

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Country Schools

"One-room schools that I have known" was the title of a talk by Mrs. Annie McTarnahan Black before the Monterey County Historical Society at a recent meeting in Salinas.

"All one-room schools had a great deal in common 50 years ago," she said. "Many of you could no doubt fill in experiences you had while attending one of them. I am sure all those who went to school in the country attended a one-room school. The coming of the school bus ended their need."

Mrs. Black expressed the thought that there were several advantages of such a school. History, geography, grammar, poetry and some arithmetic (such as tables) were heard over and over again from the first grade on up, so the lower grades absorbed facts just as they caught measles or mumps.

Mrs. Black told of the day's program in the one-room schools she taught in the Salinas Valley:

"in the upper grades, for instance, such subjects as physics, algebra, civics, sanitation, physiology, some bookkeeping, grammar, geography, besides the three R's—imagine trying to sandwich in all these subject nearly every day, along with first grade reading, writing and some numbers.

"The second, third and fourth grades—reading, arithmetic, writing, spelling, some nature study, etc.—had to be guided and given some attention. Add to all the above music and art. There were still the fifth, sixth, and seventh grades to 'hear' everyday in many of these subjects."

Other daily tasks, Mrs. Black remembers, were "papers to correct, records to keep in percentages and monthly report cards to give out, not with F, S, or A, but in percentages! Add to this the janitor work, yard supervision, games to encourage, also inspection of the little houses in the back corners of the yard.

"There were fights to stop, blackboard work had to be put on the boards every night, ready for the morning. The flowers Mary and Susie brought must be arranged to give them a good feeling. Personal cleanliness must be stressed, the course of study demanded. We suggested brushing the teeth. a

The hum of bee hive was the usual status of a good country one-room school. Everyone had to concentrate on his lesson or paper, regardless of class recitation going on up front.

But there was always the smart Alec who wanted to be noticed. To get recognition a sly spit ball would fly sometimes just above the teacher's head. Finally Mrs. Black borrowed a remedy from Miss Amelia Battcher who taught Spring School about 50 years ago.

Miss Battcher had a lot of boys near 15 and 16 years old. One of the lads had time on his hands (so he thought) and amused himself and the rest of the school by using a pen point in a spit wad. Aimed just above her head, it stuck and quivered in the tongue-and groove wall above the blackboard. A few other boys followed suit.

At the close of school Miss Battcher told them to remain. Noticing that the waste basket was full, she described at length the process of paper-making.

Then she said that as long as they loved to make spitballs that they would make them until the whole basket of paper was chewed up and made into rows and rows of neat spit wads, which would be put in empty shoe boxes. The ringleader was to do the last one-third alone.

Miss Battcher calmly went on with her work, correcting papers, doing the register, putting work on the board for the next day. The boys ran out of spit and made frequent trips to the faucet for water.

Finally she excused the least offenders. The instigator of the manufacturing of spit wads begged on his knees also to be excused, saying that he had ten cows to milk. Miss Battcher lit the lantern as it grew dusk. Never again were spit wads made at Spring school. And, what's more, her method or super-saturation of whatever malpractice was entered into made her a disciplinarian of great repute.