

## PIONEER SCHOOL DAYS

By Cyndy Gervais, Editor

September means "back to school" for most of us. Even if we're no longer a student, or no longer the parent of a student, the whole community still seems to evolve around summer holidays and back to school.

Schools and learning were structured very differently long ago. Our national attitude toward formal schooling was very different, too. School attendance in the 1800's was largely determined by a family's geographical location, their financial situation, and even their race.

Nineteenth century children grew into adult responsibilities so quickly that attending school was not always a family's top priority for their offspring. Usually, it was only city children who attended school on a daily basis for most of the year. Farm children in rural areas were needed to assist their parents during all but the winter months, and so could attend school only briefly each year. For many children, such as boys in coal mining towns, their only access to any formalized education was at Sunday School. It was a very rare situation for any child to attend school past eighth grade; the privilege of high school or college education was reserved for a wealthy minority, usually males. Many school teachers in the olden days began their careers at about 16 years old!

### Lessons

Lessons were different too. Students spent much of their day learning things by memorization. The following poem (which is still recited today) taught students to memorize the number of days in each month...

*Thirty days hath September*

*April, June and November*

*All the rest have thirty-one*

*Excepting February alone*

*And it has twenty-eight days time*

*But in leap years, February has twenty-nine.*



Spelling Bees were a popular activity in pioneer schools. Students would work in teams, each taking turns calling out the letters to correctly spell words which were appropriate to their ability, and they would earn points for each word they spelt correctly. This activity often turned out to be quite a contest between the students.

Dictionary work was a common activity in pioneer schools too. Students would look up words in a dictionary to learn their meaning. They would also learn how to pronounce the word correctly, find a synonym and use each word in a sentence. This practice, of course, would increase their vocabulary.

Students would learn basic Arithmetic - the science of numbers, now referred to as mathematics or math. They would memorize their "times tables" from 1 through 12 and were tested on their skill daily. Calculators did not exist. They were taught to add sums, subtract, multiply numbers and long division.

### Village School House

One-room community schools were very common well into the 20th century, and encompassed several grades of students and one teacher. They were typically warmed by a wood-burning stove placed in the middle of the room. It would have a cloakroom at the back with hooks for over-clothing. Indoor plumbing being rare even in most homes, the washroom would be an outhouse.

### Discipline

In pioneer days, discipline was strictly enforced by the teacher. It is arguable whether today's seeming lack of discipline is more conducive to learning or if in fact we give our students too many choices. Students were expected to be orderly and quiet except for recitation periods. Pupils spoke when called upon by the teacher or requested permission before speaking by raising their right arm. A formal politeness was required at all times. They were usually required to stand when speaking to the teacher or to the class. Titles of respect (Miss, Mister, Ma'am, Sir) were always used in addressing the teacher. Students were required to speak correctly.

Punishment took numerous forms. Corporal punishment was not unheard of nor were other extreme penalties such as detention, suspension and even expulsion. Lesser punishments, more common at that time than now, included such things as a rap on the hands or knuckles with a ruler, standing in a corner with face to the wall,

wearing a dunce cap, facing the room, and sitting upon a high stool beside the teacher's desk, standing for long periods with arms held straight out in front, or standing with an arm outstretched, palm up, while holding a heavy book on that hand for long period. In later years, authoritarian discipline and corporal punishment were softened, and greater attention was given to the development of habits of self-discipline. It was taken for granted that the Golden

Rule, courtesy, fairness, and good manners were the standard of conduct.

### Teachers

And there were Rules for Teachers too. Below is a set of requirements set out by a pioneer school board in Upper Canada.

1. Teachers each day will fill lamps, clean chimneys.
2. Each teacher will bring a bucket of water and a scuttle of coal for the day's session.
3. Men teachers may take one evening each week for courting purposes or two evenings a week if they go to church regularly.
4. After ten hours in school, the teacher may spend the remaining time reading the Bible or other good books.
5. Women teachers who marry or engage in unseemly conduct will be dismissed.
6. Every teacher should lay aside from each pay a goodly sum of earnings for his benefit during his declining years so that he will not

become a burden on society.

7. Any teacher who smokes, uses liquor in any form, frequents pool or public halls, or gets shaves in a barber shop will give good reason to suspect his worth, intention and honesty.

Any teacher who performs his labour faithfully and without fault for five years will be given an increase of 25 cents per week in his pay providing the Board of Education approves.

Education, and certainly the attitude towards education, has evolved since pioneer days. We have computers, calculators, spellcheck and the internet. As with a GPS navigation system, where you still have to keep your eyes on the road and use your best judgment on short notice - one hopes that this generation of students are able to go beyond the mere basics to stimulate the brain and do what has always been required of us - to "think"!