

“Katydids”
By Lex Shuler
“The Marion County Observer” – March 8, 2012

During the summer, the Katydids are at their best. Summer evenings get downright noisy with a few thousand Katydids, Coyotes, Owls and later on WeWah bugs. WeWah bug is the name my Mom used for this noisy insect critter. I have no idea what the entomologists call them. They are noisy separate and together they provide a background that sometimes impairs conversation.

When I hear all this natural noise I think of a few years back when I held a weekend long jam session here on the Hill. Pickers and singers came from all over, brought their tents and stayed all weekend. One band that attended was from St. Louis, or Kirkwood, MO to be more specific. Late on Saturday night there was a lull in the music and everyone was sitting around enjoying the night air and good conversation.

One of the gals from Kirkwood sat quietly for awhile and finally she broke the silence. We only thought it was silence, I guess. She said “You know ... everyone talks about how noisy the city is with traffic, trucks and horns and all, but this is the noisiest place I’ve ever been”. We all had to laugh because we were used to the sounds of nature that we hear all the time and didn’t consider it noisy in the least. I guess if we were out on the streets of St. Louis in the evening we would, of course, think that it was awfully noisy there.

I like the late summer noise here on the Hill and wouldn’t trade it for any other noise in the world.

Allmon School
March 1, 2012

I went to a one room country school all eight years of grade school. The school was on a one acre tract of land donated by the Allmon family who were early settlers in the area. The school was about two and a half miles from our home. We most often walked or rode our bicycles to school.

The school building was a frame structure consisting of the main room, a coal room, and two cloak rooms. One was a small room where the boys hung their coats and a shelf for lunch buckets. The other a girl's cloak room was a little larger and had a couple of steel cabinets that held the "library" and a table. The table was actually a sand box where kids could construct mythical villages when it was rainy. The main room had large windows on the north side; a real slate black board all across one wall, a jacketed coal furnace was in one corner closest to the coal room and in another corner a crockery water fountain. The fountain was filled by carrying water from the well near the corner of the front porch. There were two outdoor toilets spaced as distant as the one acre would allow. There were cinder paths leading to each of the outhouses. Both of the out houses had a board fence screen for privacy and two seats. A Sears and Roebuck catalog was provided for sanitary purposes. I remember that the index pages printed on pulp were always used first.

The main room of the school had a teacher's desk just in front of the black boards that faced the room and just in front of the desk was the recitation bench, a long wooden bench, which faced the teacher's desk. The rest of the room was filled with desks that were in rows facing the teacher's desk. All eight grades were in the same room if there were enough kids to fill all the classes. The smallest group attending school was about seven and the most was sixteen. I don't remember there being all eight grades at one time.

My teacher for ALL of those years was Jane Walker Stephens, a wonderful teacher who taught me more than anyone else ever did or was able to. She was a stately woman with rimless glasses and a mild demeanor but stern in her gaze when someone misbehaved. I noticed a lot of times when her humorous side made her blush although she tried not to show any emotion.

Outside there was a well with a hand pump and a flagpole stood in front of the school near the road. Upon arriving at the school the children would busy themselves with playful activities, one of the older boys would hoist the flag up the flagpole, and Mrs. Stevens would ring her hand bell which was the signal for all to take their seats at their desks and thus began the school day. My brother, Jack, has the brass hand bell today. He was the only student of Allmon School to become a teacher and Mrs. Stevens gave it to him when he started teaching. The daily routine started by calling each class to the recitation bench facing the teacher's desk with the usual "turn, stand, pass" call from each grade and subject. The other students would be studying, reading, fidgeting and sometimes napping or gazing out the windows wishing they were outside. The only thing that was not allowed was interrupting the class that was in session. Now, Mrs. Stevens would call down someone with a snap of her finger and a stern look. The "look" could turn you into stone, or worse and the snap of her finger was akin to thunder and lightning. We all avoided both if at all possible.

Mid morning was the first recess, a fifteen minute respite from boredom, study, or day dreaming. Everyone went outside if weather permitted. We would play tag, Red Rover, boys would tease the girls and vice versa. It was a welcome time that was ended by Mrs. Stevens ringing her brass bell.

Classes would resume until lunch time. Then everyone grabbed their lunch and either stayed inside or went out on the porch and devoured homemade sandwiches, cookies, apples and oranges. As I

look back all of the lunches, none contained any of the fattening things that kids eat today. After everyone finished their lunches it was time to play again. At the beginning of the school year there were new jump ropes, a new softball, a couple of new sponge rubber balls. The school had a homemade baseball bat that was used all eight of my years at the school. It was a club more than a bat. I was in the third grade before I could even lift it. The girls played jacks both inside and out.

