NINETEEN

North School, District No. 10

Our townships were divided into school districts, and a one-room schoolhouse was provided for each district. The building in each case occupied a small plot of ground near the center of the district. Schoolhouses throughout the region were all nearly the same in size and arrangement, many of them substantially built of brick.

Ours was North School, District No. 10, named for a family living near it (almost all rural schools were given their names that way.) The entrance was at the center of the south end. At the other end, in front of the blackboard that extended the full width of the building, was the teacher’s desk. Each of the two sides was broken by a row of high windows covered by steel screens. Through the center, lengthwise of the room, was a wide aisle, unobstructed except by the big stove and a receptacle for fuel, both near the center of the room. The Board of Directors provided a generous supply of the best firewood for heating. We found it piled in neat, long ranks near the door when school began each fall. The upright pot-bellied stove could radiate a vast amount of heat; unfortunately, the heat was never properly distributed. Near the stove it was much too hot—a veritable
torrid zone—while in far corners it was chilly on cold days. Pupils turned this to good account to overcome the tedium of lonely study at the remote desks they normally occupied. Several times daily, nearly all but those regularly seated in the well-heated zone would request permission to move temporarily nearer the source of heat when the weather was cold. In consequence the entire student body tended to be clustered near the center of the room during a considerable part of the time in winter, a disposition highly favorable to much whispered conversation and group fun that otherwise would have been impossible. A few teachers allowed themselves to be taken in by this pretended suffering in the far corners, but the wise ones simply opened drafts a little and allowed the heat to beat back the malingerers.

For quite a while it was customary to have two terms of school each year. The short spring term, which began in May, was provided especially for beginners and other younger children. It was always in charge of a woman teacher. I remember vividly my first teacher, a comely young woman who impressed me at the time as a paragon of feminine beauty and charm. The smell of lilacs always carries me back to that time. I see again my youthful classmates and that bright young teacher, on her desk a tall vase filled with fragrant purple lilacs. I liked the flowers and their perfume so much (we had no lilacs at home) that one of the boys brought me a vigorous shoot from his mother's garden. In our lawn it thrived and grew into a large clump, its blossoms delighting us all each spring.

Soon after the county fair the fall-winter term began. Few but the younger children attended at the outset. Most of the larger boys and girls got started in October, after the
rush of fall farm work was over. In most rural schools this term was taught by a man, because it was generally felt that a woman might lack the physical strength necessary to curb misbehavior on the part of some of the larger boys. In a neighboring district a spunky young lady one year demanded, and was given a chance, to prove the fallacy of this notion. She came through with flying colors.

There were no grades as in modern schools. With one teacher and forty or more pupils ranging in age from six to sixteen, all in a single room, there could not well have been. The beginners started with a “primer,” sole text for their first year. In the next higher class, the second-year group, were those who had advanced to the First Reader; the third-year group was in the Second Reader class; next in order came the Third Reader class. Those in the Fourth Reader studied practically all subjects in the school's curriculum. In his sixth year the pupil started in the Fifth Reader class. Here he was in the top echelon—there were no higher grades or classes. If one remained in school after his sixth year, as some did, because there was little else to do in winter, he went again into the Fifth Reader class and covered essentially the same ground as before except that, for older pupils who wished it, advanced instruction in arithmetic and algebra was available.

There were no formal graduations or promotions, no officially recognized flunking. When a pupil completed a school year in one reader, he advanced himself to the next higher. Qualified or not, he was usually allowed to remain. Naturally, some were beyond their depth much of the time. A few—not all of them actually dull—could not be interested in learning. Some in this group had fallen behind and never caught up because, for one reason or another, they
had missed too many of the fundamentals. For most of the laggards schoolroom work was a bugbear.

In reading classes practically everyone read in a monotonous, unnatural singsong, especially when they were dealing with poetry. In expressing their own thoughts, all could speak forcefully and naturally; but in using voice modulations, accents, pauses, inflections, and emphases to give to the written word life and meaning and the feeling of the author, they failed dismally. This failure no doubt was due to precedent and bad example—younger pupils acquired the habit as a result of hearing older ones read, and it remained with them.

No one except a few of our teachers bothered to provide wholesome supplementary reading. It is appalling when one considers the aggregate amount of time that was wasted in country schools of that day, time that so easily could have been used to introduce impressionable young people more effectively to the rich, boundless fields of learning.

