

The Joy of School

From the Autobiography of Leona Austin

I started school when I was five and a half in 1902. Bethel Public School was a one room red brick schoolhouse with a porch. The porch held our coats and rubbers, and there was a shelf for our dinner pails. There was a separate shed for wood and there were two outhouse toilets, one for girls and one for boys. They were cold all the time and you always had a draught up your alley. Our lunches were simple but nutritious. A banana or an orange was a great treat. There were times when we had to thaw our sandwiches against the big box stove while our fronts were burning and our backs were shivering.

On the first day Emma Hess and Ina Fieldhouse called for me. Was I ever smart with my new dress, shoes, book bag and lunch in a honey pail. It was just great to get away from doing things around home, but my first day was not so good after all. At recess Miss Hayes, the teacher, came to check my work. I was supposed to have been making O's and X's but for some reason my slate was clean. She informed me that I could not go out until I had finished my work. My heart was broken and my pride badly bruised. I could think only of a special cookie that my mother had given me for recess. I did my work, but the bell rang and I had to wait until noon for the cookie. I think it was cruel to disappoint a little girl, but it taught me an important lesson: if you have a job to do, simply do it. A job worth doing is a job worth doing well, something I have remembered all my life.

School was a joy for me. I got along well except for history. Dates had a way of slipping through my brain. I was an expert in spelling and arithmetic and loved the oral matches we had on Fridays in these subjects, as well as geography. Our school games were simple: baseball, cricket and kick the stick. On rainy days we played scat and sly wink which is the test of our popularity with the boys, and we had a chance to wink at our favourite swains.

We had to walk a mile up and down hill to get to school. We did not mind in the warm weather but it was terrible in the winter. The roads were drifted full and we were never cleaned out. I remember having a ride only twice when the snow was too deep to walk. We traveled by horse and sleigh. Our only encouragement was each other. When I see students getting off school buses, I wonder if they appreciate the service or, knowing nothing different, simply take it for granted. I think they miss a great deal in the companionship of walking to school together. We had to dress warmly: long drawers, flannel over bloomers, woollen dresses, woollen over-socks, heavy coats, rubber boots, scarves, two pairs of mittens and happy expectations.

Children started school at five and a half or six. Classes were junior and senior first to junior and senior fourth. Students went to Wooler Public School to try their entrance exams. If they passed they were eligible for high school in Trenton. It would be years before Wooler Continuation School (high school) would be established. Although many passed, few went because most could not afford to pay room and board, and there did not seem to be a need for higher education in those days. The young men worked on the farms in the summer and attended school in the winter. A number of them went west to help with the harvest. Some liked the West, stayed there, bought land and planned their futures there.

There were times when we learned more than the three R's from the older pupils. We were told that we would go to Hell if we did anything bad, and Hell was a deep hole filled with fire. Needless to say I was scared to death, but my mother soon quelled my fears on the subject. She also straightened me out on the story that babies were found in the cabbage patch. I had thought the doctor brought them in his little black bag. I now know it was all part of growing up.

The teachers boarded in homes near the school. They visited the parents during the year and this made for better public relations. I was always fond of my teachers and tried to be a good girl. My first teacher was Miss Amelia Hayes. My other teachers were Robert Stalker who later became a minister; Edith McColl who later became District President of the Women's Missionary Society; and Hattie Stacey who later trained as a registered nurse.

That school closed in 1966.



Bethel School, the class of 1903. Leona Bell Austin is in the centre wearing a print dress. She was in grade two. The teacher is Robert Stalker.