

A Foundation in Education

Story by Carol Bodensteiner

I met a woman from St. Louis shortly after Grant Wood's "Arbor Day" schoolhouse was chosen to grace the Iowa quarter. When I told her I'd gone to country school she was amazed. "You can't be old enough," she said. "I thought those schools had been gone for much longer."

To many, Iowa's one-room schools are relics of a long-gone era. In fact, some were still operating in 1967, and my days in a one-room school seem like only yesterday.

My grade school years were spent with one teacher in a one-room school in eastern Iowa. Dating from the mid-1800s, the Fairfield Independent School sat on an acre of land carved from my family's farm.

Each school day, my sisters and I hiked across the field that separated our house from the school yard, carrying metal lunch boxes that held thermoses of milk fresh from our own cows, sandwiches made with homemade bread, apples or pears from our own trees. We climbed over a stile Dad built to make it easier for little girls in dresses to negotiate a barbed wire fence. There we joined kids from surrounding farms creating a classroom that might have as few as ten or as many as 25 students in any given year.

My dad convinced the district to open the school after it sat idle for years just so my sisters and I could attend classes there. I went with my mom when she cleaned the school each fall and staked out a desk, eager for school to start.

The classroom, which housed all grades, had windows on three sides with long blackboards between them. An oil stove — the school's only heat and no competition for cold coming in through the tall windows — sat at the back of the room. On really cold winter days, we pushed our desks close to this stove, piled our wet mittens on top to dry, and studied to the wet, warm smell of scorching wool.

Miss Harriet Fowler was my teacher all eight years. Five feet two inches tall, her gray hair pulled back in a neat bun, Miss Fowler was not fat by any means, but she was padded

in a way that made you feel that if you fell and skinned your knee she'd be able to cuddle you and make it all better. Miss Fowler taught us the basic building blocks of the well educated: reading, writing, arithmetic, civics, and geography.

Throughout the day, Miss Fowler kept all eight grades going simultaneously. While students worked independently, practicing penmanship, memorizing the members of the president's cabinet, or plotting locations on the map, Miss Fowler brought each class to the front of the room to do math problems on the blackboard, to read, or to recite. Each student received individual attention every day. As we worked on assignments at our desks, we could not avoid hearing lessons repeated. We learned and relearned each year.



I was the only one in my class for all but one of those eight years, a circumstance that might have inspired loneliness but, instead, made me feel special. My education truly was one-on-one.

Older students often became teacher's aides, giving spelling tests or flipping flash cards to help younger kids with math or reading. I aspired to be a teacher myself someday, and I

relished being considered adult enough to take on these teaching tasks.

As Iowa faces economic and population challenges that may result in further school consolidation, I often consider my childhood experience.

The repetition and the reinforcement we experienced, coupled with dedicated teaching by people like Miss Fowler, are responsible for the country school reputation for fine learning. They laid the foundation for my own future success in high school and college, a foundation built without access to broad resources and multiple course offerings available in town schools. Sometimes seen as quaint museum pieces representing our pioneer past, one-room schools may have been ahead of their time. In any case, they represented a commitment to education I hope Iowa never loses. I'm glad we have a state quarter to encourage us to tell their story, a state quarter that encourages others to ask. ♣

— Carol Bodensteiner is a writer from West Des Moines.