

WOOLER PUBLIC SCHOOL

1951-1956

HAPPY MEMORIES

Contributed by: Dianne Brearley

Back to school. An exciting time to start the next stage of life with a clean slate. I went back to school for fifty years of my life, as a student and then as a teacher. I always looked forward with excitement, trying to imagine what the new school year would present.

There was one exception, however, in 1951 when I was registered at Wooler Public School. I was leaving a school a where each grade had its own classroom and teacher to a four room school with grades 1-4 in the Junior Room and 5 to 8 in the Senior Room. The two rooms upstairs were the Continuation School from grades 9 to 12.

That year there were too many students in the Junior Room and only three students in grade eight so the students in grade four were put in the Senior Room. Suddenly I was in a classroom where nearly all the students were older and bigger.

A friend took me to her family's general store to buy my school supplies. I got to pick out a three ring binder for my notes, but pencils and erasers, etc. came from my grandfather's office, and someone bought me a fountain pen and ink. Ballpoints were rare in those days. Workbooks called scribblers were provided and often came with pictures of wild birds on the covers. I will never forget the horned grebe. On the back were tables of weights and measures, times tables, etc.



Larry Stacey and Lois Pridham

The teachers were like ring leaders in a three ring circus, except there were four rings, four grades each with its own requirements. My first year there were five.

It was not just the teaching but the classroom management that kept all grades working and behaving even when the teacher was focused on another grade. Looking back I think they had a very hard job and did it admirably.

I had never been in a classroom with multiple grades and it took time to get into the routine. I really didn't like it at first and a couple of times faked a headache to stay home.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF WOOLER PUBLIC SCHOOL

In the senior room that year, spelling, literature and math were taught at each grade level, but I think the grade fours studied science, geography and history with the grade fives and sixes, but I am not positive. Health, art, creative writing, music and manual training were taught to the whole class. We had an hour and fifteen minutes for lunch, and when classes started at one fifteen, the teacher, Mr. Tompkins, read to us for fifteen minutes. We had a fifteen minute recess both morning and afternoon. It did not matter what the weather was, we nearly always went outside. There were swings and teeter totters and a softball diamond. I remember one bitterly cold day, the girls huddled in the lee of the building trying to keep warm. We sometimes played games like tag.

Every morning we had opening exercises. We swore allegiance to the flag and sang "God Save The King", took turns doing a reading from the Bible, said the Lord's Prayer and sang a hymn accompanied by one of five or six students who could play the piano. The one who was assigned got to choose the hymn. "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" was easy to play so we sang that a lot.

In grade four I was taking my turn at the piano. I practiced ahead of time because I did not want to put on a bad performance. I think history and social studies were my favourite subjects. I loved learning about explorers like Ponce de Leon looking for the fountain of youth, Jacques Cartier starting settlements in Canada, and Champlain with his travels in the Ottawa Valley and beyond. These of course, were the romantic versions not the sometimes horrible reality or relations between settlers and the native people. I loved drawing maps and learning about other cultures, even if the teacher mispronounced Maori as May-or-i.

Memory work was also part of our curriculum. We had to memorize two hundred lines I think. For the most part we could choose what we wanted, but everyone had to learn "In Flanders Fields". We had to recite it usually to the teacher but sometimes to the whole class. Marks were deducted for slips or prompts. At one time I could recite "The Highwayman". My mother sat with the text and guided me though it. I think I did it in instalments as it is over a hundred lines and the lines are long.

People do not realize what keeping few lines of poetry in your head can do. I can look at the night sky with a gibbous moon and a few clouds and recall, "The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon restless seas." What a perfect description. Over five years we must have learned a thousand lines. One year an enterprising student noted that A.A. Milne's "The King's Breakfast" had lines from one to three words for the most part and it was nearly a hundred lines long. What a quick way to half fill the requirement.