From time to time pupils brought in books of one kind or another. Many a blood-and-thunder novel did some of us borrow from classmates and read surreptitiously. If this had been generally known, it might have meant a very black mark against us from some in the community. To those good souls all novels were trash. (They were 100 per cent right, so far as some of that “literature” was concerned.) A few held that all imaginative works of literature, though they came from the pens of writers recognized by competent authorities as masters, were deadly pitfalls designed by the Prince of Darkness to entrap the unwary. Luckily, our clandestine haphazard reading included some good material, such as Grimm’s Fairy Tales, the tales of
Hans Christian Andersen, a history of the Civil War, and a biography of P. T. Barnum.

I was kept from school until my brother attained school age. I must then have been a dreadful bore to the teacher, for I was several jumps ahead of other beginners: I knew the alphabet, could spell some simple words, and could read a little, having been taught by my father, who used newspapers as texts. We lived a mile and a half from school. Perhaps because he anticipated some thorny experiences for us in those long trips to and fro, Dad negotiated with a neighbor boy, a few years older, promising a reward for him if he would keep an eye on us and steer us away from trouble. We knew nothing of this until long afterward, but the arrangement unquestionably saved us from some hard knocks and brought us safely through situations that otherwise might have been rather unpleasant. In spite of this unsuspected guardianship, we fell into an adventure the very first day that, though we were wholly innocent of any intent to do wrong, brought us no little trouble. We were wearing bright new caps fresh from the store and new pants and waists that Mother had made expressly for our school wear. Crossing a bridge over a little creek on our way home, we went down with two other boys to look into the water. Immediately, we saw a school of small minnows. Into the water we went, wading in pursuit of them. In the excitement of the moment, finding that we could not catch them in our hands, we pressed our caps into service as seines. We succeeded in dipping up half a dozen of the little fish, which we transferred to our dinner pail with half a gallon of water. Then, proud and elated, we trudged homeward, bearing the living trophies of our prowess. We must have made an exceedingly disreputable
appearance, our new caps wet and twisted out of shape, our pants and waists dirty and bedraggled, and our hands, faces, and hair smeared with mud. It was just too much for Mother, who had started us off so proudly that morning. She promptly administered to each of us a sound smacking, right on the seats of our wet pants. That paddling was meant to be impressive. It was—we remembered it a long time.

At school that first morning, we novices saw one of the boys sitting on a desk, his feet resting on the attached seat. When the bell rang, we naïvely seated ourselves side by side in the same manner on a desk, feet on the seat, our books, pencils, etc., in our hands, our dinner pail between us. This evoked a great deal of snickering and tittering until a more sophisticated lad nudged us and indicated that we were supposed to sit in the seat, not on the desk. That was Lesson No. 1.

At first we had an old schoolhouse with weatherbeaten walls, dingy windows and door, and rickety desks deeply carved and defaced by the jackknives of preceding groups of boys. When time came for school to “take up,” the teacher, standing at the door, rang a brass hand bell.

In the summer after our second year, a new building was erected on the site of the old, essentially the same as the latter except that it had, instead of a black-painted area of wall plaster, a large slate blackboard. We noted also an elaborate chart designed to make grammar plain and simple. There was a big new bell in a small belfry above the entrance, with a long rope extending down through the ceiling. This bell thereafter called us from play to books. Most of the seats, bright and new, were made to accommodate two pupils each. It was the custom for each
pupil to choose a special friend as his seatmate. Together, the first day, they decided which seat they would occupy. These arrangements were seldom lasting. Generally the teacher had to separate several pairs within a few days because of excessive whispering and cutting up. Not infrequently, a quarrel would break up a twosome. The sexes were separated as in church, girls being seated at the right, boys, at the left.

About half of our teachers came from nearby districts, half from outside areas (one, from a county many miles away). One or two had some college training; some had not progressed beyond high school. Several had no formal education beyond that acquired in district schools such as ours. The latter, incidentally, were among the best of the lot.

Teachers were employed by the Township Board of Directors, who investigated each applicant’s personal character, scrutinized his letters of recommendation, and made sure that he had a Teacher’s Certificate. Often, the applicant was known personally to some or all members of the board. All prospective teachers were required by law to pass an examination given by the County Board of School Examiners, covering all subjects taught in rural schools, plus pedagogy.

For young men, teaching was often a steppingstone toward training for a career in business or a profession. For a salary that averaged about forty dollars per month, a teacher was expected not only to provide instruction but to assume responsibility for the children at play and in their going to and returning from school. From first to last, he served, willy-nilly, as a sort of exemplar and mentor in the community, all his habits, words, and deeds constantly
subject to the closest scrutiny and appraisal. On top of all that, he had to serve as janitor of the building.

