Long-Ago Schools of the Chicot Area

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Editor's note: This is the first in a series of articles by Miss Mabel Thompson concerning the history of schooling in the local area. The Chicot area was one of the first settled in this part of the country. Miss Thompson, a regular contributor to this newspaper, is a retired teacher who attended school in her youth. She has taught in these schools and has accumulated a storehouse of tales of an earlier time from those who went before her — it seems appropriate to print these memories for the enlightenment of the current and future generations.

By MABEL THOMPSON

PART ONE

READING, 'RITING AND ARITHMETIC

I am undertaking to put together something about the old schools from tales I have heard from the old settlers, from a personal diary kept by one of the old teachers, and from my own personal knowledge.

I think it would be good to get some of the things that are known about our earlier schools, names of those who went to them as far as humanly possible, and some of the tales that came out of them so that we might have some sort of record. If someone doesn’t do this soon all the people who went to these schools will be gone, and no one will know where this person or that went to school.

I hope when you read this feeble attempt on the old schools and you don’t find your name or your parents’ names here, please remember I do not know all the names, nor do I know anyone who could tell me all who went to these old schools. I hunted for records but there seems to be none, most have been destroyed, and what few there are gives very little.

Schools of seventy to one hundred years ago were certainly much different than schools of today in many ways. There were no comfortable seats or desks of different sizes, but pupils of all ages has to sit on the high homemade benches, some sat all day with their feet never touching the floor. The homemade front part was much too high for the small pupils to write on.

Way back then there were no good chalkboards as there are today, and only a very little light as they have no means of lighting the old schools.

There were no glass windows in these early schools as the windows were nothing more than holes cut in the walls and these having wooden shutters that had to be closed on cold days. These buildings were roughly built, not ceiled, and having only one door. Most had fireplaces for heat.

There were no such things as water fountains, no indoor toilets. In some old schools built in the woods there were not even any outdoor toilets. Most of the water the children had to drink came from a bored well, if a spring was nearby that is where they got their water or if a neighbor lived close enough the boys went after a bucket of water for the pupils. If there were a good many students it took several buckets to quench their thirst.

Just about the turn of the century wood burning iron heaters came into use in the old schools. My mother told us how the patrons of the old schools would take turns supplying wood. There was one old man all had to laugh about who never took any wood, and he had a whole raft of kids, but he gave ungodly reasons why he couldn’t get any wood when all his neighbors knew the real reason was just plain “unadulterated laziness.” This was the way we got wood at the first school I attended, and at the three room school built in 1912.

The boys and girls who went to these old schools rode “Shanks’ Mare”, or in other words walked not short distances but miles, maybe two, three, four or more to get to school. I wonder how many today would be interested enough to walk one mile on a hard surfaced road?

Back in those days “school” and “schooling” were words that children heard at home, it was stressed by your mammas and poppas how important an education was. No one ever said they were going to stay home from school today,—you wouldn’t dare do such a thing. You were told you were going to school, it was expected of you to go, and mammas and papas were boss then and not the chaps as it is today.

If they said something you did or else you’d be sorry you didn’t. If you played sick you just as well get ready for a big dose of castor oil. After several doses of this stuff not too many wanted to stay home. But most children were anxious to go to school, and did attend under adverse conditions, such as rains, cold days, many days in freezing temperatures, over muddy dirt roads, and sometimes having to wade in water to cross streams swollen over their banks.

It is amazing how much they learned, too, I have here in my home some old books that my brothers used when they were about in the eighth or ninth grades and these are like college books. It is true in many cases the teachers were poorly educated, some only being hired because they could read and write, but those that were hired were outstanding in their communities, were church members, and took the job because they wanted to help the boys and girls.

What some of these teachers lacked in academic knowledge they made up in good old “horse sense.” They did their dead level best, they tried to teach, they had the parents’ and pupils’ respect, and having children there to learn, not to frolic or misbehave, and that I think made the difference.

In the remote areas where some of the old schools were located their drinking water came from a creek or a spring, if there were no neighbors near enough to get water from their well. I am sure the water was clean and pure as there were few people, and those that lived near streams did not have any wells, and they would take advantage of the water for their needs.

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There were no maps, located places and rivers, etc., and when you got through you knew where these places were.

Of course, not every pupil was an “Einstein”, or an “Edison”. There was one boy in one of the old schools I have heard about from some of the older men who went to school with him tell. I won’t name the boy nor the section from which he came, but the tale is that he was so dumb he stayed in the grammar seven years, and each time he got to the story of the “Spotted Dog” he would say to the teacher, “Grandma, I have to turn back, I just don’t know THEM big words.” Now this may be only one tale they were telling in fun but I thought it worth adding to this story.

In the old schools that were built in the woods (and you must remember all this country was a solid forest until cleared by the settlers) the boys and girls found vines growing from the ground high up into trees. You could cut this vine and have a wonderful swing, and a wonderful lot of fun. Did you ever swing on a vine swing? If you haven’t you have missed a lot of fun. Then, too, the boys always tried to be around when their special girl friend was to swing, then they could give her a big push and she would go real high. Then some were full of mischief and might give the girl a few jabs in the ribs and if she got tickled she couldn’t hold on.

(To be continued next week.)

All of the school books were bought by your parents, and you took perfect care of them as they had to last as long as a child in the family needed them, books were not changed often back then. You were not in a “grade” in those days as the “Fifth Grade”, but when the teacher wanted the geography class, she would say, “Fifth Reader Geography.” It meant all taking geography at that level must go to the recitation bench.

(You never heard of a recitation bench?) Shame on you. Where have you been? This bench was the long bench that was at the front of the room facing the teacher.

The students took turns reading their lessons with the teacher asking questions as the lesson progressed. Maps and globes were unheard of in all the first early schools. About all the maps the students ever saw were in their books, but in these schools with all the new fangled methods we have today. You drew maps, located places and rivers, etc., and when you got through you knew where these places were.

But pupils

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