

The New Rural School

Binding the Schoolroom to the Home thru the Teaching of Practical Subjects of Every-day Interest and Usefulness.

A Remarkable Object Lesson Provided by the Mendota Beach School, Wisconsin.

By M. C. Cutting in The St. Paul Farmer

There is a one-room rural school in Dane County, Wisconsin, that has earned a place in the history of education. It has marked the passage of one educational era and the beginning of a new—the change from abstract to concrete instruction. Two years ago this school was like thousands of other neglected rural schools in this country—inconsiderate of the childish body, uninspiring to the childish mind. Today it stands as a model of all that is useful, stimulating and efficient in rural school education. It has forged the golden link that binds the schoolroom to the home.

In the autumn of 1912 a new teacher came to the school at Mendota Beach, Wisconsin. She previously had been engaged in a city business office and had gone to the country to recuperate. But she became so much interested in her school and her community that she resolved to stay and put some original ideas to the test. The result is the Mendota Beach school of today. While this is not the only school in which rural education has been changed for the better, and while it may not have been the first school to make the change, the probabilities are that no other rural school in this part of the country has made a more effective change with as little expense and community friction. It was the common sense, human sympathy and executive ability of Miss Grace Wyman, the new teacher, that effected the transformation.

What the New Teacher Found

When Miss Wyman came to Mendota Beach she found a school that was old and unattractive. The walls were bare and dingy, and a sulky stove in one corner of the room served for a heating plant. There was no vestibule or hallway in which the children could leave their lunches and wraps, and the basement was nothing more than a dark, damp excavation in the earth. In winter the school was cold and gloomy. Lessons were droned over in the hopeless, meaningless way that lessons have been recited from time immemorial. There was nothing in the curriculum to arouse ambition or inspire the interest of accomplishment among the children; it contained nothing that could be put to practical use in their everyday home life. And this was the kind of a school that Miss Wyman started to teach and continued to teach during the first half-year.

But the germ of an idea was continually working in her mind. She held intimate talks with the children from each home and learned the little chores they were required to do, their desires for doing certain things which they could not do, their grievances, ambitions and so forth. And she discovered that the children wanted to learn how to do things themselves, rather than to repeat what other people had done. Then the germ of an idea became a conviction. She decided to hold a school exhibition, not only of work they were doing, but of new work they were anxious to do and could do if they had the equipment.

"It was a cold, bitter day in January," says Miss Wyman; "the stove smoked and sulked; the children were sitting on their feet. As I looked down the aisle

of uncomfortable little bodies and twenty-six unhappy faces, feeling sure of their confidence, I laid aside my book. The geography lesson was concluded, and the children were asked to come up

around the stove, for I had a secret plan which I could no longer keep and must tell them." She, then, disclosed her plan of an exhibition—an entertainment in which they would boost for a new schoolhouse. Each child was asked to prepare an original piece of work along some special line which each one would like to do in school the coming year. And these exhibits were to be

ushered into the schoolroom where an exhibit of work actually done in the school was shown, all of which was familiar and spoke for itself. But the awakened a new interest. It contained just the suggestions of work in the home that Miss Wyman hoped to obtain. The girls brought domestic articles almost entirely. There was a frosted cake, a loaf of bread and needlework of various kinds, such as embroidery, belts and bags made of Indian beads with perfect designs. One boy brought a hand-made Dutch windmill standing in a box of earth, fash-

thermore, she proposed to teach these subjects herself, and to do it without loss of time from the regular lessons. The annual meeting came; every voter in the neighborhood was reminded of its importance; the whole neighborhood was assembled, and the old schoolhouse was full. A warm discussion followed; but, with the exception of one item—a cistern—the estimated plans were adopted and improvements to the extent of \$900 were authorized.