On rainy days, Mrs. Stevens would conduct games for all. One of the games was called "Clap in, Clap out." Either the girls or boys would go into the cloak room and close the door. Names were drawn assigning a boy's name to each of the girls. The girls were seated at desks and they would draw a boys' name and announce it by clapping and calling the name. The one called would go and sit by one of the girls and if he picked the right one he remained seated, but if not, the girls would start clapping their hand to indicate that he had to return to the cloak room. This continued until all the boys were seated beside the girl that had his name. The name was fun and served as our introduction to social behavior.

The school day always began with music. We used the Golden Songbook, a volume of favorite songs with words and music. Mrs. Stevens would play the old upright piano and everyone gathered around and sang three or four songs. This was one of my favorite activities at school and I have one of those old song books in my collection.

Another of my favorite times at the school was Christmas. The week before Christmas, classes were suspended and we practiced our Christmas program. There was a curtain of paisley print material that was suspended with safety pins from a wire that went across on end of the class room. Desks were moved to clear the stage area behind the curtain. The program consisted of group singing, solos and trios, individuals doing recitations and small groups doing skits. We practiced the program for four days and then in the evening before Christmas, our parents and friends came to see our show.

Everyone participated, some performing and some moving furniture and drawing the curtain. Everyone had a part. After the performance Santa Clause would come in and pass out presents, oranges and candy. The first three or four years that I was a part of this program, the school had no electricity and the lighting was four large mantle lamps that were hung from the ceiling. This was a striking sight and I was actually disappointed when the electricity became available.

I will always relish the eight years I spent at Allmon School, Mrs. Stevens is still my favorite teacher of all time. My experience there was the better part of my education and I am thankful for that.

The Memory of Odors is Very Rich – March 1, 2012

I picked up a copy of the rerelease of John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* the other day and I turned to the very first page and one sentence caught my eye. "The memory of odors is very rich." Those words made me think of my grandpa Shuler. Grandpa, or Lee to others, was a rugged individualist who never worked on public work in his whole life. He always trapped for bearing animals, dug roots, gathered medicinal herbs, truck patched and the like to make a living.

In the early winter when the leaves have fallen, and the faint scent of a fox or some other critter is in the air, I can literally see Grandpa in his overall jumper, walking out across the hill with both arms behind his back, carrying a toe sack half full of steel traps. That time of year Grandpa had that exact smell from being outdoors, skinning out and stretching pelts. When I breathe in that air I always remember Grandpa. He's been gone over twenty years now but that odor can bring him back to me in an instant.

The Toby Show
Feb. 16, 2012

Now that it's getting close to spring I've started planning some of the things I want to do when the weather gets nice. I guess my mind wandered a bit and I began thinking about all the things I liked to do when I was a kid. I remembered the Toby Show and suddenly I longed for those days when life was a whole lot simpler.

Back in the late forties, the Toby Show used to come to Alma, Illinois during the fruit harvest. There were a lot of orchards around Alma and most people had a little spare change when the fruit was picked. The Toby Show would set up in a big tent on a vacant lot near downtown. If you had a dime, you could be entertained with music, poetry, skits, magic and comedy all rolled up into one big show. It was a form of vaudeville, I suppose, soon to be drowned out by television. There was always some mystery about the Toby Show. I always wondered where the people came from, what did they do when they weren't doing all that great stuff we came to see.

In later years, I did some research and found that there were quite a number of Toby Shows that traveled about the countryside entertaining folks and they were all called Toby Shows. I always assumed the performers were a family troupe and their last names were Toby. Actually the Toby show was a short lived phenomenon right at the tail end of live variety shows. Television and other entertainment media chased the shows back to their home bases and they were never heard from again. Well, I shall never forget the dark tent and the bright footlights, the songs and laughter. I'm sure it was a respite for the older folks and a way to forget the daily grind for a while, but for a boy of 8 or 9 years, it was wonderful, amazing, and mysterious.

“The Great Coon Hunt” – Feb. 16, 2012

Nearly fifty years ago I went on a coon hunt with my grandpa, dad, brother, cousin and a friend and after the hunt grandpa sat down and wrote a short story detailing what had transpired that night. The story was written in pencil on the back of a flyer advertising brooder equipment and an envelope that he had unfolded to make it larger. I have had the story for a long time and was going through some of my papers and discovered that it took place on the night of January 14, 1956. The last line of the story prompted me to post the transcription of grandpa’s story here.

The Great Coon Hunt of 1956

It was the last night of the coon hunting season. It was a fair night for Mister Raccoon to be making tracks. Well, it was dark and time to be going and away we went to Jim Creek bottoms with one old red dog named Due and one old yeller dog and an old dog named Shaky.

I almost forgot. There were some boys, all young coon hunters raring to go. The boys