Dianne Anderson 1951

Much of our education was practical. When studying plants, we learned the differences between bulbs, corms and rhizomes by sorting and planting them in the flower beds at the front of the school. We tore petunias apart to learn the parts of a flower, and picked blue chicory flowers along the ditch to understand composite flowers. We learned to carefully observe details to make accurate drawings for our science notes. We went to the woods to talk about trees. We sprouted beans with blotting paper, and rooted cuttings. We did projects on birds and their habits and place in nature. One project was to cut a twig, bring it to class, put it in water and watch it develop. We then had to write the progress in the first person, as if we were the twig and make drawings of the progress. I took Japanese quince with produced pink coloured flowers before the leaves developed. I had never noticed that before. We learned about soil erosion and the use of cross cultivation to prevent it. We made a marimba by cutting lengths of wood and fastening them to pieces of rope. And yes, we managed to play a tune on it.

One highlight of the week was music. The school was so fortunate to have a music teacher named Mrs. Baker. She lived in Stirling where her husband was a minister. She was a voice teacher and did not just teach us songs, but taught us how to sing.

She took this group of kids of different ages and abilities and had us singing rounds like "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" and two part harmony in songs like "Santa Lucia". "Soft o'er the water/ Eve is descending..." I can still hear it. When it came to Christmas carols we had three part harmony with a couple of us singing descant.

To make her trip all the way to Wooler worthwhile, Donna McColl, Anne Redcliffe and I took private vocal lessons. Under her guidance we were suddenly winning medals in the music festivals, putting Wooler on the map. We got excused from class for our half hour lesson and this pleased me because it meant I did not have to play softball.

**School year 1951-52**

Back: Mamie Schultz, Patsy Hubble, Alice Fitzgerald, Don Smith, Bill Stacey, Doug Branscombe, Marguerite Bentley, Diane Brown, Muriel Pridham.

Middle: Ann Morrow, Anne Redcliffe, Dianne Anderson, Doris Bentley, Lois Pridham, David McColl, Guy Austin, Jamie McCauley. *Front:* Richard Stacey, Gary Redcliffe, Jackie Arthur, Larry Consul, John Morrow, Billy Connelly.

One of the things missing was a library. Our "library" consisted of two shelves at the back of the classroom, nothing new, most at least a generation old. Some of the space was taken by old grey atlases from my mother's day, I think. The maps had been traced so many times that some of the countries were just blobs.

Manual training was a combination of woodworking and crafts. We had most of the morning one Thursday a month. We learned how to use a coping saw, hammer nails, glue pieces of wood, use a brace and bit and screwdriver. We did leather work, tooling designs into key cases. We made plaster book ends, swirling paint through so that the finished product looked like marble. We made a book shelf. We spliced ropes and wove bracelets. I did a bracelet with a native/Hispanic design that I wore when I watched The Cisco Kid on tv.

This class also happened to be on the same day as "Dinner at the Church" put on by the United Church Women's group. For the student rate of fifteen cents, they served sandwiches and scalloped potatoes and pies, lots of pies. The adult price was twenty five cents, probably because they thought adults would eat more, but we kids stuffed ourselves, often having two or three pieces of pie. We had to clean up after our manual training class and we always did it quickly so we could run to the church to be first in line.



We did not have a phys-ed class. Sometimes Mr. Tompkins made us do little exercises such as touching our toes, sit-ups, pushups, etc. In good weather, he would organize a softball team and we would play at recess. When I was in grade four, he would choose two senior boys, my cousin in grade eight was one, and they would choose sides. Being a young girl I was usually one of the last to be picked. On one occasion there were two of us left. My cousin looked at me and said, "Okay, stupid" to me. The teacher said nothing. On the ball diamond I was hopeless and I did not care enough to try. As I got up to bat, a sympathetic voice shouted, "Pitch it easy to the little guys." I usually struck out, but once when I got a walk, I went to first base. I was not paying attention, and when the next batter bunted the ball, the runner on second didn't move but I ran to second base. That meant I was out. That was so embarrassing. We also played volleyball which I liked, and soccer, as I could run. We did track and field and held a field day in the spring: races, the long jump, the standing broad jump and the high jump, among others.

