

EARLY DAYS IN THE VALLEY

(Background Information for the Liberty School Centennial)

School Days

Old time school teachers endured many hardships without complaint. They worked under rough conditions that were taken as commonplace. Teachers generally had to arrive early each morning to build a big wood fire in the old heater. The big boys helped bring in the wood from the shed. Rooms were warm only in spots. Children would ask permission to sit by the stove. Perhaps all they had to do was to slide to the end of a long bench. It was all right, if they worked at their lessons.

In the old Union school children carried water from the fine Sharrock spring nearly a quarter of a mile from the schoolhouse. Sometimes boys and girls stood in line for a turn to drink water from an old fashioned dipper. A bucket of water was soon gone. To save time, water was often passed from desk to desk. Children loved to pass the water as they could skip study for a short time at least. Desks were long benches with desk surfaces to match. As many as four could sit in a row. The girls were on one side of the room and the boys on the other.

Many notes were passed from hand to hand under those desks. Plans for play, help with lessons and questions important to youth were slipped along by loyal friends. Besides, little love notes circulated among the big pupils. All grades shared the same room. By watching teacher it was possible to hand notes over the aisle. The best moment was when he was writing on the blackboard. If caught, no one seemed to know who started it.

Twenty dollars a month, with room and board, was considered excellent pay in the early Oregon school. The schoolmaster was well paid at \$40.00, and generally had a family and owned his own home or farm. Gardens and fruit kept down the cost of living. Teachers from other communities often tried to board with a family that lived nearest the school. It was not unusual for children to walk two miles, and one mile was thought to be handy.

When school funds were especially low it was considered good practice to hire a "school ma'am". They were much cheaper than men teachers because it was possible to board them around with the families, a week at a time, without charge. That way, they could teach on a smaller salary. The old school was even ahead of modern ideas. The school board thought it was good for the teacher to get acquainted with the pupils and their family problems by living with them! The results of this were supposed to be helpful. My, such scrubbing and cleaning so that the spare room would be ready for teacher next week!

School Days-Con't.

At times, there were only enough funds to hold school about three months in the late fall. Then there would be recess for six weeks or so during the hardest months of winter, plagued by heavy snow and much rain.

Nowdays children ride in school buses safely, rapidly and keep clean and neat. No falling down in the mud or grinding dust, and wearing out their clothes and shoes in several miles of woodland trail. But will they have memories of the first wild strawberries ripening on the side of a little hill, or a bird's nest in the brush, or the first trilliums of a forest glade where a cold spring gushed out. How could they remember the delightful taste of a left-over snack from a little old five-pound lard pail lunch bucket. Walking in fresh air makes appetites sharp. Parents expected their children to take plenty of time walking home from school, allowing for proper investigation and some loitering. This was sensibly expected of wholesome children. But when the proper time came to be home and at the chores they had better be there!

There were more men teachers in early days. They expected children to mind and their orders were respected. A new teacher heard there were bad boys in the district. The first day he cut a good stick and laid it on top of the blackboard. The big boys were told that he wouldn't stand any trifling. He never had any trouble with them, either. The historic hazel switch was thought to be a valuable educational help, also, when milder instruments failed.

This teacher wore a sort of goatee, which gave him without doubt a dignified and even awesome appearance. He was a bachelor, however, and had no one to look after the repair of his clothing. No dry cleaner called at his house in those days. The seat of his trousers wore thin and slick. Finally this humble garment gave way, and red flannel showed through when he stood at the blackboard to do sums. The children thought this was good fun but were discreet about it. They were also entertained by the way he had of talking to himself as he walked about the room during times of aggravation. But children adjust to anything, and didn't think it was quite so funny as time went on. Kindly pity was mingled with respect.

One schoolmaster had a long flowing beard and sideburns. He was considered a good teacher insofar as he could get the children to listen to him. Somehow he didn't seem able to keep very good order, but the whole school loved him. They had marvelous good times and did pretty much as they pleased. On very rainy days he generously let them play, "Miller by the Dee." This was a great favor, for there was only one room for all grades, and no outdoor sheds to play or eat in. Pupils learned to get along with what they had.

School Days-Con't.

Big boys and girls went to school in winter when work was slack. They reviewed from year to year such lessons as they learned in a previous year. Pretty soon they were grown up. Six grades of common school offered a pretty good education. Eighth grade graduation was splendid.

The schoolhouse was the social center of the community where spelling school and debates were held during winter and many dates and lasting friendships were made and kept.

There was no professional entertainment in our community. But we had wholesome good times. Generally there was a spelling school or other merry-making. The spelling school captains could choose up sides and see who was the best. As the contest went on the poor spellers sat down. Excitement grew. There were some champion spellers on both sides. Each tried to outdo the other as they spelled through the book. Words were given out by the teacher. The side that lost had to furnish a treat--generally a party.

From the old time school, that now may seem so poor and crude, there came out many finely trained citizens.

Visiting

Visiting was real, natural, enjoyable. Not infrequently a family would visit another on Saturday evening and remain until the late Sunday afternoon. The visited were as glad as the visitors. Real, old fashioned handshakes in which the very presence of the soul was felt and transmitted was the rule and not the exception. The old revolving table was always loaded with wholesome foods from the farm. This revolving table was a home-made affair. The main part was, of course, stationary, circular in form and about six feet in diameter. In the center and about eight inches above the main structure, there was a smaller table, about three and a half feet in diameter which was turned by the hand of the diner. The food was placed on this latter part and, when a certain article of food was wanted, the diner turned the revolving center until the desired viand was before him. When ten or twelve hungry persons were seated about this table, the revolving part was kept almost continuously in motion.

