

One Room Schoolhouses

Fond memories of a time not so long ago

Don & Diane Wells

Today, a county school board's request for \$30 million in SPLOST funds is not unusual. They need it for new construction and improvements to older buildings. Schools today are often major facilities reaching 500 or more students and needing a large staff to operate and maintain them. Less than 100 years ago, educating our children was very different.

In the late 1800's and early 1900's, the United States was mostly rural. Families were scattered across the land on farms and in small towns. There were no school buses to transport the children to a consolidated location. With the possibility of having only one, or even no, child in a particular grade, multi-grade school buildings were impractical. Therefore, many one-room schoolhouses were built to serve these far-flung communities. Reminding us of the value these hardy souls placed on education, children had to walk a mile or more in all kinds of weather in order to get to school. Those who lived farther away sometimes rode a mule or came by horseback. The one-room schoolhouse generally housed the first eight grades. If a student went on to a high school, arrangements often had to be made to board them with another family who lived in town.

One-room schools were commonplace throughout rural portions of many countries including the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom, Ireland and Spain in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. By the 1900s, it has been reported that there were more than 200,000 mostly one-room schools across the United States. A single teacher taught all grades. By the 1960s, most of these tiny schools were phased out.

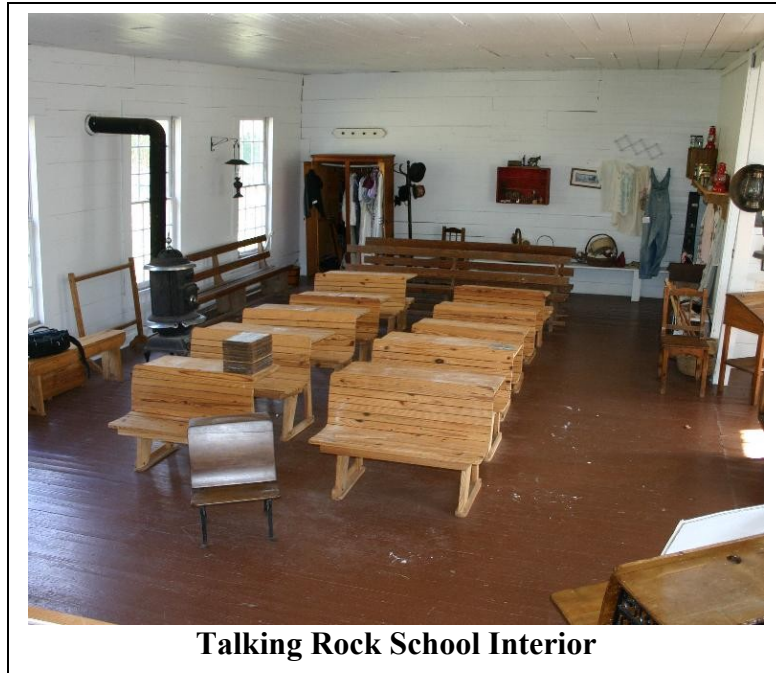
In Pickens, Dawson and other rural North GA counties, there were many one-room schoolhouses. In Pickens, the Burnt Mountain, Talking Rock and Salem Schools were one-room schoolhouses. Anderson, Ball Creek, Bethel, Blaine, Crossroads, Hinton, Dobson and Griffith may have also begun as one-room schoolhouses, but grew into multi-teacher schools in the later 1900's. In Dawson County, Amicalola, Old Harmony, Lebanon and Mt. Pleasant were one-room schoolhouses. Liberty, Old Lumpkin and White Oak may have been also but no data could be found to determine if they were.

The luxury of having a janitor for the schools did not exist in the last century. Teachers and pupils did all the clean up work required in order to leave the building and grounds in perfect condition for the next day's class. Boarding around, living for a few weeks at a time in the homes of each of the students, was a common practice for teachers at the one room schoolhouse. While boarding, the teacher not only did his/her share of the chores, but was also expected to tutor the children. An alternative to boarding around was for teachers to live in the local boardinghouse or to board with just one family.

Very little is known about the school on Burnt Mt. other than it is believed to have met in the Burnt Mt. Baptist Church building. A reference from the Pickens Herald dated 28 February 1889, stated that: "Mr. B.J. Chester of Dawson County was hired to teach the public school at Burnt Mt. during the 1889 term and that a large school (of children) was expected for that year." He would have had to be boarded in the Burnt Mt. Community since it was too difficult to get to Burnt Mt. from Dawson County in the late 1880.

Not many of the one-room schoolhouses exist today but one has been preserved in Pickens County. "One of Pickens County's Best Kept Secrets" proclaims the headline on the web site for the Talking Rock Schoolhouse Museum in Talking Rock. This one room schoolhouse is a great place to go to explore the learning environment for students of a bygone age. Spending some time sitting on the old benches and pretending to be student can make today's children appreciate the comforts of their school and give them a glimpse into a way of life that is gone.

The Talking Rock School, known as the Talking Rock Academy, began in 1883 and continued as a one-room schoolhouse until 1933. The one story building you see today was originally built as a two story building in Ludville in 1877 and was the first Pickens County High School. The school was moved to Talking Rock in 1882 when the railroads came to Talking Rock and more people moved to that location because of jobs. The Odd Fellows Society met in the second floor room until in the early 1930's when a wind storm caused the building to lean. The second story had to be removed to stabilize the building. Georgia Cagle reported in her book, *Remembrances in Talking Rock and More* published in 2007 that William T (Tom) Townsend was the teacher at the school in 1889. In 1889, "the teacher provided his supplies and the parents provided the books and the parents paid the teacher five cents per day for each student."



