Mrs. Powell, as well as her impressive fund of health care knowledge, were positive factors in my decision to become a nurse. School days were long, from 9:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m., but we had an hour for lunch, 30 minutes to eat and 30 minutes for organized play; we also had morning and afternoon recesses, which almost always featured out-

door play. My birthday was in December, so I was taken to see a psychologist in Kearney to be evaluated as “ready for school” at age four. Until the Third Grade, I was the only student in my grade, but I found friends among the 12 other pupils distributed in Grades K-8. When I was in Third Grade, a family moved into the District, and they had a daughter in Third Grade—we quickly became “Best Friends” for the rest of our District 15 years.

I clearly remember a series of hard-working and competent teachers, all of whom stayed in the job over one year; the teachers carefully planned lessons for the eight grades and gave individual attention to the needs of each child. The number of pupils grew gradually until a teaching assistant was hired to meet the needs of 21 students who attended District 15 when I was in the Fifth Grade, and, expanded into two rooms and two teachers shortly after I graduated.

The academics were challenging and interesting and divided into required subjects, such as Arithmetic, Reading, Grammar, Spelling, History, Geography, and Penmanship. The school was regularly visited by a County Superintendent of Schools, Miss Deininger, who monitored District 15 compliance with detailed requirements for each grade; the visits by the stern superintendent were taken very seriously by the pupils, teacher, parents, and the elected school board.

Some years after leaving District 15 behind, I realized that I had an excellent basic education, which surprised me, as I supposed that schools with twenty students in a grade and only one teacher were superior to eight grades handled by one teacher.

District 15 was a rich environment, with all of us understanding each other’s weaknesses, including behavior problems. Every teacher “kept order”, although some were more stern than others, but none were unkind or unfair. We understood that behavior problems were quickly communicated to parents, who were summoned to the school. If the school couldn’t meet a need, we were guided to a solution—after I read my way through the modest library, I was guided to the St. Paul Library. The learning environment was enriched with singing and dancing, drama, and sports. We sang a variety of songs, especially from “The Little Golden Book”, learned square dancing and, even some ballroom dancing. Planning and practice for the Christmas Program

went on for weeks, and the outcome was a varied program of plays, monologues, “pieces”, solos, duets, and group performances; talented mothers fashioned elaborate costumes and capable fathers helped with set design. A huge sign of progress was the acquisition of a roll up canvas screen printed with advertising to replace the dyed sheets that previously served as stage curtains. The program was performed for a standing room only crowd, after which Santa arrived and distributed gifts, finally, and then lunch was served. The Christmas program was one of the most exciting nights of the year, full of performance anxiety, fears of forgetting lines, and teacher prompts of nervous students.

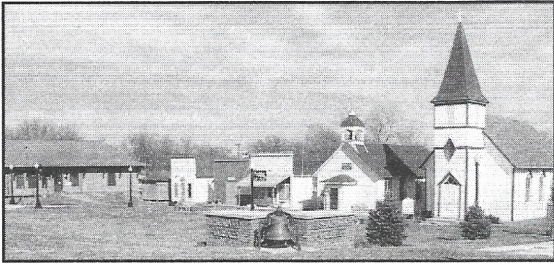
We played a lot of games and sports, often with all ages together to provide enough players for teams; we liked “Send” and “Kick the Can” (over the roof of the school!), but always came back to softball. One season, I got tired of the humiliation of being picked near the last for a “side”, and practiced night after night tossing a ball up and hitting it with a bat until, finally, I became a reliable hitter who was chosen early to be on a team. A snowfall was exciting and meant elaborate forts and the complicated paths of “Fox and Geese”. A slab of new concrete in front of the school allowed month after month of roller skating but perpetual skinned knees.

Soon enough, my friend and I entered adolescence and broke off into a group of girls; the boys did the same, and we played fewer games together. Our group of girls sobbed out loud when we found out from the radio that there was a plane crash and Buddy Holly died. Finally, after years of dreaming and planning, it was time for my Best Friend/Classmate and me to take Eighth Grade Exams, and we went to the St. Paul Superintendent’s Office, dressed in matching outfits, to take the exam; we both did very well.

Our District 15 years were over, and we were eager to go to St. Paul High School, which seemed excitingly and terrifyingly large and complicated.

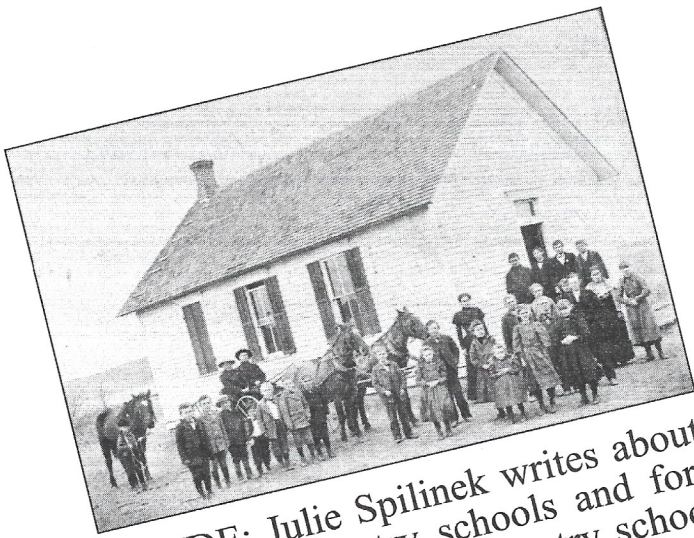
At the time, we didn’t realize that we were leaving behind our caring, protecting, and nurturing “Village”.

As a result of rising costs, the yearly membership dues have been raised to \$15, effective in 2017.



HOWARD COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
 P.O. Box 1
 SAINT PAUL, NEBRASKA 68873

Historically Speaking



INSIDE: Julie Spilinek writes about one room country schools and former Howard County country school students recount experiences attending Districts 13, 41 and 15.

Historically Speaking

PUBLISHER:

Howard County Historical Society

EDITING, LAYOUT, AND DESIGN:

Many fine members of the Howard County Historical Society

CIRCULATION:

300+

MAILING ADDRESS:

P.O. Box 1, Saint Paul, NE 68873

MEMBERSHIP (INCLUDES NEWSLETTER
 SUBSCRIPTION AND MAILINGS):

\$10 per person

Preserving the history of:
 Boelus, Cotesfield, Cushing,
 Dannebrog, Dannevirke, Elba,
 Fairdale, Farwell, Nysted, Paplin,
 Saint Libory, Saint Paul, and Warsaw

2016 OFFICERS:

Kaye Tomlinson, President
 Jesse Kiser, Vice President
 Julie Spilinek, Secretary
 Evelyn Dvorak, Treasurer

OTHER 2016 DIRECTORS:

Jim Ross
 Rose Ross
 Carl Huebner
 Roger Van Pelt
 Robin Elstermeier
 Roger Goettsche
 Donita Anderson
 Marion Bahensky
 Alice Osterman

The HCCHS is a non-discriminatory provider.