One of our women teachers unfortunately got off on the wrong foot at the very first. She tried earnestly, but she went about everything so tactlessly that within a week she had antagonized about half of the pupils in her charge. Thereafter, they took special delight in making trouble for her. One of them came one day with this doggerel, which he zestfully recited to everyone who would listen:

\[
O \text{ Lord of love,} \\
\text{Come down from above} \\
\text{And bless us poor scholars;} \\
\text{We hired a fool} \\
\text{To teach our school,} \\
\text{And paid her forty dollars.}
\]

Probably the most difficult problem of the teacher who had the winter term in a rural school was that of discipline—especially holding in line the big boys who attended. This problem appears to have been created and kept alive largely by tradition. The boys heard from grown men—in a few instances their own fathers—how, in their day, they had defied their teachers, cowed them into yielding important disciplinary points, and, in some cases, "licked" them in physical encounters. These men had little respect for education; they held that learning beyond the ability to read passably well, to write a legible hand, and to do the elementary "ciphering" incident to farming was superfluous and silly.

It was common practice for a teacher to bring in, about the first day, a long, lithe switch cut from a tree. This was
kept within convenient reach, where all could see it. Some modern pedagogues quite likely would take a very dim view of that practice. Nevertheless, under circumstances that then prevailed, that whip had a pronounced salutary effect.

If a teacher showed a disposition to be perfectly fair, coupled with an unmistakable determination to brook no infraction of any rule of good conduct, he soon had the burly boys eating out of his hand. At times they even vied with one another for the privilege of carrying wood and helping with janitorial duties. On the other hand, if a teacher failed to show firmness at the outset, if he yielded or compromised, the initiative was likely to pass quickly from him. Regaining the mastery then was not easy, but some did it by soundly whaling a young bully or two. There were no namby-pamby notions about corporal punishment in the district. If a teacher whipped a boy for misconduct, it was generally felt that he was merely doing his duty. Legal actions against teachers in such cases were unknown.

When we boys started to school, our parents made it quite clear that they expected us to obey the teacher under all circumstances. "If you misbehave and get a whipping in school," said Dad, "you will get another at home." This had weight with us; we knew that they were not just idle words. We carefully observed the letter and the spirit of school rules and during our first years got along wonderfully well.

Then, one day, in spite of good intentions, we found ourselves in real trouble. Some of the larger boys, eager for excitement and diversion, contrived to get a fight started among younger boys at the noon recess. Soon four boys, including my brother and myself, were involved in
the melee. When we assembled for the afternoon session
the teacher, noting black eyes, scratched faces, and bloody
noses, tanned all four of us. We bribed our sister to keep
the matter secret at home, promising to pay well for her
silence as soon as we got the money. She kept her part of
the agreement for two or three years. Then, angered by
something that we had done and remembering that we had
never made good our promise, she told Dad the whole
story. Luckily, something like the statute of limitations
worked in our favor—we never got that home licking.

Outstanding among our teachers was a young man with
wavy red hair, a face peppered with freckles, and an ex­
ceptionally agreeable personality. He quickly won the
friendship and esteem of all in the community, including
his pupils. He was a master teacher, with a thorough
knowledge of all subjects taught. Right in the beginning
all in school, including potential troublemakers, knew with­
out a word being spoken on the subject that he would stand
for no tomfoolery. (It was he, by the way, who gave my
brother and me the only larruping we ever got in school.
This did not lessen in any degree our liking for him, al­
though I have always felt that the instigators of the fracas
that noon deserved some attention.) From teaching he
went into the business world, eventually becoming owner
of a successful business enterprise.

Another well-liked young man was an exceptionally
competent instructor who joined heartily in nearly all of
our play. This alone would have been enough to win for
him warm friends and supporters. He was firm enough to
maintain good order and tactful enough to promote en­
thusiastic co-operation, even in the school’s singing. For
years after he gave up teaching, he practiced law success­
fully. He bequeathed to the town a public historical museum, providing in his will for its maintenance.

As happens today, many little boys attending spring sessions fell in love with their pretty girl teachers, and, not infrequently, some older girls became enamored of the male teachers. The men were not always aware of this; but when they knew, they managed so tactfully that there was no embarrassment, and no hearts were broken. In a few instances puppy love between boys and girls blossomed and grew, finally, when they had grown up, culminating in marriage. More often, however, the eyes of the boys would be taken by girls in neighboring districts, another county, or even in some far removed town. Local girls were sought out by boys from other schools, near and far. This seems to bear out the adage about the grass appearing greener on the other side of the fence.

