

Those early school days in Burgessville

By Reta L. Dickson
From Cider Press

Having received numerous requests to write an article on our early school days, I am about to keep a resolution: I made, to do so in January 1979.

The first memorable event to me was the burning of the "Old White Brick." Standing on the wooden plank sidewalk, beside our teacher, Miss Euphemia Allen, the burning made little impression on me as I had gone to school only a very short time. To some of the senior pupils it was probably hilarious seeing their school go up in flames. They thought it would provide a long holiday. However this jollity was short-lived as the alert energetic trustees soon found accommodation for us. To some parents, the burning may have been considered a blessing in disguise, because a few years previously the dread epidemic diphtheria had caused many pupils to become dangerously ill, some fatally. Names of the latter may be seen engraved on several tomb-stones in the Burgessville Cemetery. The old over-heated furnace was apparently the cause of the fire. It was located in a damp dug-out cellar which was warm and moist, an ideal place for the propagation of disease germs.

The old school was very, very old and would have ultimately been razed before too many years had passed. It faced east and to enter one of the two rooms you climbed long old wooden steps to a platform, off which were the entrances to the classrooms.

Inside, everything was very old and dismal. The

object that really stands out in my memory is "The Old Arm Chair" standing in the front left-hand corner. It was a disgrace to any pupil who occupied it. If you were particularly garrulous and caught incessantly chattering you were escorted, weeping, to the "Old Arm Chair" where you remained for a week, vowing never to be so humiliated again. However this resolution was usually broken, for what else was there to do but whisper when your seat-work was completed and you were waiting idly for your class to be called? No supplementary reading books or interesting seat-work was provided to keep you occupied and out of mischief. Luckily, we had a very competent conscientious teacher in the person of Miss Allen, who drilled us well in the three "Rs" and phonics with the result that we became quite tolerable readers in that old brown-covered, "rat, cat, hat" primer.

But if conditions in the old school were poor, they were certainly preferable to our accommodations after the fire. We Juniors, were located in the Templars' Hall, a white frame building on Church Street East on the site of the present residence of Mr. and Mrs. Michael Hughes. Later this hall was moved just north of the store and became the first telephone office. Later it was completely renovated and additions added making it the pleasant residence of Mr. and Mrs. Wally Orth.

It was fortunate that this hall was available and could be made into a classroom in short order. Between the two long rows of benches, the central aisle led up to a high

platform, where there was a table and chair for the teacher and the "Honour Roll" chair for the pupil obtaining the highest monthly marks. If fortunate enough, or unfortunate, to be the occupant of this chair, you could look down haughtily on the occupants of the seats below. However if the leg of this chair just happened to slide into the knot-hole in the floor, this pupil was hurled to the floor below, amid the laughter of the other pupils and one's

dignity quickly lost, while the boys seemed to be guiltily snickering. Did they know how that chair leg seemed to be so near the knot-hole?

Naturally we had no desks, only planks nailed to the back of the benches ahead. Three pupils were seated on these benches, one at each end and one in the middle.

The pupil next to the aisle had the advantage of sitting next to the huge round wood-stove which seemingly had to be constantly replenished by the older boys. When the pupils next to the wall were so extremely chilled that their teeth chattered and their fingers were too numb to write, they frantically waved their hands till they

gained the teacher's attention. Then if a place was available in the circle of chairs that the teacher had thoughtfully placed around the stove, you were allowed to move. There you sat, not only until you were defrosted, but until your legs were practically seared, because a chance to sit by

the stove came usually about once a day. If you became thirsty, you tried to forget about it, rather than drink tepid water from the communal dipper in the pail at the back of the room.

Teaching must have been very difficult with only one blackboard about 6'x8' on which the teacher wrote the primary work.

To facilitate teaching the older pupils, Jr. and Sr. Second (now called Grades 3 and 4) a monthly magazine called "School and Home" was subscribed for by each pupil. It contained not only sufficient seat-work in English and arithmetic but interesting supplementary reading. Teachers, seemingly, became discouraged trying to teach under such unsatisfactory conditions, because they resigned periodically.

While we Juniors were receiving some education under these conditions, the Seniors were housed upstairs in a large two-storey white frame warehouse on the corner, where Jim's Garage now stands. The upper room quickly became a class-room taught by the principal, the late Philip Hendershott.

