



Otego Historical Society

Tracey Sherwood, Publisher

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Good Old Golden Rule Days

As the new school year commences, we're highlighting memories of two former students of the Otego Union Free School which stood on Willow Street in Otego. Perhaps the only remnant of the old school is a rectangular stone near the sidewalk by what is now the Unatego bus garage. We hope you'll enjoy this walk down "Memory Lane" with Ruth Secor Searles, 94 and Harold Lent, 87. While the first Otego school was built in the early 1800's, our interviews revolve around the Willow Street school built in 1866. Ruth and Harold attended this school shortly before the new elementary school was built.



*Otego Union Free School
Willow Street*

Getting to school was sometimes grueling. Ruth remembers walking with her two older brothers for two miles to and from school. In the winter, the boys would go first to clear a path for Ruth to follow in. Clutching her dinner-pail, her hands would become so cold she would begin to cry. On the trip home, the siblings would often stop at neighbors along Otsdawa Avenue to warm themselves and perhaps be given a cookie or other treat.

Living further out of town, Harold first attended the #18 district school on the West Branch of the Otsdawa. Once transferred to the village school, he was

transported by a school bus which was more like a truck. An older story yet tells of busses with benches along each side and a leather curtain which could be rolled down in inclement weather. Occasionally, a wheel would get stuck in the mud causing the truck to tip over and children to be thrown out!

The school had four rooms on the first floor for elementary students. A single teacher handled two grades. The second floor had four rooms for the high-school grades. Upon arriving at school, pupils could play outside until the school bell was rung by the school custodian, "Pop Stensland". The tolling of the school bell could be heard throughout the town. Pop Stensland kept the furnace operating and also fired up a pot-belly stove in the 5-6th grade room since that room was apparently notorious for being chilly.

Each school day began with a salute to the flag followed by a reading from The Bible. School supplies were

supplied by each students family. Paper tablets cost \$.10 each. Pupils usually had a pencil box with a sliding cover. Inside, pencils, rulers and other random treasures were kept safe. Children brought their own lunches or, in the case of those living nearby the school, returned home for lunch. Students had the option of eating at their desks, outside or accompanying friends home. In light of the fact that everyone was watching their pennies, children carried lunch pails instead of frivolous paper lunch bags.

Neither running nor *walking* were permitted in the hallways. **Marching** was the method of travel that Ruth recalls!



Ruth Secor Searles, 94



Harold Lent, 87

...School Supplies (continued)

Children *marched* to and from the bathrooms and other classrooms. There was a girls bathroom on the first floor while the boys bathroom was down in the basement next to the furnace. To be excused from class, a students initials and the time of departure were written on the board. (Boys were given a bit more time since they had to travel a greater distance to the bathroom). In stark contrast to this regimentation, outside the schoolhouse, no one kept particular track of the students. They were “on their own” until school was back in session and role was called.

Both Ruth and Harold recall that each teacher had a rubber hose kept handy in the bottom desk drawer to be used on students exhibiting bad behavior. Another form of punishment was to send the miscreant either to the hallway or the closet. One student remarked he

“Both Ruth and Harold recall that each teacher kept a rubber hose in the bottom desk drawer for disciplinary reasons”

didn't know how he was to learn anything as he spent so much of his school day standing in the hallway! In random rounds of the hallways, the Principal would check to see how many students were outside their classrooms. Ruth recalls a room outside the 3-4th grade room that was used as a laboratory. Unfortunately for some, it also doubled as the discipline room where students were sent to await the dreaded rubber hose. One young man was successful in opening a window through which he crawled to run home and tell his parents he wasn't going to “wait for a licking”! We're left to wonder did he face a similar fate at home?

During inclement weather, the teacher would lead the group in exercises such as jumping jacks alongside their desks.

If the weather was stifling hot, a bit of air conditioning would be provided by the teacher pulling down the top window to let in some fresh air. As soon as their exercise was completed, the window would be closed.

Ruth recalls her love of the piano. With an organ or piano in each room, teachers would lead the class in song. According to Ruth, some of the teachers didn't have very good singing voices! Ruth remembers having to repeat third grade due to time missed while suffering from typhoid fever. She jokingly remarks that in truth, she had a bit of a reputation for being the “teacher's pet” and thinks Mrs. Chase just wanted her in the classroom for another year! Perhaps Ruth wasn't far off the mark being that years later, when Mrs. Chase died, she willed her piano to Ruth.

Team sports such as basketball and baseball were not as organized as they are now. The school team played against other local schools but there were no state divisions and competitions. It was said by an old classmate of Ruth's, Burnette Bundy, that anywhere they could find two baskets and 10 boys, they could play some basketball!

Ruth's mother made all of her school clothes. She was particularly fond of black or dark fabrics since they were practical in not showing dirt!