We had a well and an iron pump a few steps from the entrance door, with a rusty tin cup on a wire hook. A few pupils had private drinking cups, but the majority saw nothing at all wrong about using the common cup. If one were thirsty (or tired of schoolroom routine), he asked permission to get a drink. Carrying his slate-cleaning sponge, presumably dry, he went out, and we would hear the pump creak long enough to bring up a barrel or two of water. Several minutes later (kids usually stayed out as long as they felt would be safe), his thirst assuaged, he came noisily in and resumed his studies. Some of the more expert time-killers would save the sponge for another trip to the well a little later.

The greatest possible amount of play was crowded into our three daily recess periods. Some swallowed their midday meals almost whole to avoid any unnecessary waste of
the noon hour. We never tired of playing ball, using at times homemade yarn balls with rubber cores. The yarn generally came from raveled stockings. One could buy molded solid rubber balls, but they were of inferior quality—they split too easily. Now and then, someone would get a hunk of solid rubber, known as “car rubber,” probably because its original use had been as a cushion in a railway car. He would whittle from it a rough sphere about two inches in diameter. Such balls were very tough and so resilient that a good batter could hit them several hundred feet. We liked them especially in what we called “Rounder,” a game somewhat similar to the present baseball. Though quite hard, we caught them, even on the fly, sometimes wearing only thin canvas gloves, sometimes barehanded. We knew nothing of padded gloves. Bats were all home-made, whittled out of oak or ash. Girls frequently joined in ball games, some of them being excellent players.

Many times we “rasseled” hats. The players, standing in a circle, threw their hats into the ring. One, blindfolded, shuffled the headgear, then came up with a hat in each hand. The owners of the hats wrestled until one was thrown. The shuffling was not always strictly honest; the shuffler might peek enough to get the hats of two boys well matched in size and wrestling ability in order to be sure of an exciting, worthwhile contest. From this game, in all probability, came the expression so much used in political circles—the man who becomes a candidate for an office is said to “throw his hat into the ring.”

“Shinny,” a rough winter game similar to hockey, was great fun. Sometimes our puck was a wooden ball, sometimes a rock or a battered tin can. Our clubs were cut from tree branches with a natural bend or from the bent bows of
old buggy tops. When the pond at the tile mill froze over, we transferred this game to the ice, playing on skates. At other times, we played on the frozen ground.

With a single exception, all of our games were intramural. That exception was a football game played in the snow one December day against a neighboring school’s team. The only remembered feature of this contest is that it provided the setting for my first meeting with Cletus Wright, who, through all the succeeding years, has been among my cherished friends. A keen lover of sports and possessor of an extraordinary sense of the dramatic, he came that day from a district several miles away to see the game. He arrived with a wild-West flourish, his snow-white horse running at top speed, drawing a fantastic homemade sleigh that slithered and careened crazily in a white cloud of snow. A few years later he and I became classmates and roommates in college, living, working, and playing together through several years.

None of us at North school had ever seen skating shoes. A few had heel-plate skates with knobs that fitted into steel heel-plate sockets set into boots or shoes. They were fastened with straps. Most of us preferred the “Winslow” or “Barney and Berry” adjustable clamp-type skates that, at the push of a lever, gripped heels and soles and required no straps. The mill pond and Dog Creek, which flowed by it, afforded excellent ice for skating; many a noon hour did we spend on one or the other. The creek ran through our farm and, about a half mile from the house, crossed our regular route to school. Daily, when the ice was good and free from snow, we skated to and from school.

Often in early spring we played a rural version of the cops-and-robbers game. First we built a “jail” in the corner
of a rail fence. Then we elected a sheriff. All players except the sheriff assumed the roles of horse thieves. It never occurred to any of us that it was a bit out of the ordinary for thieves of such a despised order to make provision, as we did, for having themselves brought to book. The officer promptly set to work to round up the lawbreakers. This was a tough assignment because hideouts were plentiful, and most of the pursued were as fleet of foot as the pursuer. If one could outsmart the law or wriggle free after being apprehended, he might remain at liberty quite a while. But once the sheriff led a desperado to the jail, thrust him through the door and called out "click-clock," the rules decreed that he had to remain a prisoner. The poet sang, "Stone walls do not a prison make," but for us, sticks laid on the ground made prison walls, bars, and door. Rules of the game made escape by breach of the walls impossible. However, if the sheriff forgot to kick into place the stick forming the door and then lock it with a resounding "click-clock," he would invariably find all the birds flown when he returned to the clink. This was an exciting game, but it required a great deal of leg work on the part of the sheriff. Furthermore, if it was not a moderately warm day, thieves in hiding or in durance vile might get pretty chilly.

