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Our School Department.

Behind the Lombardy Poplars.

BY JESSIE BROWN, LAMBTON CO., ONT.

Picture to yourself a long row of Lombardy poplars—a gap between two of these stately trees filled in by a maple and a willow—behind these trees a much-tramped yard and, set in the midst of the yard, a little white school. The school has an old-fashioned air. Perhaps that is due to the high windows, each with its sixteen small panes of glass or, perhaps, too, the Virginia creeper which festoons the porch, almost hiding the front window. But look above the porch at the date marked there—1869. Ah! that explains it. Do you see the flowers growing about the school—pansies, morning-glories, hollyhocks? The hollyhocks complete the quaintness of the picture. Surely the boys who come to this school dress in homespun and the girls wear long dresses and pantalettes and are dear, shy little creatures who spend their leisure time stitching fine seams and sewing patchwork squares.



Ready for the School Fair.
A Dundas county school girl and her school fair grain.

Alas for illusions! The children in this little school are just like all other modern children. The boys do not wear homespun. The girls are not shy, their dresses scarcely come down to their knees, and you are much more likely to find them playing baseball or croquet or digging in the school garden than sewing seams. The children, you see, are my pupils.

Speaking of gardens reminds me that I intended to tell you about ours. It is a small strip of land on the east side of the school yard. It is not exactly a new institution here, having been in existence for three or four years.

When I came here last fall it had been lying neglected all summer, and was a wilderness of weeds with a lone vegetable peeping through here and there. Our first task was to remove the weeds. This afforded opportunity for several informal, out-of-door lessons about the various weeds we found. In studying these plants the end kept in view was the discovery of the best means of destroying them. For instance, the children saw for themselves, by examining the underground root stock, why it does very little good to cut the Canada thistle above ground. This discovery led naturally to a study of other plants having similar characteristics and means of destroying them. When we finished our weeding the garden was an even sorer sight than before. Only a few straggling vegetables were left. We removed these and the garden was ready to be dug.

The only spade we had at school was, to be Irish, a shovel. Obviously we could not dig our garden with that. By this time the leaves were piled high in the yard and we had only one rake. Moreover, we wanted fertilizer for our garden. We got permission to take as much barnyard manure as we pleased from the farm next door, so our only problems were to get some implements for work, and to find some way of bringing the manure to the garden. The children brought spades from home and dug the garden. Then some of them brought rakes and, while these raked leaves, others drew manure on a push cart, a wheelbarrow and a child's wagon, which had been pressed into service. The dead leaves we piled in a heap and left there to rot, to be used as a fertilizer in the spring. When that work was finished we left the garden for the winter.

Almost before the first robin came this spring the children began to ask, "please, when may we plant the garden?" As soon as the frost was out of the ground we laid the garden out in plots and put some of the rotten leaves on it. Then came the task of assigning plots. This I did quite arbitrarily and without the least misgiving. I saw signs of dissatisfaction, and discovered that I was upsetting their consciences. They had their own part from former years and did not wish to part with them. I finally decided to let them have their own way in that matter.

When we had our own plots ready we had to decide what we would plant in them, and in the 25-cent gardens about the school. My first fond dream was to plant hollyhocks, but my pupils were trained when they asked me to show them to dig up the hollyhocks and throw them away. For the first time, the holly-

hocks remained in the ground. The children had no suggestions for replacing them. They were simply tired of them and wished to get rid of them. I wondered if in this small way they were not reflecting the present-day unrest in the grown-up world where people are anxious to abolish existing conventions and systems, but have no rational schemes for reconstruction after their work of demolition is over. . . . Aside from insisting that we have hollyhocks I allowed the children a good deal of liberty in choosing seed for their plots, merely making a few suggestions. Most of them wished to plant radishes so they could eat them at school! We finished the last of our gardening on Arbour Day and now we are patiently waiting for sunshine and showers to start the weeds and vegetables so we can begin weeding.

Perhaps the one thing that impressed itself most upon me in the teaching of agriculture was the fact that those things which the pupils learned for themselves by the use of their own senses were of infinitely more value to them than the things I simply told them. I have mentioned the root stock of the Canada thistle as one thing which they learned about by digging it up and examining it. They studied the wild carrot in the same way in its two stages—first and second year. They pulled up sweet peas and clover to study the nodules on the roots. And with myself they studied mushrooms in field and woods. These things they have not forgotten and are not likely to forget. Some of them remember the lessons I taught them with the aid of illustrations, but I think I am safe in saying that they do not remember the lessons which were merely lectures. This is, of course, not a new discovery, but it is a fact which will bear repetition since it is of very great importance, not only in the teaching of agriculture but in other school work as well.

This year's work has not been a particularly shining success in my school. I have made mistakes without number. However, the past is behind and I hope to make next year's work more successful. I would advise any rural teacher to teach agriculture in her school. Farming is a dignified occupation, and the teaching of agriculture should help to show the pupils the dignity and beauty of it. In later years without this training they might see only the long hours of hard labor, the disadvantages of country life, the higher wages of the towns. But given proper training in their youth they will be able to see beneath these things and realize the greatness of the farmer's mission—feeding a hungry world. In these days when men are daily flocking to the cities it is very necessary that we should find some way of keeping up the population of the rural districts. It is useless to cry "back to the land" to those who have gone. We must train up the boys and girls so that they will never wish to go. It is a big task and one in which the teacher can render great assistance. That is one of the things that I am trying to do for the boys and girls in the little old school behind the Lombardy poplars.

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