One-Room School

By Carl L. Bedal

I'm reminded daily of my first school because a fading photo of it hangs on my study wall. It shows my dad, Earl Bedal, and his classmates of 1893 posing in front of a brick schoolhouse near the town of Brighton, on the north shore of Lake Ontario. I attended that same school 40 years later.

A gravel road ran between that school and our 100-acre farm. In contrast to my classmates, many of whom walked two miles or more to get to school, I had only to walk across a 10-acre field. (School buses had not been thought of yet.)

Being so close to school certainly offered an advantage, at least in winter. On the other hand, I knew that my father, who was a school trustee and who often toiled in our fields within sight of the schoolhouse, would have taken the teacher's side had trouble ever erupted in our classroom.

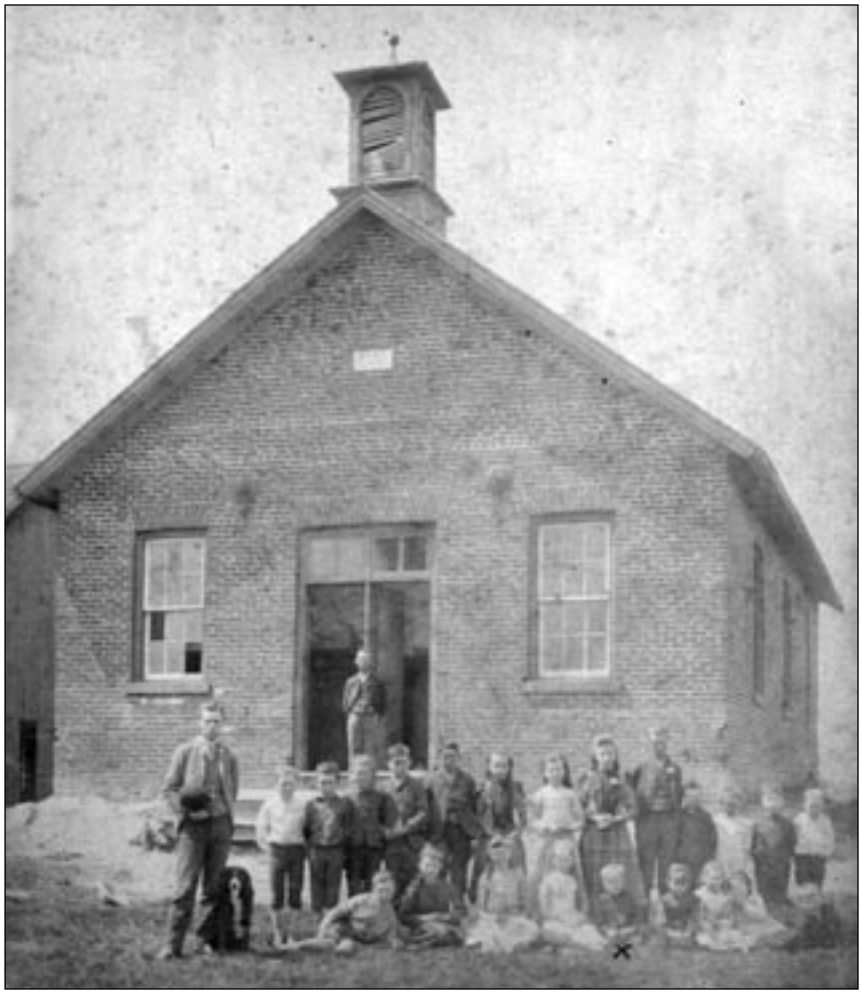
I don't recall being fearful of starting my education. However, my younger brother, after his first half-day at school, ran back home across the field to tell Mom and Dad that he'd had enough. But the next morning, he again left for school—and hurriedly, having received parental guidance typical of the 1930s.

Our one-room school actually consisted of three sections: anterooms inside the girls' and boys' entrances; the actual classroom; and a storage area for firewood at the rear of the building. The anterooms served as cloakrooms. Each held a chemical toilet, a convenience that had only recently replaced two unsightly outhouses.

Along each wall of the classroom were three tall windows, the only sources of light. Electricity was still not available in our rural area. The hardwood floors reeked of the oil used to maintain them, and stifling chalk dust constantly drifted through our classroom.