There was a custodian to clean the school and tend the furnace, but we were supposed to look after some things ourselves. We had monitors - one to clean the blackboards at the end of the day, one to take the chalk brushes outside and clean them by whacking them against the back of the school. Another took the waste basket around and we were expected to pick up anything around our desks and put waste paper and any other garbage in the basket.

Photo left: L-R: Ann Morrow, Norman Mallory, John Morrow, Lois Pridham

A SPECIAL TRIP

The school budget was small and field trips, the kind where you take a bus to something special, just did not happen. There were literal field trips where we took a sketch pad or notebook and went across the field to the drumlin behind the school to draw or make notes. The year I was in grade five, we had a paper drive to raise money. We went door to door collecting newspapers and magazines. Jackie Arthur's father brought his big farm truck and we loaded it and sent it off to the paper mill in Glen Miller, near Trenton. The money we raised was used to help pay for a field trip to the Royal Ontario Museum. We were allowed choices to explore what interested us and I chose ancient Egypt. There were all kinds of artefacts but the most fascinating were the actual mummies on display. The bandages had rotted away or been removed from one and you should see her face and hair. I stood and stared at it for some time.

Some of the kids said they were going to have nightmares after that, but it did not bother me. My second choice was rocks and minerals. I was always examining rocks around Kite Hill. I was thrilled by what I saw - geodes and giant quartz crystals. Wonderful amethysts. How did nature make those geometrical shapes? I loved every minute.

Photo right: The Wooler Public School fire escape as it stands today in 2022.

THE FIRE ESCAPE

One unusual feature of the building was the fire escape. It was a giant tube that stretched from the top floor to the ground with an access point on each floor. A couple of times a year we would have a fire drill. This was an amusement for the boys, sliding down and then coming back in and sliding down again. For the girls in skirts, it was a different matter. You had to make sure your skirt was tucked under so as little bare skin as possible touched the metal as you went down. Also you did not want the misfortune of having your skirt blow up exposing your underwear to sniggering boys at the bottom, just waiting for the chance. We hated it. Unless there was a fire in the hall, the front doors would have been as quick an exit.



HOLIDAY MEMORIES

We had parties at Halloween when we dressed up and played games, such as bobbing for apples. A tub was filled with water, apples floated on top and you tried to get your teeth into one to eat. If you missed you just tried another one. It didn't matter that someone else had probably already licked it. At Christmas we drew names and gave little gifts. It must have been hard for families with several kids in school. You always hoped that your best friend would get your name so you would get something nice. One year one of the worst brats in the class got my name. I was worried about what he might give me, like wrapping up a stick or something worse. In fact he gave me a very pretty gold brooch with coloured stones.

Valentine's Day was another celebration. I think I gave cards to everyone, although I probably excluded a couple of boys who picked on me. A couple of girls gave really nasty cards (I got one) and some kids sadly received only a few.

Every year before Christmas we made preparations for the Christmas concert at the town hall. One year we gathered pinecones, painted them and sprinkled them with salt to imitate snow. We made paper chain garlands and gathered evergreen branches and then we decorated the hall. The best part was getting an afternoon off to it. The Sunday School usually did a nativity scene, but we did skits, recitations, sang songs such as "Frosty the Snowman" and "Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer" as well as Christmas carols.

A DIFFERENT ERA

The school system was tough. Humiliation was a big part of every day life. We had spelling bees and if you misspelled the word you got bounced off the team. I was good at spelling but one word that knocked me off the team was "jardiniere". In grade five, I grumbled that I had never heard of the word.

Test results and scores were often posted for everyone to see, even our height and weight. When I was five feet tall, I weighed ninety eight pounds. I was not fat, but I was taller and weighed a bit more than other girls and someone drew an arrow pointing to my weight.