One winter someone in school read a magazine advertisement offering a marvelous opportunity for youthful salesmen to earn beautiful, useful premiums. He sent in his name and by return mail received a list of enticing premiums, order blanks, and samples of extraordinarily ornate cards. Not calling cards, mind you, not business cards, but "hidden name" cards! The manufacturer called them that, and we assumed that he knew what he was talking about.

The cards, extremely gaudy, came in an assortment of sizes and shapes, with deeply scalloped, tinted edges. For
the printing of his name, one could choose from several styles of highly ornamental 18-point blackface type or from a number of ornate script styles, all embellished by an amazing lot of flourishes and curlicues. A multicolored, hinged paper cutout, with garishly lithographed and varnished floral or bird-and-angel decorations in considerable variety, covered the name on each card. The cards caught on quickly. After the first two or three had placed orders, the salesman had only to write orders in rapid succession and collect the money. Collection in some instances required a great deal of time and patience, but eventually everyone paid up. In due time the cards were delivered as ordered, together with the salesman’s reward for faithful, earnest effort—a small trumpet made of bright tin with two or three erratic keys. The cards were distributed to customers and then a general exchange took place, each trading one of his own for the name card of a friend.

From time to time after that, others of our classmates in the role of salesmen called on us, offering such necessities as chewing gum, small squares of scented chalk posing as sachet perfume, and small, embossed, silver-washed souvenir spoons. After disposing of their quotas of merchandise, all of these salesmen received premium awards such as Ingersoll watches, trick puzzles, pasteboard cameras, and, in one case, an asbestos tobacco pipe formed and colored to look like a cigar.

Most of the boys and a few of the girls acquired nicknames. In a few cases the origin of these names was obvious, but many seemed to have been applied without any reason whatever. We had Peeky, Buck, Stump, Dentist, Flippy, Cock Robin, Seeky, Welshy, Dog, Egg, Shep, Tug, Doc, Grinny, Felix, Bill Nye, Button, Fox, Queasy, Brick, Cricket, Scaley, Dime, and Cookus.
Poor Cookus had a hard time of it in school. He couldn’t get interested in books, and never saw much sense in any part of school except playground activity. One day, to keep himself occupied, he tore the red felt binding from his slate. (Everybody had a slate, supposed to be cleaned by wiping with a damp sponge, but in too many cases “cleaned” by spitting on it and wiping it with a rag.) Finding that the felt when wet would give up its dye, Cookus swabbed his face with it, and his visage became as red as that of any Indian that ever prowled the forest. Taking note of the lad’s odd look, the teacher brought him forward and made him stand, grinning shame-facedly, where all could see him. For several minutes there were long, loud guffaws at his expense.

Arrangements were being made one time for a little program of recitations, songs, and so forth, to be put on in lieu of regular classes the following Friday afternoon. All but Cookus entered wholeheartedly into the plan. He held back stubbornly, offering every imaginable sort of excuse for non-participation until at last he saw that there simply was no getting out of the thing. When his name was called on the appointed day, he stepped to the platform, made his best bow, and treated us to the following:

*Seen a rat run up the wall;*
*Seen its tail and that was all.*

Although devoid of interest in books and school tasks, he could recognize and name at sight all of the birds indigenous to the area and could imitate their calls with surprising fidelity. He was extraordinarily fleet of foot and was the best skater among us. He could throw a
stone with the precision of a sharpshooting rifleman, and he threw with incredible force. Surely he would have become a notable baseball figure if he had been given a chance.

Cookus and I once figured in a bit of schoolday drama that I have never ceased to regret. He was about twelve, I about ten at the time. We were walking in a little group headed homeward when Cookus announced his determination to kiss one of the girls. No sooner were the words out of his mouth than she was off, running like a fawn, he, close at her heels. Rooting enthusiastically for Cookus, I began swinging my dinner pail wildly round and round. About the fourth round, a sharp edge of the pail smashed into the face of “Egg” Evans who, altogether unnoticed, was running closely behind me. A long, deep gash was cut in his cheek that left a permanent ugly scar.