At the back of the room stood a large box stove flanked on three sides by protective metal sheeting. Its long line of black stovepipe raced across the ceiling to the front of the room where it disappeared into the chimney.

This stove was a welcome friend when we arrived each winter morning. Nearby, we'd see 2-foot lengths of split, dry hardwood, piled neatly. Sometimes Teacher would stoke the fire, but more often she'd ask a student to do it. She became our automatic thermostat, signaling for the addition of more wood by pretending to shiver—or was it for real?



S.S. No. 5, Brighton Twp., Ontario, Canada. Mr. White, the teacher, stands on the left. My father, Earl Bedal, is the fifth child sitting in the front row.

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At the front of the room stood Teacher's desk, one drawer of which contained the dreaded strap. Student desks, both single and double, huddled around the stove. Singles barely held some of the older students, while doubles were reserved for younger and presumably more docile students. Glass inkwells were imbedded in the tops of our wooden desks. The ink froze some winter nights with disastrous consequences, spilling over the desk's contents.

Our teachers, who frequently were from nearby towns, were a courageous and hardy lot. For $600 a year they toiled in their goldfish bowl, watched by everyone: students, parents (via word of mouth), and occasionally on site by a school board member or inspector. All our teachers were single women; married women were not allowed to teach during the Depression. (The regulation was one breadwinner per family, and it was based on the assumption of a male breadwinner.) Many of our teachers were young girls, some only in their late teens, and most were teaching in their first school. Although inexperienced, they labored valiantly to teach us and perform numerous other tasks. If the challenge proved too much, some lasted but a year, others even less.

Teachers became part-time cooks during winter months, graciously receiving soup bones from parents who had butchered recently. In midmorning the box stove served as a cookstove, with soup bubbling merrily until noon—one more distraction in an already noisy room. However, the soup's aroma provided a welcome change from the odor of sweaty bodies. And at noon, our dry peanut-butter sandwiches were helped along their way by the hot soup. Still, we rushed through lunch so that we could go out and play in most any kind of weather.

As students, we didn't realize how difficult teaching must have been, with 30 or more students ranging in age from 6–16 years. Teachers taught several subjects in each of eight grades. At any one time, most students were doing seatwork while our schoolmistress was teaching one class.

Lesson preparation, let alone the presentation, was a phenomenal task when the school's teaching aids consisted of little more than a small metal globe, some roller maps, a few tattered books, a slate blackboard, a long pointer and a piece of chalk. Teacher's challenge was to live and work from 9 'til 4 with what must have seemed like a horde of capricious students. And her teaching responsibilities didn't end with the school day. What student could forget the Christmas concert, when Teacher was director, stagehand, pianist and prompter? Only a parent could begin to imagine the difficulty of teaching in a one-room school.

Because our schoolhouse was located in a woodland nook in the midst of farms, nature surrounded us. It therefore became the focus of many activities. In warm weather we took art classes outdoors, where we sketched our beautiful surroundings.

Arbor Day officially recognized the part played by nature. On this day in May we cleaned up winter debris from the yard, planted trees and prepared our garden plots. Teacher became the boss of our work gang on this semi-holiday. Nature offered a focus for our writing, provided cold, crystal-clear drinking water from a nearby spring, and reminded us of the trials faced by early explorers.

School fairs were another big time. On these occasions, Teacher assumed the position of coordinator. Our weed collections, pressed leaves, and insects mounted on pins in cigar boxes all gave us insights into nature. We worked hard preparing for these fairs. The anticipation of success drove us, and we cherished the colored ribbons we won. The big day had almost a carnival atmosphere, complete with tents, a tiny Ferris wheel, candy floss and Cracker Jack (remember the surprises?).

Competition was the essence of these fairs. It carried over to the classroom, where spelling bees and arithmetic games pitted student against student. Teacher presided as game-show host over these Friday-afternoon activities.

We had no word processors to correct spelling, no hand-held calculators to check arithmetic. Looking back on my early education, it reminds me of a frontier time, when batteries weren't included and electricity wasn't needed. We depended on our skills and whatever was handy.

My father, who is a 6-year-old in his 1893 school photograph, revered schooling, in part because he'd sampled further education before settling down to farming. So it wasn't surprising that my brother and I were expected to learn. With the help of our teachers in that one-room schoolhouse, we learned well, perhaps too well.

Eventually, I took to schooling, not farming. But that's another story! ❖

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