Thus was the first of Miss Wyman's plans realized. Then came the working out of the second plan. She had obtained the promise of a better building; she now wanted to develop a more efficient school. Immediately she began collecting all the information possible from books. Failing to find a suitable text-book for the teaching of domestic science in a rural school, she bravely set out to make one for herself. She visited every home in the district and got acquainted with the mothers. Her visits were not formal calls; she just "dropped in" in a friendly way to have a chat—and she helped with the work while they chatted. But she obtained the confidence of the mothers in this way; she learned the domestic problems of each individual farm home; and she awakened an immediate interest in her plan to teach the girls to cook, sew, iron and sweep, and do it well, the same as reading, writing and arithmetic. And so was her text-book completed.

The Old School Transformed

The next thing was to obtain the consent of the School Board for the purchase of the necessary equipment. She had estimated the approximate cost, and she knew where the materials could be cheaply obtained. With the clerk of the School Board, who approved her plan, she arranged to take the other two members on a visit to inspect the domestic science and manual training equipment of the Madison schools. The visit was made, the work inspected and, to Miss Wyman's delight, her plans were approved.

When school opened at Mendota Beach last year there was a vast improvement in its appointments. One side of the dark building was removed and replaced with a solid row of windows. A vestibule, with accommodations for wraps, lunches and rubbers, was added to the front. The dismal cellar was transformed into a light, airy, roomy basement with cement floor, and a furnace was installed. Indeed, the whole atmosphere of the building was changed. In the schoolroom the walls had been painted and the new equipment was in place. In the rear stood a kitchen table, with a deep drawer well stocked with cooking utensils, and an oil stove with portable oven on top. Nearby, neatly screened from the schoolroom, was a lavatory containing a wash bowl, looking glass, water cooler and a cabinet for individual drinking cups. And down in the basement, in addition to the furnace, was a carpenter's work bench having two drawers and containing a set of carpenter's tools.

The cost of the improvement voted at the annual meeting was \$900. Beside this, the cost of the additional equipment was very slight. The cooking

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MENDOTA BEACH SCHOOL, WISCONSIN
Where rural education has received a new impetus. At the top, the manual training boys at work. Centre, Miss Grace Wyman, the teacher who developed the idea.

grouped in the "Original Corner," the surprise of the entertainment.

The enthusiasm of the children was unbounded. Nearly every morning the school opened with some new plan for the eventful day. The children were told to talk about it at home and elsewhere, but not to divulge the secret of the "Original Corner." The significance of that exhibit must strike the fathers and mothers of the whole community at once. Programs were printed and the covers hand-painted with apple blossoms, and one program was sent to every home in the district. The date was set for May 2, and arrangements were made to hold the entertainment beneath the trees in the schoolyard, stretching a canvas from one end of the building to a tree as a protection for the speakers from the wind.

At last the appointed time arrived. It was a hot spring day, and the whole neighborhood was assembled in pleased anticipation. The program went off swimmingly. One boy gave a parody on "The Old Oaken Bucket," using to clever advantage "The Worn-out Old Schoolhouse." One of the girls offered a prophecy as to the condition of the schoolhouse ten years later, keeping the question of the schoolhouse well before the gathering. Then the guests were

ioned from a picture he had seen. Another boy had made with his jack-knife a rule properly marked off in the scale of inches. Everything was exhibited with the greatest pride and enjoyment by the young owners.

One of the progressive ladies of the community had previously appointed a committee to work up an evening meeting for the benefit more particularly of the men who were busy with their spring work. This followed the afternoon entertainment. A short musical program by local talent was given, and then came an open discussion of the schoolhouse and its needs. An outline of the changes needed in remodeling the school was brought before the meeting. A committee of three was appointed to draw up an estimate of the cost of these alterations and to report at the annual school meeting in July. With this much accomplished, the day's activities were over. And so ended the school year.

Miss Wyman had decided that, if it was voted to remodel the schoolhouse at the annual meeting, she would remain and endeavor to work out another plan for the teaching of domestic science and manual training, the kind of instruction that the children themselves had suggested in their "Original Corner." Fur-



ILLUSTRATIONS OF THE PRACTICAL WORK TAUGHT AT MENDOTA BEACH. RARELY FOUND IN THE RURAL SCHOOL: TYPEWRITING, SEWING, COOKING AND THE KINDERGARTEN