

Bethinking of Old Orleans

C.W.Lattin County Historian

Vol. XIX

2-27-97

No. 9

SCHOOL DAYS



First, let me tell you about, and invite you, to an educational event. On Wednesday evening, March 12 the Cobblestone Society is hosting its annual winter dinner and program at the Village Inn located in Childs, N.Y. The keynote speaker for this occasion is Dr. Norman Bauer of Geneseo whose topic is "Foundations of Public Schooling During the National Period 1775-1860". This is by reservation only. For further details on menu choices, time, price, etc., please call 589-9510.

This is a program which will be of interest to all, especially educators and board of education members. We all pay taxes to support the public schools and most of us have received some or all of our education through them. But who of us has the slightest inkling of their origins and development? This topic is of particular interest and importance to the Cobblestone Society as the museum interprets the historic cobblestone school house at Childs.

Dr. Bauer is Emeritus full professor of Social Foundations of Education, State University of N.Y. Geneseo. He retired from the faculty in 1995 after 28 years as chairman of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction and classroom instruction. He has written numerous articles and reviews for more than twenty-five publications and lectured widely on the history of education.

Our photo with this article is an early school picture, perhaps taken in the 1870's of students attending the Caroline Street District School in the Village of Albion.

In Landmarks of Orleans County 1894 we find this information by Freeman A. Greene under the heading "Early Schools": "The district school in pioneer days was quite unlike the common school of today. The neat, well painted, well furnished, well ventilated, wood or brick school building now stands where the little log school house stood, with its high desks on three sides of the room, with seats behind for the big boys and girls, low seats in front for the small girls and boys, a big box stove in the center of the room, and the teacher's high desk in one end, usually opposite the front door. Slate and pencil instead of blackboard, quill pens, made by the teacher, took the place of the fine Spencian or Gillett steel pens now in common use. Books were few. Daboll's arithmetic, Webster's spelling book, the old English reader and Porter's rhetorical reader, and an atlas with a geography proper separate, used by the older boys and girls, completed the list.

"Only small children attended school in the summer season, in winter both large and small. The large boys prided themselves more upon their physical strength than upon their ability to cipher or parse. Physical culture was acquired in those days by wrestling, jumping and running. The

teacher must be a man of muscle as well as courage and brains, for the great sturdy, full grown boys too often would pick him up and pitch him out of the door or window.

"Mr. J.H. Swett in writing of the district schools of forty years ago tells this true story: A compactly built man by the name of Harman J. Tilden, was called to teach in the old brick school house, a mile east of Ridgeway Corners. His predecessor had been turned out. The first morning Mr. Tilden called the school to order, and every seat was filled. That day went well, as the boys were sizing him up. About the middle of the afternoon of the next day six burly fellows rose from their seats and began a march around the big box stove. A mild remonstrance from the teacher was followed with whistling, singing and stamping as they marched. The next instant Mr. Tilden was among them like an untied thunderbolt. He caught one of the biggest by the coat collar and the seat of his pants, and raising him at arms length over his head, threw him against the other five, who were standing, open-mouthed, watching this wonderful display of strength. As a consequence four of the bullies at once lay sprawled in a heap upon the floor. The other two faced the teacher with fists drawn to strike, and were at once promptly knocked down. By this time the other four regained their feet and started for the door, but Mr. Tilden was there first.

Backing up against the door, he spoke in a very mild and pleasant manner, while a sweet persuasive smile played upon his features.

"My young friends, will you now take your seats and remain there, or shall I be compelled to use force? I came to teach and manage this school, and it pains me to find so many of the scholars insubordinate."

"Taking out his watch and glancing at it, he continued: "It is now two minutes past 3 o'clock. If you are not in your seats in two minutes and six seconds past 3 o'clock I will proceed to administer to each of you the severest whipping you ever endured." At the word six seconds each one of the bullies started for his seat, and the school exercises proceeded as quietly as though nothing had occurred to disturb them. It is almost useless to say that Mr. Tilden's success was assured."

This description of early schools and circumstances shows the condition of early schools during their developmental period. Wouldn't Freeman Greene be astonished at the highly technological equipment found in our modern classrooms? Indeed, we've come a long way from quill pens to computers and from a time when all schooling was private to the vast public school complexes of today. Indeed, the public schools have been one of this country's greatest attributes. "Knowledge is Power"