

History's Little Red Schoolhouse

(From a talk given July 20, 2002, at a meeting of the Antiquarian and Historical Society of Culver in the home of the Rt. Rev. William C.R. Sheridan and Rudith Sheridan on 18 B Road, Culver.)

It may be fitting that we are talking about the one-room school in a building that once served as a small village church. The line between school and church was not as sharply drawn in the 19th century as it is today. Sometimes the public school was used as a place of worship until the church was built. Frequently the two buildings sat nearby and shared a common history, or sometimes even a common name.

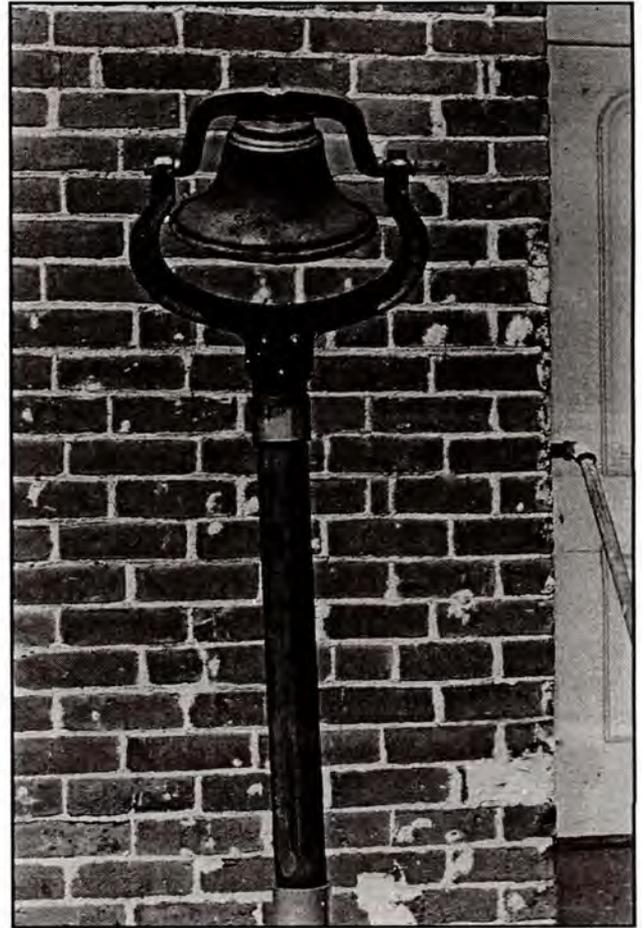
This old church served the Maxinkuckee community, and the Maxinkuckee School is still standing several hundred feet to the west. It has been purchased by a couple who apparently plan to care for it and recently gave it a new roof, certainly an essential step for its preservation from the elements.

Unfortunately, many of the one-room schoolhouses in Indiana have not fared so well, including the old Washington School, which I will say more about later.

One-room schools in this state were discouraged by policies adopted at the state level early in the 20th century, particularly in the 1920s, including an act passed in 1929 for the formation of new school corporations by merging a township school with a school town. So Indiana's one-room schools generally have been in disuse, or converted to some other purpose, for a long time, longer than in many adjacent states (except Ohio, where a similar course was followed).

When I left Indiana in 1962 and moved back to Illinois to edit a newspaper in Grundy County, I had just covered many episodes in the latest Indiana school consolidation, including the then-controversial creation of the Caston school district from four township school systems in two counties. I was surprised to learn from the county superintendent of schools that there were still a couple of two-room schools in operation in Grundy County, Illinois, and some one-room schools in other parts of that state.

Even now, there are one-room schools in Michigan, chiefly in remote areas. In the town where we have vacationed almost every sum-



A bell is used to summon pupils to class at the restored Prill School in Fulton County. The school reopens frequently to expose a new generation to the one-room schoolhouse.

mer for 25 years, there is a one-room school with fewer than a dozen students. After grade school, the students are bused to a high school in Calumet, a long and scenic ride in the summer, but a hazardous one in winter, when some of the heaviest snowfalls in the United States make a curvy and hilly road difficult to travel.

Probably all of us have fond memories of our first school. Although I didn't attend a one-room school, the grades in my school were doubled up in four or five rooms. During my first six years of school, I was in a room with two grades every year except fifth grade. That was also the year when I was taught by my favorite teacher.