Talking Rock School Interior

Everyone pitched to help run the school. The boy's chopped wood to keep the pot belly stove heating the school room and the girls fetched water from a well nearby. There was a ladle in the water bucket for everyone to use to get a drink. The boys also brought pocket knives to school for use in sharpening their pencils as well as the girls.

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Other preserved one-room schoolhouses in Georgia can be seen in Buchanan, Norcross, Statesboro, Mt Berry and Lincolnton. Serving far-flung communities and reminding us of the value that was placed on education, these small schools were sprinkled across America from the end of the 19th to the middle of the 20th century.

Information about the Talking Rock School was obtained from an interview with Gloria Beaudet, a historian for the Talking Rock School. Also, permission was obtained to quote Georgia Cagle's book and from her.

Fond memories of a time not so long ago – Part 2

The One-Room School

Don & Diane Wells

Children today probably find it difficult to imagine attending the one-room schools of the 1800's and early 1900's. These schools, which served eight grades, generally had no heat, little insulation, no running water and outdoor privies. By the mid 1940's, when I started to school, our one-room school, while still quite different from modern educational facilities, had the luxury of indoor bathrooms, running water and heat. We lived in Hiawatha Camp, Colorado, a part of the Mountain Fuel Supply Company; therefore, gas was readily available. As soon as I arrived at school during the worst part of winter, it was my job to go outside and kick the gas line. That would break up the ice crystals that formed during the night and allow the gas to flow more freely. The teacher, my mother, would light off the pot-bellied stove in the middle of the room. Soon, we would be warm.

For lunch, we often had our own version of Stone Soup. Everyone dumped whatever he or she brought from home into a big pot sitting on top of that pot-bellied stove. About ten o'clock, wonderful aromas would begin to waft up from the soup pot. We



One Room School Class

would take turns asking; "How much longer until lunch?" Eventually noon would come and we would dig in to bubbling, delicious soup.

Teachers in one room school had very few teaching materials and rather spartan facilities. They had to be innovative. Mother was certainly creative, competent and able to think “outside the box.” For example, having no funds to create a library for the school, she purchased about two hundred classic comic books. We delighted in them and read them over and over. The number of students at our school, usually less than fifteen, varied from year to year. Since “lessons” could be heard by all, it was easy for the younger ones to learn from the older. Traditional grade lines blurred and we each moved forward at our own rate. Officially listed as “in the third grade” didn’t keep one from reading with the seventh graders or doing math with the fourth. All grades did science and social studies together. Each one simply learned what ever was appropriate for them. Any required curriculum was always completed by early March. The rest of the year we learned about whatever interested us. During the spring, when the weather warmed up, we were rewarded for our hard winter’s work by going on “field trips.” Field trips were simply hikes around the area, complete with bag lunches and pet dogs. We thought that we were just having fun. However, Mother never wasted time. We learned a great deal about ecology, geology, and the environment on these hikes.

Discipline was seldom a problem. The students respected the teacher and knew that they were expected to behave properly. One time, Mother had to go into Craig, the county seat, for a teachers meeting. She was to be away for at least four hours. Can you imagine what would happen if the teacher left a modern classroom on its own for even one hour? Can’t you just hear the comments and questions? Who’s going to make sure the children are safe? Who’s going to be responsible if something bad happens? What do you mean you left the children alone? The teacher would probably be fired for child endangerment and dereliction of duty! Left at school on our own, we continued doing the same things we would have been doing if Mother had been there. If there was a discipline problem at school, the parents supported the teacher. One incident stands out in my mind. One of the boys, about ten or eleven, brought a porcupine quill about four inches long and with a sharp fishhook like barb on the end, to school. He would creep up behind other students and poke them with it. When my mother found out what was happening, she turned him over her lap and stabbed him with the quill. Today, she probably would have been sued. Then, the father simply paddled him when he got home.

For recreation we had the usual playground with swings and teeter-totters. Jumping rope was a favorite activity and games such as “Red Rover, Red Rover,” “Annie, Annie over”, and “Mother May I?” were enjoyed by all. Often, during recess, we would all pile onto the swings and one of our more creative students, Bobby, would tell us stories about his exciting adventures with his rusty old can opener. No matter how cold it got, we bundled up and went outside for recess. After the snow began to fall, we added “Fox and Geese” to our games as well as sledding or sliding on the ice. The schoolhouse was on a slight hill. When the road was icy, we would get a running start and slide on our feet for a hundred yards or more.

Other than sickness, there was no excuse for not being at school. There were no such things as “snow days” even though there were 40 to 60 inches of snow each winter. Living less than a mile from the school, most of us just trudged through it. One of our

schoolmates had a much more difficult time. Living on a ranch about seven miles away, he rode his horse. Sometimes, by the time he got to school his hands and face were frost bitten and his eyelashes would be almost frozen together. A couple of boys would run out to put his horse in the barn. The rest of us would bring him bowls of warm water so he could thaw his face and fingers and wipe the ice flakes from his eyes.

I am sure that students who attended one-room schools with unprepared or inadequate teachers suffered, just as students do today in similar situations. My experience was positive. My mother, a very strict but caring woman, was able to instill in all of her students a confidence in their ability to succeed. After eighth grade, when it was time to move to town for high school, everyone was prepared. Laughter, love, support, a dedication to life-long learning, and a feeling of family and safety filled my life those six years in that one-room school. It was an experience that I wish many could have today.