After they left school, two of the boys among my classmates signed up with Uncle Sam for a hitch in the navy. One was Cookus. He had been aboard ship as a stoker only a few months when his trunk was shipped home. Laconic official word came to the family that he had been lost at sea; no details whatever were given. As the country was at peace, the fate that actually befell him is a mystery to this day.

With the exception of two or three who lived close to the school, all of us, including teachers, carried our lunches every day. The majority lived a mile to a mile and a half distant, and all walked, regardless of mud, ice, and drifted snow, trudging over the roads, some macadamized, some plain dirt, or hiking across fields and climbing fences. When it rained, some fathers drove their children to school in curtained carriages. Once in a while, to the envy of
most others, a boy got to ride with his dad on a horse, both wrapped in rubber coats.

Daily, each of us carried to school, and ate, five or six apples, the best to be found in the home store. Two or three times each week, someone brought in a big lot of sorghum taffy or a full peck of popped or parched corn. The aroma of the corn pervaded the room immediately, whetting appetites and centering attention upon the girl or boy who had brought it. Providing these treats had become an established custom, and each of us who cared for the full approbation of schoolmates felt an obligation to contribute from time to time.

Occasionally, instead of a “literary” program for Friday afternoon relaxation, we voted for a “spelldown” or a “ciphering match.” For either contest two leaders, closely matched as to ability, were named. The teacher, with a finger between the pages of a closed book, would ask each leader to guess the page so marked. The one who guessed nearest was entitled to first choice in naming members of his team. Soon, all in the school were aligned on one side or the other.

In a spelling match members of one team stood along one wall, their opponents along the opposite wall. The teacher pronounced words from a spelling book, starting with comparatively easy ones and gradually working into more difficult lists. The first word went to the first in line on one side, the next, to the second, and so on down the line until someone missed. He was obliged to take his seat when someone on the opposing team, often a specially selected “trapper,” spelled the word correctly. The spelling continued, along one line and then the other, each contestant taking his seat after being spelled down. The one who remained standing when all the others were down
won the contest for his side and made himself for the
time being the champion speller. Two girls, cousins, were
so good at spelling that nearly always one or the other
was the winner at a spelldown. They took the matter so
seriously that, almost without fail, the defeated one went
to her seat in tears. Spelling contests, coupled with the
strong emphasis put on spelling as a subject of study,
made a few country pupils excellent spellers.

Most pupils seemed to enjoy ciphering matches more
than spelldowns, probably because the former tended to
be a little more exciting and because, as usually happened,
nearly all of the real work would be done by half a dozen
of the school's brightest students. The best were always
first choices of leaders in either of these contests. One
could have gauged quite accurately the relative abilities
by noting the order in which pupils were selected.

After two ciphering teams had been formed, each leader
named someone from his side to compete in the initial
contest, beginning with the least competent. The one
who came up first with the correct answer to a problem
was the winner. At times a majority of wins in several
trials was required. Each loser returned to his seat, and
the leader named someone to replace him. This continued,
each leader going up the scale of age and ability in naming
contestants and the teacher propounding more and more
difficult problems, until all on one side or the other had
been "ciphered down." The last at the board, undefeated,
was the champion, and his side was winner of the match.
Quite often, the champion was one of the leaders. Several
in the school could perform intricate arithmetical opera-
tions with amazing speed and accuracy.

In regular spelling classes all stood in line, the right
hand end of the line being the "head," the other end, the
"foot." The first word went to the pupil at the head. If he spelled it correctly the next word went to the second pupil and so on down the line, then back to the head. If one missed a word, the teacher called "next" and the next pupil gave it a try. If he got it right, he exchanged places with the one who had first missed it.

Thus it was possible, if one had luck and spelling ability, to move all the way from the foot to the head of the class, either by degrees or by a single correctly spelled word. A "headmark" went to the pupil who stood at the head at the end of a recitation; he had to start at the foot the following day, all others retaining their relative positions. A daily record of headmarks in each class was kept. A number of teachers, aiming at stimulating all to their best efforts, credited the marks opposite pupils’ names on a chart kept in daily view.