In my day, we also all went home for lunch, unless our mother was going to be away for the day, in which case we might gain permission to carry a lunch to school. The brother of one of my classmates had a friend whose parents both worked,

(Continued on Page 2)

something that was unusual at that time. The friend invited him to lunch at his house to have a wiener roast. They didn't know much about fire and built one in the living room. The living room didn't have a fireplace, and the house literally burned to the ground. Both boys escaped unscathed.

I was in the last class to finish at my school. When it was torn down a year later, there was no one interested in historic preservation to attempt to save it. At the age of 12 I'm sure that I didn't have a clue as to what that concept meant. Even then, I definitely was not happy to see it destroyed. However, I did save a stone and a brick from the school.

When we had a stone outdoor fireplace/barbecue built just south of our house about five years ago, we had the stone and brick built into the masonry.

Although one-room schools are the exception in our



The entire student body and a horse-drawn bus stand outside the Washington School in this view dating from 1912. (Photo courtesy of the Marshall County Historical Society)

individual memory, they still play a strong role in our collective memory as a cornerstone of American education: the Little Red Schoolhouse.

We all have heard the stories, to be sure. The apple for the teacher, the teasing boy dipping the braided hair of the girl in the seat in front of him into the inkwell, the teacher placing a naughty boy in a double seat in the front of the schoolroom – this is a boy at an age when he did not yet appreciate being seated close to a girl. The truly disorderly or uncooperative student might find himself seated in the corner, wearing a dunce cap.

I recall my parents and their siblings talking endlessly about their long



The Washington School is still a landmark at the southeast corner of Queen Road and 20th Road in Union Township. Its deteriorating condition imparts urgency to any hopes to preserve it.

(Continued on Page 3)

walk to school and how cold it used to be and how much snow there was in those days, even how the ink froze after they were given fountain pens and carried them to school. I never could understand why it was colder in those olden days ... but I hadn't yet heard about global warming.

I had an uncle who later became a minister who taught briefly in a rural school in Michigan. The boys had to cut wood and build fires to heat the building. Some of these boys did not relate well to Uncle Elmer or even to the idea of attending school. They were also very tough, so incorrigible that they sometimes put bullets in the stove along with the firewood. Fortunately, the walls of the stove were thick enough that they exploded inside without harm to anyone in the schoolroom.

In pioneer times in Indiana, provisions were made for a portion of newly settled lands to be set aside for schools. Most of the pioneers recognized there was value in education, even if they had not had much themselves. Sometimes those with the least education appreciated it more than those who had had the benefit of more schooling. School teachers were usually women and almost always unmarried. When they married, they stopped teaching.

In the days of the one-room school, teachers were often subject to strict rules of conduct that would certainly not be considered politically correct today and might even be illegal. Things like smoking, drinking or even keeping company with men were often forbidden. The pay was not all that much either and seems ridiculously low whenever the figures are quoted today. Of course, money went farther in those days, particularly when there was not much to spend it on.

Teachers were sometimes drawn from the ranks of students who had successfully completed the same level of school themselves. Very few had gone to college. Later on, special schools to train teachers were created, which for some reason were called normal schools. I never understood why. Still later they were called teachers colleges and, eventually, universities.

Different teaching methods were tried in pioneer schools, but many in the Midwest were called "blab schools." Much of the training was by memorization and recitation, sometimes by several students at the same time. The older people I have talked to who attended one-room schools have sounded a common theme about their experience, that the younger students learned from the older ones when they recited. I guess there is some truth to this, as I noticed it to some extent when I was in school with just one grade ahead of mine.

While the one-room school may have minimized the division between grades, it also symbolizes in our national mythology the equality of all people, rich and poor, native born and immigrant. As is often the case, the myth helps to express the promise of democracy but goes farther than the reality. Some years ago while researching an African-American community in St. Joseph County that eventually resulted in a scholarly article in the *Indiana Magazine of History*, I learned that until after the Civil War,



A dunce cap marks the corner set aside for misbehaving pupils at the restored Prill School in Fulton County.