Visiting during those years was leisurely and splendidly enjoyed. There was never present that tense feeling that the entertainment was not all that it should be. The Sunday afternoon visiting on the part of parents provided excellent opportunities for quiet and friendly walks over the farm at which time all the knowledge then known to practical husbandry was as earnestly discussed as was ever a congressional bill in the capitol at Washington. A new colt, a calf, a litter of pigs, young lambs or goats, even the newly hatched brood of chicks, all came in for complete analysis.

Visiting-Con't.

The means of transportation was either the team and wagon or on horseback, depending on the season of the year. It was the advent of the swiftly moving auto and the telephone that have combined to erase the old time visiting. These modernisms have come to stay and, consequently, the old time visiting has gone to stay. The farmer who may have an errand with a neighbor today, jumps into the ever-ready auto and, in five minutes he is there. In another few minutes he is home again. If a farmer's wife wants to speak to a neighbor matron, she takes down the receiver of the convenient telephone and begins the more terse and hurried conversation.

Food

Milk, butter, meats, salt-rising bread, fruits and various vegetables were abundantly provided. Coffee, tea and sassafras tea were the drinks used except for the children who drank much rich, sweet milk. Loaf or ginger bread cake was much in evidence and fruit pies were delicious. Head cheese, salted meats, home-cured bacon and often fresh grouse or quail made up the meat diet. Horseradish and greens were always enjoyed. Candies and other sweets, ice cream and rich cakes were almost unknown in the early days.

Settlers tried to raise enough wheat between the stumps of their little clearings to survive. Cradling off a few sacks of grain made a trip to the mill necessary. Most families needed fresh flour every three months. The mill put out several flour products. "Shorts" was the milling fraction nearest to flour. Next came "graham," which was used for cereal by many. Then, there was "germea," followed by bran. The last was not much liked by man or beast. The standard flour milling itself was rather poor looking stuff, unbleached and yellow. But people now claim that it had more vitamin and mineral value than the attractive bleached product of today. The old time homemade bread was so savory that families could hardly get enough of it. It seemed to taste better than anything that is now made by factory methods.

In the early dairying days there were no cream separators and milking was followed by straining through a cloth. Each day's milking was left to rise in tin pans or crocks on the shelves of the cool spring house or milk room. Cream was taken off by a hand skimmer, a tin ladle that held the butter fat and let the milk run back through small holes. The cream could not be churned if there was too much milk in it. If the milk was sour, or clabbered, it was even better. The cream was saved up for a couple of days during which it was stirred and ripened. Then it was churned by a hand dasher, taken out with a paddle and worked by hand into one pound print molds. Wrapped in wax paper it was destined to be a fancy product on the market, where it would fetch an attractive price.

Fish and Game

Fishing was a serious occupation rather than a mere sport. Even then, a man had to earn his fish. Perhaps he would stand in the pouring rain all day, as those were the best fishing days. Some days there were no fish running at all. Other times, several large salmon in a gunny sack brought gladness to a waiting family. Salmon steaks for supper, with sour dough raised biscuits, were something not to be forgotten, though now a lost combination.

People had to depend on fish and wild game for their meat. There was no license required, neither any limit imposed. The common people would not have had money to pay for licenses anyway. All who could live by fishing and hunting did so as far as possible. Fish were salted by the tub or smoked over a fire of hazel wood coals.

One man always traded a wooden tub of fine salmon steaks for a quarter of beef in the fall. This gave a change from fish. People had little money so they exchanged products. If one farmer butchered early he sent choice pieces to neighbors. Then, if another killed a beef a similar gift was returned. So, folk of the same community had surprises and changes in their diet of too much potatoes and bread. Families that liked sauerkraut would make a big barrel of it to last all winter. Everybody worked at the fresh crisp cabbage--trimming and shredding it, tamping it into the barrel until the juice started. Salt was added and a long day's work produced a balance for the large meat diet of our countryside.

Wild game birds were plentiful. Pheasants, native grouse and big fat timber quail were easy to bag with a few hours of hunting in the woods. How tasty they were, stewed with light fluffy dumplings, rich with the wild flavor of the broth.

Deer were hard to get in 1890. Sometimes it took a homesteader a week to get his animal, as they were very elusive.

Happy Mail Days

People came into the post office once or maybe twice a week, if they were looking for something important. Some farmers lived from one to three or four miles away, and mail was an event looked for.

Whoever went to the post office brought the neighbor's mail. It was a friendly and happy custom, and friends passed around the weekly papers to each other. These were well taken care of and returned later in favor of a later issue. World news and events were gravely discussed whenever neighbors met. This often took place on the road. Horses understood this very well and expected to rest for a few minutes.

Peddlers

Of particular fascination to the children were the pack peddlers who arrived on foot from unknown parts of the world, and bore the utterly marvelous wares of "Timbuktu" and "Samarkand." These humble and often less than handsome merchants seemed invested with the charm of the "Arabian Nights," and brought unforgettable treats to the beauty-starved homesteaders. The common stock of the modern five-and-ten burst as a galaxy from his rude pack while the country folk seized upon pins, needles, combs and costume jewelry. The vendor literally paid his way with goodwill, having broken the monotony of life in a far and lonely place. But he also paid in goods for his lodging and board when night overtook him in his travels. He rested in a place of honor, to set out in the morning with a somewhat lighter burden.

One of the old timers, visited about the community as a particular apostle of goodwill, dispensing kindly advice to troubled ears, and even cutting hair for 25 cents, and pulling teeth cheerfully for only twice this sum. The latter operation could be painful. Needless to say there was no pain deadener when the forceps were applied to a thumping molar.

References: Oregon in the Making by C. Louis Barzee
Days and Ways of Old Damascus by Lottie Maybee
and Forrest Dale Forbes