Bowing to precedent of long standing, our teachers always provided, at their own expense, a treat for all in school at Christmas. They kept all preparations as secret as possible and often went to great lengths, short of outright lying, to make everyone believe, even up to the last minute, that nothing at all would be forthcoming. Regardless of what might be going on, just at the proper moment about midaftemoon of the last school day before Christmas, smiling, white-whiskered Santa Claus, decked out in a red cap and a long, fur-trimmed red coat (which partially hid his blue overalls and high rubber boots), burst open the door and strode noisily into the room. He carried several big bags, and sleighbells jingled loudly at every step. Generally, he refrained from talking, knowing that his voice would identify him. The presents, usually a bag of candy, a bag of nuts, an orange, and a ruler or pencil, were distributed amid great, happy excitement.
One time, Santa, distributing gifts, came upon a little boy of preschool age who had "happened" to come as a visitor. As kindly St. Nick passed out gifts to him, the lad piped out: "We got three more kids to home." With a great belly laugh, Santa produced gifts for each of the absentees (teachers always provided enough to make sure that no one would be missed).

Santa came one Christmas and brought his "son," a man who lived near the school. This four-footer, known everywhere as "Shorty," was a born clown. His antics kept everyone laughing while he and his "dad" distributed gifts. Smoking a corncob pipe, he walked to the platform just as they were ready to leave and announced that he would "speak a piece." Then, with a sweeping bow, he gave us this:

_When I was a little boy, my mother kept me in._
_NOW, I'M A BIG BOY, FIT TO SERVE THE KING._
_I CAN HAVE A MUSKET; I CAN SMOKE A PIPE [FLOURISHING PIPE]; I CAN KISS THE PRETTY GIRLS AT TEN O'CLOCK AT NIGHT._

Shorty came on another occasion, a Friday afternoon that had been set aside for entertainment. He brought with him a parlor organ and two neighborhood fiddlers. Without ado, they started the show, the fiddlers scraping away at their instruments, both tapping their feet in time, and Shorty "chording" at the organ. Their music, all lively old-time tunes played one after another in rapid succession, was accompanied by superb, masterful clowning, making the performance, from beginning to end, a delight.

Occasionally, a parent or other resident of the community would come for an afternoon visit. The teacher always tried to conduct classes as usual and to keep things
going naturally and normally. Invariably, these efforts were nullified in large measure by his charges. The visitor’s arrival was taken by some as a signal to begin showing off. They would self-consciously simulate intense interest in their studies, breaking this commendable application by frequent side glances at the visitor. Later, they were likely to engage in long whispered conversations, feeling sure that the teacher would hesitate to reprove them. The cutups would seize opportunities to hurl wads of paper or pieces of chalk. Requests to leave the room or to speak to someone were sure to be twice as numerous as when no outsider was present. Reciting in classes, many would display unwonted ignorance and stupidity.

Now and then, a district school somewhere about us would name a night for a spelling bee and invite all who wished to come. Often the house would be jammed to capacity. The contests were exciting because most of the real spellers came from near and far, and they came for blood. Equally popular were “literaries,” programs commonly made up of recitations, some group singing, maybe an oration, and always a debate, on a subject announced weeks in advance. The debates were informative and entertaining because the participants were well-informed young men—most of them teachers—who had forensic ability and knew how to argue logically and convincingly.

The crowning event of the school year came toward mid-April, at the end of the winter term. This was the “Last Day,” a traditional gala in rural schools of the area. On this day, long anticipated, the girls and boys wore their very best. All were on their best behavior, trying to make themselves and the school appear in the most favorable light. The teacher, fully aware that embarrassing situations could arise, was hoping for the best and praying
that somehow he would get through the difficulties of
the day successfully. A little before noon, fathers and
mothers began driving into the yard, bringing big, heavy
baskets of food. They found seats, and with lively interest
watched their young hopefuls at their studies and recita-
tions, speaking meanwhile to each other and to neighbors,
sometimes in whispers, sometimes in tones that carried
to all parts of the room. Visitors from other districts also
were showing up, young men and women much more
interested in the social aspects of the occasion and the
prospective bounteous dinner than in any evidence of
scholastic progress that might appear. Usually, a minister
was on hand, smiling benignly and shaking hands amiably
with everybody he could reach.

When classes were dismissed at noon all of the pupils
and all of the men filed from the room, leaving the good
matrons of the district in undisputed charge. The smaller
children, trying (though often quite vainly) to keep their
clothes clean, ran about in little groups, talking, giggling,
and playing simple games. The larger boys of the school
and the young men visitors whiled away the waiting
period by engaging in such athletic contests as the running
broad jump, the standing broad jump, and the hop, skip,
and jump. Their best coats draped over the board fence,
they strained nerve and sinew in these trials, getting shoes
and pants smeared with mud as, at the end of each power-
ful spring, they landed in the soft, well-churned soil.

