

LOOKING BACKWARD: ONE ROOM SCHOOL

Old Timer

EDITOR'S NOTE: The *Argus*, Benton's weekly newspaper, ran a series of eight articles entitled, "Looking Backward: Recollections of Benton and Vicinity More than Sixty Years Ago," from mid-August to the first week in October, 1929. The author's name is unknown, except by a pseudonym, Old Timer. Undoubtedly, it was an elderly person who had lived in the Benton or the immediate area for a long time since the articles recalled events dating back to the late 1860s. They provide the reader with a series of historical snapshots, descriptive narratives, of what life was like in our area more than a hundred years ago. In the fifth essay published on September 12, 1929, the writer describes what it was like going to a one room school. Other essays from "Looking Backward" will appear from time to time in subsequent issues of the *Newsletter*.



When the teacher, to a hand help up, would ask what was wanted, and the answer was I want a drink, the pupil in the old red school house would go to the one water pail and quench his (or her) thirst from a common dipper that all the school used, returning to the pail the water not drank. No such thing as germs or microbes was even thought of in those days. And some times there were as many as 80 pupils in the school room and only one teacher to grades running from the A, B, C, class to the Fifth and Sixth Reader. The teacher in such a public school had his hands full.

I can only recall the name of two teachers when I attended: Silas and Alex McHenry. The former believed in the old adage that to spare the rod would spoil the child, and many an unruly lad would be taught this lesson. But there were some boys that when they knew a "lickin" was coming would deftly stick some green twigs down their pant legs or under their coats and the force of the "gad" [a rod] was very much minimized.

I do not recall that Alex McHenry raised the rod at all but perhaps he did. It may be of interest to my readers to know that May McHenry of Stillwater in her story, "Deepwater Politics," that ran in the *McClure* Magazine some years ago used Alex (her uncle) for one of the characters in the story.

The red schoolhouse with its elevated desks and benches, all on the boy's side being elaborately carved with jackknives by the occupants; the desk for the teacher on a raised platform so that he could command a view of every pupil; the map of the "Solar System at one View" that hung on the west wall; the big stove that heated the room in winter and the bench on which the water pail reposed – all come vividly to memory.

At recess many joined in games or played Anthony Oyer (or antiover) over the schoolhouse. There was another game played with a wooden ball which was called sock-about, hitting a player with the ball, and when the ball became well soaked up in wet weather you knew when the thrower hit you. Long Tom or town ball was another diversion as baseball was then unknown here. The covered bridge on a rainy or snowy day also made a good place to play.

One wonders sometimes at the amount of instruction an eager pupil did acquire under such crowded conditions; but the foundation for the future of many former Bentonians was laid in the this red school house and the academies at New Columbia, Orangeville and Millville afforded a further opportunity for learning that many availed themselves of.

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