African-American children were not welcome in most schools in the state, and their parents were not required to pay the school tax. Some attended anyway, including in the community I was researching. In 1869, the General Assembly made official provision for the education of African-Americans and, of course with that, added the privilege of paying the school tax.

One-room schools contributed to universal education, because there were enough of them in rural areas that most pupils could reach them on foot. Transportation to high school was more problematical, as that became a part of the public school system. One-room schools were outdated as soon as motorized buses were available to carry children to larger buildings at a central location. In the school year 1906-07, before that happened, there were 132 township schools in Marshall County, with 133 teachers. Forty of the schools were brick and 82 were of frame construction.

Union Township had nine schools, four brick and seven frame. There were two male teachers and nine females.

Some of the flavor of the one-room school can be noticed in the Amish schools we see along the roads in Elkhart and

(Continued on Page 4)

LaGrange counties. Students there still pump water and learn without electric lights, without team teaching and without computers.

In Hope, a small community in southern Indiana, there is a one-room school on the grounds of a modern educational complex. Through a special project, some of the teachers and some of the students have been trained to don 19th century attire and assume roles in the same classroom where their great-grandparents might have learned reading, writing and ciphering a century or more ago.

The Prill School, at its original location near Akron in Fulton County, has been lovingly restored to its 19th century appearance and re-creates for children of today the classroom experience of an earlier time. Several retired teachers, some of them with experience in one-room schools themselves, serve as "school marms" to recapture the spirit of the "little red schoolhouse" for a new generation.

My wife, Judy, and I both serve on the board of the Prill School, and we invite all of you to visit if you have not been there. Many of the furnishings are original, including some of the desks that were kept in the building during the years it was used for grain storage. They are none the worse except for some marks on the wood caused by rodents' chewing. There is a hand-operated pump in front of the school and two wooden "restrooms" at the rear of the schoolhouse property. One of them is still in use.

Much of the credit for saving the Prill School belongs to one woman, Vada Quackenbush Jefferies, a retired teacher and still a reading tutor in Rochester. After devoting decades of her time to Prill School, Vada was remarried there in the year 2001.

Many students whose education began in one-room schools went on to successful careers. One of them was Abraham Lincoln, who apparently only spent a total of about one year in school but wrote some of the finest examples of rhetoric of any American president, including, of course, the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural. Those of us who have read a lot of old documents know that not all people educated in the 19th century were that literate.

Nineteenth century schools did not have to contend with a street culture that denigrates education and entertainment venues that demean its relevance. The Little Red Schoolhouse of an earlier and simpler era could seem like a precious ideal in the context of the violence and breakdown in education that trouble some public schools

today.

Many remaining one-room schools are threatened, along with other rural landmarks that don't seem to arouse as much concern for their preservation as historic buildings in town. Look at the barns that you still see when you drive through the countryside and consider how many have disappeared in the last few years. You might have to go to states like Pennsylvania or Wisconsin to find an abundance of well-cared-for barns that are kept intact for economic reasons.

Until the 1880s, what is now called Queen Road angled to the west from about a half mile south of here to the Maxinkuckee School. In the town of Maxinkuckee, the route was called Washington Street. The area somewhat south of 18B (then called the Maxinkuckee Road) was known as the Washington neighborhood. That is why the old schoolhouse southeast of the intersection of Queen and 20th Road was called the Washington School. The Washington Cemetery is about a mile to the west near the Culver Marina.

Opposite the school was a Washington Church (belonging to a denomination called the Evangelical Church which is

(Continued on Page 5)

Antiquarian & Historical Society of Culver Spring 2003 Newsletter
News Editor: Agnes Bramfeld
Feature Editor: Jo Dugger
Production Editor: Fred Karst



Students gather beside a brick wall of the Washington School that is little changed from the way it looked in 1912, when this picture was taken. The teacher was Deane Walker, who went on to prominence as a school administrator at the county and state levels. (Photo courtesy of the Marshall County Historical Society)

now part of the United Methodist Church) located on the west side of what is now Queen Road. For a while there was a second Washington Church closer to the cemetery.

Although it is slowly crumbling, the Washington School remains much like everyone's image of the one-room school, beautifully situated on high ground at the same site where hundreds of Union Township children learned the three "r"s. The school has recently been pictured in a painting and prints made by Esther Powers Miller. Easily accessible from the East Shore, it remains the defining characteristic of the one-time Washington neighborhood.