Harold was transferred to the village school for third grade. The “classroom” was an area under the stairwell with a couple of posts separating 3rd and 4th grades. The teachers and Principal decided to advance two of the girls to the 4th grade. One of these girls was the cousin of Harold. He protested being overlooked for advancement himself, stating he was “just as smart” as the girls were. Shortly thereafter, Harold was advanced to 4th grade as well, skipping 3rd grade entirely! Ruth's brother, Lynn, had a similar experience in that he was the only student entering 7th grade one year. He had the option of spending another year in 6th grade or advancing to

8th grade which he ultimately chose.

Ruth tells a story about a district rule requiring the Principal to teach one class, in this case, chemistry. A particular class of students decided they were not satisfied with the quality of instruction they were receiving. The town fathers got together and arranged with the school board that the students from Otego could either drive or get a ride to Unadilla to attend chemistry class. Quite a number of students elected to make the most of this opportunity. Ruth's brother, Perry, was one of them. Another brother, Lynn, was one year younger. He requested Perry bring home all of his homework. For a year, Lynn carefully studied Perry's notes and reading material. When it came time for the Regents exam, *both* brothers took it. Perry earned an 86% while Lynn, who never entered the Chemistry classroom, earned an 85%! Lynn was then able to devote his time to subjects of his interest. Ruth said this was called “home-schooling”.

The Willow Street school building was razed in the 1930's after standing vacant for several years

The Willow Street school was not without its pranksters. On rare occasion, some of the boys would turn the big bell upside down and fill it with water. Whomever was next to ring the bell would get an unsuspecting shower! This bell, which is the Otego Historical Society rooms, was given to the school in 1869 by William Birdsall who was a prominent citizen of Otego.

Ruth was always anxious to go to school the day after Halloween to see what kind of trickery had taken place in the Village. She recalls that there was usually something big placed on the top of the flagpole. Ruth's brothers Perry and Lynn were always a little suspicious that some of the devilry was caused by their own father!

The Willow Street school building was razed in the 1930's. Ruth remembers feeling sad because the building was a beautiful structure despite standing idle for several years.

Both Ruth and Harold graduated from the Otego Central School. Ruth in 1934, Harold in 1939.

Despite the many challenges faced by these early pupils, integrity and character led to the completion of their primary educations. Over the years, as in other aspects of our lives, the role played by teachers, Principals, Superintendents and various school activities have evolved to provide a much more complex educational experience for students. Still, one thing remains the same: Students grow and create memories that will last a lifetime!



Circa 1920:
Students and teachers
The Willow Street School

*Among other selections,
students at Otego
Central School were
required to memorize
"In School Days".
85 years later, Ruth can
still recite it.....*

IN SCHOOL DAYS

Still sits the school-house by the road,
A ragged beggar sunning;
Around it still the sumachs grow,
And blackberry vines are running

Within, the master's desk is seen
Deeply scarred by raps official;
The warping floor, the battered seats,
The jack-knife's carved initial,

The charcoal frescoes on its wall;
It's door's worn sill, betraying
The feet that, creeping slow to school,
Went storming out to playing!

Long years ago a winter sun
Shone over it at setting;
Lit up it's western window panes,
And low eaves 'icy fretting.

It touched the tangled golden curls,
And brown eyes full of grieving,
Of one who still her steps delay
When all the school was leaving.

For near her stood the little boy
Her childish favor singled;
His cap pulled low upon a face
Where pride and shame were mingled.

Pushing with restless feet the snow
To right and left, he lingered;
As restlessly her tiny hands
The blue—checked apron fingered.

He saw her lift her eyes, he felt
The soft hand's light caressing,
And heard the tremble of her voice,
As if a fault confessing.

"I'm sorry that I spelt the word:
I hate to go above you,
Because," the brown eyes lower fell,
"Because, you see, I love you!"

Still memory to a gray-haired man
That sweet child-face is showing
Dear girl! The grasses on her grave
Have forty years been growing!

He lives to lean, in life's hard school,
How few who pass above him
Lament their triumph and his loss,
Like her, because they love him.

~ John Greenleaf Whittier ~

We're on the web!
www.otegohistoricalsociety.org

~ JOIN US ~

SPRING 2010

Please consider joining the fun at the next regular gathering of the Otego Historical Society the Harris House. A presentation will be made on a topic of local history. We hope to entice you with a bit of history, an evening amongst friends and neighbors and of course, *refreshments!*

~ Plan your visit today! ~

Location:

6 River St.
PO Box 127
Otego, NY 13825

Hours of Operation:

September - May:
Every Wednesday
1 - 4 p.m.

June - August:
Saturday 10 a.m.-2 p.m.

Town/Village Historian:

Helen Groves 988-2225

Information/Special Openings:

988-7885

Programs:

Local history programs are held at the Harris House @ 7 p.m. on the 3rd Monday of each month from April - November. All are welcome to attend. Refreshments are served.



*Safe travel to all the "Snowbirds"!
See you in Otego in the Spring.....*