At length the bell sounded the dinner call and all
crowded into the building. There, spread out over cloth-
draped boards laid across desks, was a magnificent display
of food. Included were roasted and fried chicken, savory
beef cooked in a variety of styles, stuffed and pickled
eggs, baked hams, baked beans in many shades and con-
sistencies, pickles and relishes of every variety, more than a score of cakes and as many pies in mouth-watering array, quantities of cookies, tarts, rolls, jams, jellies, candy, nuts, fruit—just about every item of food that one could name. The teacher, as master of ceremonies, tapped a plate with a spoon until the chatter and hum of voices subsided, then asked the minister to say grace. Everybody fell to after that. The smaller children, big napkins over their fronts, were helped by their mothers. All others served themselves cafeteria fashion, moving from table to table, all talking merrily as they ate. One heard lively banter, jokes, and bon mots galore—all funny, but nothing meant to be malicious or disparaging. There is a question whether one could get together any group of everyday people whose quick, clever witticisms, spontaneous gags, laughter-provoking retorts, and pranks would surpass those of an assemblage of farm folks who know one another well.

Within a short time, groups of food-stuffed, giggling children, holding in their hands pieces of cake and other tidbits, began pushing their way outside, eager to resume their play. Some fast eaters among the men, having gulped their fill, also worked their way out, to get away from the congestion and to enjoy their after-dinner smoke or chew of tobacco. Those remaining inside, taking advantage of the less restricted elbow room, now moved about more, sampling all tempting viands in sight. At last, everyone having crowded digestive capacities nearly to the limit, the tables (still loaded with more than enough food to satisfy another company of like size) were left to the attention of the good ladies. Each collected her dishes, table linens, and other belongings, and packed them, with remnants of the repast, into her basket.

The afternoon was given over to a program in which
each pupil participated in some way, to the end that something of the school’s achievements might be demonstrated and that each parent might find in the performance some grain of nourishment for his or her personal pride. After this, visitors and parents were invited to make “remarks.” The minister would speak briefly, making his words as humorous and as complimentary as he could. A few of the parents might make short speeches, lauding the teacher’s efforts and seeking to encourage the pupils to continue in the pursuit of knowledge. The teacher might say a few words, telling of the satisfaction he had derived from association with the school and the community. Then, seated at his desk, with a quantity of small coins before him—cash from his own pocket—he began calling the roll, requesting that the children come forward as their names were called. As each in turn stood before his desk, he gave him the money due for the headmarks he had earned, and with a friendly smile, bade him good-by.

District No. 10 schoolhouse was abandoned and torn down years ago. Looking back and considering the many far-reaching changes wrought by time, the poem, “Forty Years Ago,” in our McGuffey Fifth Reader, comes to mind. The first stanza ran:

I’ve wandered to the village, Tom,
I’ve sat beneath the tree,
Upon the school house playground,
That sheltered you and me;
But none were left to greet me, Tom,
And few were left to know,
Who played with me upon the green,
Just forty years ago.
How many times, as boys and girls in school, we read that poem! But, being young, we naturally read it always objectively and impersonally. The words to us were those of some queer fellow, extremely old and doddering. For us, such a retrospective look, after such an incredibly long span of time as forty years, seemed almost impossibly remote. Now, we can discern real meaning in the poet’s nostalgic words and appreciate how true and faithful was the picture he painted.

In 1892 the Ohio legislature enacted a measure known as the Boxwell Law, which provided that pupils from rural schools, successful in examinations prepared under provisions of the law, could be enrolled in urban high schools, their tuition paid from educational funds of home districts. The number taking advantage of the opportunity thus afforded was relatively small. Over a long period prior to that time, a few young men and women educated in one-room district schools of the region became teachers in such schools, some with supplementary education in one of the several normal schools, some without.

A handful of young men, some of whom had been both pupils and teachers in district schools, moved up through educational facilities available to them to enter business or a profession. Few achieved special fame, although one, from the little rural school that my father attended, was for a long time widely and favorably known as editor of an important city newspaper.

In most cases the grounds once occupied by district schools have long since reverted to the farms of which they were originally a part. Nothing remains to indicate that they were ever sites of school buildings. Farm chil-
dren now ride in busses to centralized grade and high schools.

A fair proportion of these youngsters go on to college. The girls enroll in much the same courses that their city cousins take. Some of the boys prepare themselves for business or professional careers. Others major in agriculture; but oddly enough, few of the latter actually return to the family farm. They become college professors, government officials, county agricultural agents, managers of farm estates, specialists in industry, or salesmen for manufacturers of products for farm use.