Eating candy, or anything else for that matter was not allowed, but cough drops were if you had a cold. Funny how so many kids had "colds" and worked their way through a package of liquorice flavoured Smith Brothers' Cough Drops.

Chewing gum was forbidden and if you got caught, you had to stay after school. You were given a chisel and had to get down on your knees and remove old gum stuck to the underside of the desks.

If you misbehaved, you got the strap. Mr. Tompkins took the boy, never a girl, to the supply room. Most boys came out smirking. Mrs. Cowling who took over when I was in Grade seven, decided to strap one boy in front of the class. He had probably had far worse at home from his father, and stood there holding out his hands and laughing.

HOLIDAY MEMORIES

We were generally pretty good as a class but there were days when we challenged Mrs. Cowling. One of those, we, the seniors, had a science assignment to work on. There were seven of us in grade eight and we were all goofing around, talking, throwing paper and erasers while Mrs. Cowling carried on with the other grades. I did my share that day, but I also got my work done. Mrs. Cowling got very angry, and as dismissal time came, she said we had to stay until she saw our work completed satisfactorily. Since I had finished mine, I guess she felt she could not make me stay under the circumstances and I left with the other grades. The rest probably took no more than five minutes to complete the work, but I was home by then. The next day, none of the grade eights would talk to me. This went on for a couple of days and I admit I was shattered and angry at the teacher. She knew I was as guilty as the rest for bad behaviour. A few days later, I expressed my anger by talking back to her. For that I had to write, "I am sorry for being impudent," a hundred times. I quickly did it but I wasn't sorry at all.



A DIFFERENT ERA

Once a month we had Junior Red Cross meetings. There was a president, secretary, treasurer and program committee. We had to follow proper procedure for a meeting with the secretary taking the minutes and then reading them at the next meeting to assure there were no "errors or omissions" before the president signed them. We wore Red Cross buttons but I have no idea why.

The part we liked was the program. Classmates, would sing, play the piano, read or recite a poem, etc. At one meeting two other girls and I had signed up to sing. We stood in front of the class and sang, "I stuck my head in a little skunk's hole/ Little skunk said, 'Why, bless my soul, /take it out, take it out!, take it out!' / Phew! I removed it." We got a great round of applause from the class, but Mr. Tompkins was furious. I do not remember our punishment.

I lived only a few doors down from the school but most kids had a long walk. There were no snow days. Even at temperatures below zero Fahrenheit, the kids walked. I never remember a parent driving them to school, but it might have happened on a bitter day. They rode their bikes when weather permitted and they brought their lunches. I never stayed at lunch time and did not know what they brought for lunch, but the teachers did. There was a hotplate in the hall and the junior room teachers, Mrs. Tooley in particular, brought cans of soup which she prepared and offered to any kid who wanted it. I am sure that helped at least a few kids get through the day.

Photo left: L-R: Doris Bentley,
Dianne Anderson, Ann Morrow,
Lois Pridham

FAREWELL WOOLER PUBLIC SCHOOL

At the end of grade eight I left my beloved grandparents and Wooler and moved to Belleville where I registered at Belleville Collegiate Institute and Vocational School. I went from a two room elementary school with maybe a total of forty five students to a high school of twelve hundred. I was a little uneasy that first day, but I never felt inferior because of my rural school education. I competed well with the top students in my class. In fact my grade ten biology teacher asked me how I knew so much about plants and animals. Wooler P.S. had prepared me well.

- Dianne Brearley



School year 1953-54

Back: Unknown, Ronnie Branscombe, Richard Stacey, Mr. Tompkins, Jackie Arthur, John Morrow, Gary Redcliffe.

Middle: Grace Pouli, Anne Redcliffe, Dianne Anderson, Doris Bentley, Judy Redcliffe, Marilyn Connelly, Lois Pridham, Ann Morrow, Gloria Twyman. *Front:* John Pouli, Billy Connelly, Maurice Coulthard, Harry Weese, Norman Mallory, Melvin Twyman.