

## Teaching at Oak Grove School

By  
Wilma Purcell

Oak Grove School was located two miles west of Alma. My grandfather gave each of his children 40 acres when they married. From my mother's share,  $\frac{1}{2}$  acre was donated for the site for the Oak Grove School. When the school was disbanded, it was considered government property and was sold at an auction. My family bought the land back, and another buyer purchased the building to use as lumber.

About half of the Oak Grove students continued their education at Kinmundy Alma High School, which had formed by consolidation in 1942. That was my first year in high school and the first year for school buses to Kinmundy. I didn't participate in extracurricular activities because I needed to ride the bus home. A girlfriend and I did attend the prom. I wore a blue taffeta dress, which I still have. At graduation I wore a purple cap and gown.

When I graduated, I started working at the Salem Dress Factory. In December of 1946, I took an eight-subject test at the County Superintendent's office. If I could pass that test, I could teach. I passed with flying colors. On January 2, 1947, I started teaching at Oak Grove, the only school I ever taught. I was 19.

The school ranged in size from 18-26 students. Grades 1-5 were taught every year. One year, 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grades were offered. The following year, 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades were taught. To graduate, a student had to be enrolled for eight years. This might mean that a student completed 8<sup>th</sup> grade and then had to come back for 7<sup>th</sup> grade.

Before the school day began, I had to make sure the building was clean. In the winter, I carried in the coal and fired the coal furnace. The day started with the ringing of the bell at 8:30. Some of the students would walk a lot of miles, and the bell would let them know how fast to walk to be ready to line up outside at 9. Following the pledge, they were seated and started their lessons. The boys wore overalls with a few wearing blue jeans. The girls wore dresses, or sometimes a girl would wear her

brother's overalls. People were still recovering from the Depression and World War II, and they didn't have much. The three-member school board purchased books, pencils, crayons, construction paper and notebooks for the students. They bought ink in gallon tin cans. It was my job to fill the inkwells. The books and supplies were picked up from Sweeney's Drug Store in Salem.

There was a cistern in the school entry way with a sink and pitcher pump for drinking water. A bucket of water sat beside it for hand washing. The bathroom was outdoors—one for the boys and one for the girls.

Some of the students brought lunch in metal lard buckets. It might be a peanut butter sandwich on homemade bread or a cold biscuit with fried egg in it. They usually had a homemade sweet—cookie or piece of cake their mother made. There was an orchard by the school, and the owner gave permission for the students to pick fresh fruit in season to supplement the lunch. Some hardly had any food at all. I asked the school board to buy an electric hot plate. Once a week, I would bring soup or ham and beans to provide a hot lunch. They got to depending on that.

The County Superintendent's office sent an assistant to the school on a monthly basis to evaluate. On the first visit, she knocked. After that, she came in unannounced. The County Superintendent's office provided a list of questions to use for the 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduation test. I wrote the exam on the chalkboard. The only duplicating machine was a hectograph. The hand written original copy was laid on a sheet of jelly. About 8-10 copies could be printed before fading out.

The school had a piano, and the county would send out a lady once a week to teach songs. We had a girl in the school whose mother played piano. She would come in between for more practice for the school Christmas program. The group sang, and some students sang solos. The children also memorized recitations for the program. Then I gave each student a gift. I still have a fan shaped vase from one of the families and ceramic duck and chicken from another.

Another holiday we celebrated was Halloween. The children would dress up and have a parade. I would bring hot dogs, buns, and marshmallows. My dad would build a bonfire, and we would have a wiener roast.

I had no college education when I started teaching. After that, I went to school in Carbondale every summer. During the winter, I took classes from University of Illinois in Salem and correspondence classes from University of Missouri. In the beginning, I was paid \$80 a month in 12 payments. Each year after that, I got a \$10 a month raise.

The first day I taught, a huge 15 year old young man came in with a pistol handle showing in his overalls pocket. He was nearly as old as I was and much bigger. I asked him to bring the gun to my desk and told him I would lock it in a drawer until the end of school and I never wanted to see the gun again. I didn't have any more trouble with him. Later I learned that the family was very poor and decided he probably was going to kill a rabbit on his way home to have for supper. He quit school at 16.

I didn't have much trouble, just a few ornery pranks. I remember one incident with a croquet mallet. After a pie supper, a swing set, baseball bats and gloves, and a croquet set were purchased. Everyone wanted to be the pitcher. Since I was still a teenager myself, I pitched and played with them to avoid arguments. One day a croquet mallet was missing. Someone told me it was in the boys' toilet in the pit. I went in and looked but did not try to retrieve it. No one confessed to the prank. About 12 years ago at an Oak Grove reunion, a group of men were talking about the mallet. The culprit was there and confessed.

The pie suppers were big affairs. All the women in the community, especially the single girls, would prepare a box supper with sandwiches and bake a pie. They would be auctioned, and the winning bidder would eat the meal with the girl who made it. One girl played a joke by making a beautiful pie and filling it with cotton. It brought a lot of money, but the fella was angry, and I gave back his money.

After six year of teaching, we decided we were living off the taxpayer dollar, and he was making enough money, and we wanted a family. So I

quit. My greatest pleasure in thinking back over my teaching experience is seeing children grow up and knowing I had a little influence in their success.