It's also one of our surviving links to a mythic past, when Americans brought learning to the frontier and gave meaning to the idea of equality in a nation that created hope in a world still largely ruled by totalitarian regimes that educated only the elite.

This Little Red Schoolhouse would need attention soon if it were to be saved. Some of us have been looking at it and wondering whether there might still be time to preserve it, whether enough money could be found and whether the owners would permit it to be done.

We have talked with Kurt Garner, president of the Wythougan Valley Preservation Council, the group that recently restored the old Summit Chapel School in Tippecanoe Township. Some grant monies are available, and they helped with that project. One source of funding is through 50 per cent matching grants from the Indiana Department of Natural Resources. The Wythougan group already has placed the Washington School on its list of threatened buildings in the county and would be willing to help find funding to preserve it.

I believe the Maxinkuckee School was not a one-room school and consequently remained open longer than the Washington School. I hope it can be adapted for a use that will assure its existence long into the future. The Washington School is in worse shape but probably more typical of the Little Red Schoolhouse we hold in our collective memory.

Jim Peterson and I met with Mr. Garner, who is also a professional architect, and we looked closely at the Washington School. We have indications that the owners might be agreeable to allowing it to be restored if it were taken



Students pose outside the Washington School in 1915, when the teacher, at left, was Mildred Busart Kyle. (Photo courtesy of the Marshall County Historical Society)

back to its original condition. The cost could be as much as \$100,000 just to stabilize the building, that is to repair the roof, put in a floor, repair the brick and stone masonry on the front and sides and put up a temporary wall at the rear on the east side of the building.

Further restoration could cost much more. Much of the slate is intact and could be saved and used to cover at least half of the roof.

One thing that might be necessary to save it is to find a purpose that would enhance its significance in order to justify the efforts and also to make it eligible for additional funding. Mr. Garner suggested a Native American Museum, since the site is near two former Indian reservations, or else a center available for meetings and events like weddings and reunions.

I am sure that all of you have your own memories about your primary school and I wish that we had time to share them today. I hope that you will think about your first school experience and reflect upon how it shaped your character, your future education and your life.

I would also invite all of you to keep the Washington School in your thoughts, and even in your prayers, and to speak with us about any ideas you might have regarding this link in our township to the Little Red Schoolhouse in American history.

– Frederick Karst

**SPRING, 2003
NEWSLETTER**

**Antiquarian and Historical Society
P.O. Box 125
Culver, Indiana 46511-0125**

Ice Cream Social and Antique Boat Show

This summer the Antiquarian and Historical Society will host an ice-cream social and antique boat show at the Culver Cove.

Our ice-cream socials on the East Shore were very popular, and this year we will have an added display of old wooden boats, including an old steam-powered boat, which is coming here from Elkhart.

Members and guests will be able to ride on the lake, as people did years ago on Sunday afternoons.

Frank Stubblefield, Bob Kreuzberger and Warren Bickel are working with Jim Watson on the details of this exciting occasion. As they add more fun-filled happenings to the agenda, we will keep you informed.

The date is Sunday, August 10, which coincides with Sidewalk Sales in Culver, so it will be a grand day to spend here with friends.

Memorial Bricks in Park

We are still taking orders for memorial bricks to be installed in Heritage Park. This has become a popular way for our members to honor family members and friends. Call Agnes Bramfeld, 842-2477, or Dorothy Peterson, 842-3940, for information and the necessary forms for ordering.

Summer Meetings

Our first meeting this year will be on Saturday, June 28, at 10 a.m. at the remodeled Culver Farmhouse on the East Shore.

You will get a postcard announcing the topic and the exact address.

On July 12, we will have a tour of the Culver Academies' Art Gallery. More details of the July meeting will also be sent before that meeting.

YEARLY DUES \$20.00

Send 2003 dues to the Antiquarian and Historical Society, P.O. Box 125, Culver, IN 46511-0125

Name _____

Summer Address _____

_____ Phone _____

Donation in Memory of John Cleveland \$ _____

Make checks payable to Antiquarian and Historical Society,
P.O. Box 125, Culver, IN 46511