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SCHOOLDAYS SIXTY YEARS AGO

(By JAMES CRAIG.)

Seeing in one of Ruth Cameron's Side-talk letters in the London Free Press where she was enumerating the requirements of the modern pupil, and wondering where it was all going to stop at. Aside from an arm-load of books, there is floor space, air space, light, temperature and ventilation. All has to be looked after, and with the regular inspector and school board there is a staff of nurses and doctors who are making a living by inspecting and prescribing for their physical and dental ailments. There is certainly subject for wonder.

Now with the permission of the editor and the reading public, I will try to describe the conditions and systems of the public school which I attended some sixty years ago.

Well do I remember the first day I started to school. It was the summer of 1853 or 54. My mother brought me to the school room and introduced me to the teacher.

The teacher was a Mrs. Atkinson, the mother of the famous Atkinson brothers, and a bright lot of youngsters they were, all except Tom, who was the dull boy of the flock. Four of them became criminal lawyers, the youngest James Joseph, being able to plead in three languages.

The school section was a union, the second and fourth concessions south, of Warwick, were combined. There were a lot of children in those days in this section, but not many of them got to school at the same time. In the winter the small ones could not attend on account of bad roads and insufficient clothing. During the summer the big boys were kept at home to help on the farm. In fact, we were kept often on very simple reasons. I remember our teacher asking me, "Did I stay at home yesterday to watch the cat from eating the tongs." I remember two brothers who were sent to school week about, what they learned one week they forgot the next. In those days education was not so important as now, not many branches being taught. We were taught the three "R's," and well thrashed, the latter branch, generally a blue beech, seemed as important as the others.

Our school was situated on 27 sideroad halfway between the two concessions. It was about 20x30 feet in space, probably ten feet high to the eave. The roof was covered with clap boards about thirty inches long laid on stout poles at a slope sufficient to run the water off, but the wind and snow came in quite freely. The walls were built of round logs chinked on the inside with split basswood, on the outside plastered with mud. There were beams about six feet apart but no loft till later. In the fall of the second season there came a load of lumber. I think it was sawn at a mill situated on Brown's creek, on the farm owned at present by Dan Kelly. After some days the big boys volunteered to place it and soon they had the loft complete. There was no stairway required. The door was made of rough boards with a hole through which we poked our finger to lift the wooden latch when we came in. The floor was of basswood slabs, very rough and so open that the squirrels and chipmunks came up by times and skipped about looking for crumbs. You may be sure we paid more attention to them than we did to our lessons. A pair of peewees also came in and built their nest against a roof pole. The teacher warned us not to meddle with them, but afterward remarked "Those birds are going to be a nuisance." There were two windows on each side and directly under the windows were the writing desks, they were of the same material as the floor, the widest slabs being chosen. Each desk or platform was set upon four feet and sloped slightly inward. They were very uneven till one day Mr. Cline came with his adz and jack plane and levelled down the lumps. He made a vast improvement, he also bored holes to receive the ink bottles. Our ink was made from boiled soft maple bark with a little gunpowder added to the liquid. It was good but sometimes got frozen and burst the bottles. Our seats were of split basswood logs with feet placed in the round side, the flat side up, two on each side of the stove, they were about fourteen feet long, two of them being pushed back to the writing desks when we used that piece of furniture. The stove was a large box affair with the pipe going straight up through the roof, there was the raised picture of the head and shoulders of Jacques Cartier on each side of it.

One day the second season, Mr. Thomas Clark with another man came and made a window in the east end directly behind the teacher, and a rough desk was brought for the teacher, he had quite a time keeping it from joggling on the uneven floor. There were neither maps nor blackboards. I have seen the teacher pointing out imaginary hemispheres and continents on the north wall where there was nothing but round logs with the bark on. Our third teacher had a peculiar method of making us study, when school called and we had taken our seats the command came "Study out" when every pupil in the room started at the top of their voice to rehearse their own lesson for the morning. You can imagine what a racket and medley they made, that went on for thirty minutes when we got the word "Silence, Fourth class places," the fourth class marched out and set their toes to a crack in the floor, "Read". The head pupil started to read, should the reader make a mistake the correct word was snapped out by two or three of the others and up went as many hands to further make known who was first, whereon the teacher would decide who was worthy of promotion and send that one above the one who made the mistake. The teacher set the head lines in our copy books at the noon hour if it was not too cold we wrote a few lines after dinner.

Some of the teachers opened the school with the Lord's Prayer and the ten commandments was recited once a week. We were punished for swearing and black-guarding and tobacco was strictly prohibited.

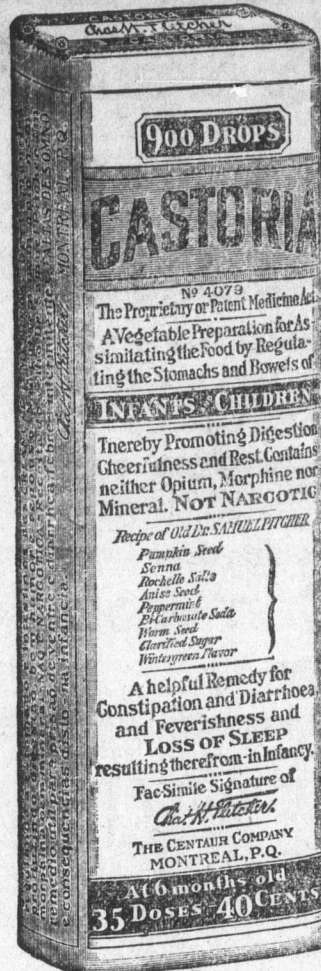
Our play ground was unlimited. In winter we played jail going on the road allowance. In summer we roamed in the woods after getting so far away that we were out of hearing of the school call, the teacher called school by rapping on the side of the door with a stick and shouting out "School." The first two or three teachers did not possess a watch. Few of us had ever seen a watch at that time. Our second pedagogue, a Mr. McKartney, borrowed an old sun dial that was lying around our house, it was made of a piece of oak plank, eight square with a circle and a diagram of figures from nine to three, a thin piece of triangle wood was placed so its shadow would fall on the figures, the boys called it "Methusalem's clock," when the sun was shining it marked the hours on the diagram fairly well.

Our holidays were few and short. To begin with, we had but every other Saturday, with two weeks at mid-summer, the Christmas week and Easter Monday and perhaps the 24th of May. Our second teacher boarded round the section, two weeks at one place and more according to the number of scholars going. We had to behave ourselves proper while we had the eyes of both the teacher and our parents on us. The teachers salaries those days was about sixteen or seventeen dollars a month. G. W. Ross, M.P., Middlesex grand inspector, taught his first school at fifteen a month with board deducted.

At first school and land tax was collected separate, school tax was levied on those who had children of school age, vacant land and families without children were exempt.

The trustees were appointed two on one line with one on the other, alternate, the odd one had to cross the bush on foot or horse-back when business was transacted.

I have spun out this history too long now and if it escapes the W.P.B. I will be only too thankful and ringoff by saying that the count of fingers on one hand would number all that is left of us that went to that Pioneer School.



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