As no playground was available at either school, we were delighted on that spring morning in 1905 to be told to collect our books and slates and prepare to march up to the new school (now the School Museum). Now we not only had a school yard which provided three small baseball diamonds but a beautiful new school.

There were no conveniences but we did have cold drinking water out of the granite cup chained to the pump. While the pupils were really hilarious, not so the parents. They were happy to see us so happy but there was much grumbling about the heavy taxes which would not be imposed on S.S.

3. The cost of the school had

far exceeded the first estimates. Also, many disapproved of the architecture, saying it was more suitable for a jail. Also why did it not face the road as the old school had? The reason was that the Department of Education in Toronto had issued instructions that all new schools must have windows at the left and back of the pupils.

Early school days

All the pupils were thrilled with their new clean shining school. The windows shone; the floors shone and the desks shone. To retain this glow, some of the girls brought from home cloths dampened with coal-oil. I was not allowed to do this, as my mother insisted that coal-oil would eventually remove the varnish and ultimately I would have the shiniest desk. We were especially happy when the school board hired our first teacher, Miss Allen, who had resigned earlier to become Mrs. Jim Dennis.

Now instead of that old fat stove we had hot water radiators. Sad to say, they were usually cold until the first recess, but if lucky we were then allowed to lean against them. We kept warm at recess by playing running games in our spacious basements, when "Sheep, Sheep Come Home," "Pom, Pom, Pull Away," "London Bridge" and "Drop the Handkerchief" were enjoyed.

Outside, heavy snow falls, which seemed to be customary provided the boys with snow forts and snowball fights. Alas for the boy whose snowball accidentally broke a window. He was not only duly reprimanded at school but quite possibly had the punishment duplicated at home when father learned he would be required to replace the shattered win-

dow. Money was very scarce in those days. Inside, checkers proved an interesting diversion, especially when the teacher became so involved that he forgot to watch the clock.

As soon as the school yard was dry, baseball or football became the order of the day. This was especially interesting when games were arranged between neighbouring schools.

However inconvenient the "Old Brick" was, from it many successful graduates became doctors, dentists,

elementary and secondary teachers, civil servants, private secretaries and

prominent farmers. A photo of the pupils may be seen in the School Museum but very few pupils, even in the primary row, are still with us.

Burgessville school

By W. Fowler,
North Norwich Public
School Staff

During the last 52 years, the residents of Burgessville have been accustomed to seeing the school on Highway 59 booming with activity. At the end of this school year Maple Heights will no longer be a school facility for the Oxford County board of education.

Maple Heights started as a Continuation School in 1927 and served the Burgessville residents until 1948. In 1948 the Burgessville students were able to attend the Norwich District High School and the Norwich Township school board took over the building. It then became known as S.S. No. 3A

and was used as a community meeting place.

With a new addition in the early 1950's, the school building was ready to take the overflow of students from the other township schools. Now Burgessville had the two school buildings, Maple Heights No. 3A and the present day Museum School, S.S. No. 3.

In 1961 the present North Norwich Public School was opened and Burgessville had three separate school buildings, all housing students.

In June of 1974 the old S.S. No. 3 closed its doors to regular classes, and reopened them as a museum school.

With the declining

enrolments throughout the township, Maple Heights closed its doors to the Burgessville senior students in the fall of 1978.

This past year Maple Heights has housed a Grade 3-4 class along with the Family Studies and Industrial Arts programs for North Norwich, Norwich, Otterville and East Oxford schools. In June of this year, Maple Heights will once again close its doors.

For hundreds of students Maple Heights has been and will be their school. Regardless of what now happens to the building, it's educational history is part of the past, a part which cannot be completely erased, because its heritage is in the lives of people.

Burgessville school may become museum

Burgessville's two-room North School will be converted into a school museum if Oxford County Board of Education has funds available in 1974.

The project was proposed earlier by the elementary principals' association. The association will be responsible for organization, development and use, while the board pays operating costs and maintenance.

Proposed operating budget is \$3,300.

Dr. H. W. Hedley, superintendent of elementary instruction, reported to the board that the principals propose to have one room used for displays of items related to early schools and education in Oxford. The other room would be furnished and used as a teaching area where classes could go to experience the school atmosphere of the past.

The principals' association would train teachers on how to use the school in their teaching program.

The school, built in 1905, is presently in use, housing a Burgessville area kin-

dergarten class and class from Norwich Public School.

Trustee Muriel Bishop felt the school project would be a good teaching aid.

A budget study meeting is planned by the board for December 3.