

North River School House

Bennett, Iowa

Written by Avis Kenworthy

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Photo Taken by Gerald Rowles, Johnston, Iowa

The North River School house is a good example of native limestone construction; built in 1874 the schoolhouse was used continuously for 71 years. In 1945, North River was in sad shape when one of our retired history teachers, (Henry Miller) decided to clean and restore it.

The restored building today looks just like a country school of the 1930's and 40's. The North River School house has been placed on the National Registry of Historic Places.

About Country Schools

Before school began in the fall, the yard was mowed with a field mower, windows washed, and everything was cleaned for the teacher. Whoever was the Director of the School District either cleaned

up the school and premises, or hired it done before school started. My father, Royal Compton, was at one time the Director of the North River district.

School Grounds

The grounds were generally bare except for outside toilets; 1 for the boys and one for the girls. There was also a coal shed that was separate from the school.

Building

If the teacher was lucky, she had one or two reliable boys who banked the fire in the pot-bellied stove before they went home in the afternoon, and got an extra pail of coal in from the shed. In the morning, all the teacher had to do was open the damper and shake the ashes and it would start burning. In a short time the school was warm.

The stove usually sat a little bit ahead of the center of the room lengthwise, and at the center back where it joined the chimney.

Usually there wasn't a well on the school grounds. Boys were sent for water to the nearest farm home during recess. Water was not needed every day.

The school houses usually had an entryway. A pail of water and dipper stood on a bench in the entryway, as well as a wash basin on the same bench. There was usually soap there that could be used. In some schools, everyone brought their own tin cup and the cups were hung on the wall in the entryway.

The teacher usually supplied the towel which hung on a nail by the bucket and basin. Some schools had their towel on a roller. The teacher was responsible for the towel and keeping it, the basin and the bench clean.

Wraps were hung on hooks inside the door and boots placed under coats on the floor. The entryway was very cold in the winter. Before school dismissed, the children would march out and get their coats and wraps and bring them in, placing them on recitation bench to warm.

Every night the water bucket would be brought into the schoolroom. It would be frozen in the morning if it stayed in the entryway.

Academics

Children attended the country school from **1st grade thru 8th grade**. The average number of students in the school ran between 10 and 14. Sometimes there would be only 1 student in 1 grade. Sometimes there would be no students in a grade or two. Classes sometimes increased in winter when the boys were not working on the farms.

"Readin" "Writin" and "Rithmetic" were taught, along with History and Geography.

The Palmer method of penmanship was taught and the students practiced hard on making ovals, etc. Reading, grammar and spelling were worked on diligently as well. There were frequent “spelledowns”.

Usually held from the last recess until near the end of the day, two captains chose their teams for the spelledown. Teams lined up on each side of the room facing each other. Sometimes they spelled for “headmark”. All of the students were lined up, and each tried to gain the head of the line and remain there until the end of the session. The student at the head of the line would receive a point or “headmark” for that day. The teacher kept score for the year. If one was at the head at the end of a session, he got to take that place the next time the class had a spelledown. If he missed a word he went to the foot of the line and had to work up again, leaving someone else to the “headmark” for that day.

Arithmetic was addition, subtraction, multiplication through the 12s and division taught by memorizing. There were no math books used. The teacher used the blackboard. Student copied problems from the board.

Generally there was one arithmetic book used during the country school days. Work from the blackboard was done until about 5th grade, then the book was used. Students were to use only a specific number of pages each year. They gradually worked their way through the book and by the end of the eighth grade they were to have made it through the whole book.

Geography: There was always a globe and there were wall maps that were on rollers. There were the elementary geography books and the larger books were for the older grades. In the early 1900’s students learned about their home locations, section, township, county, state, U.S. and about the rest of the world.

History: Books were used in the same manner as the arithmetic books. The same book used thru the 8th grade. Only a certain number of pages were used for each grade.

There was a Recitation Bench at the front of the room, sometimes the schools had two benches. When it was time to recite, the class left their desk area and came to the bench in front. In this period in history the students seemed to have more individual attention. Facts were stored for years in their memory since pupils heard the previous year’s work repeated at the recitation bench. Since we all learn by repetition, it helped students to hear these recitations each year.

It is interesting to note that our so called “new” open spaces type of teaching resembles this old time method to some extent.

Discipline wasn’t too much of a problem in those days. Self respect and respect for others was more ingrained in back then

The 8th grade was usually the last grade attended; typically, the high school was too far away. There were some consolidated high schools. If you lived outside the district, tuition could be paid. One could either ride horseback or come by horse and buggy – or board at a home in town during the week and go home on the weekends, which is what I did. For those living in the District, there were horse drawn school busses; the busses were windowless and looked like boxes on wheels. There was only one window in the front where the driver sat. These were home built busses. Seats lined the side facing each other and in the winter, there was small stove inside for warmth.

Country School Teachers

Teachers typically boarded with a nearby family, which was usually a pleasant experience. The teacher walked to school in good weather, in winter, she entered the school and immediately began making the fire. Sometimes she met vagrants or tramps that had spent the night in the school to keep warm. Sometimes she just found their tracks upon entering the school.

Everyone brought their lunch in a sack or lunch buckets. There was usually a cupboard at the back of the classroom where lunches were kept. Some pupils remember each bringing a vegetable or meat and the teacher cooking a stew on the stove all morning.

There was a 1 hour lunch period from noon to 1:00 pm, and 15 minutes recesses at 10:30 and 2:30. School started in the morning at 9:00 and dismissed at 4:00 in the afternoon.

At 9:00 there may have been the Pledge of Allegiance and possibly singing of 2 songs chosen by the children. Sometimes the season suggested what was done at the beginning (We had marches played from records on the victrola). These opening activities never lasted more than 15 minutes.

The night before the teacher scheduled her day and worked the math problems and studied the subjects to be sure she was ahead of the class.

Teachers had to have graduated high school. That was the only qualification for receiving a teaching certificate through 8th grade.

Teachers I remember having at North River School House

Bessie Johnson
Eva Manders (who boarded at our house)
Maude Reid (married Floyd Bennett)
Mildren Radakovich
Laura Abrahams
Dors Binns
Hattie Balbusy

Facts about the North River School House

The school house was registered by the Madison County Historical Society, Inc. during the years of 1962 – 1973.

After the school closed, the land reverted back to the farm of Myles and Blair Young. They permitted its restoration. The grounds were reduced from 1 acre to 6,000 ft. The dimensions of the property are 100' long and 60 ' wide.

Madison County residents will be interested in the people who have worked on the restoration:

- A fence was put up by Hiram Allen, now deceased. He farmed nearby the school house.
- The outside painting was done by Raymond and Helen Rogers.
- The new roof and ceiling were completed by Albert Lehman and Lawrence Hooper – both policemen. They did the work on their days off.
- The plaster work was done by Mr. and Mrs. Max Osborn.
- All other work was done by Henry Miller, retired school teacher and secretary of the Historical Society in 1962.

The Madison County Historical Society spent approximately \$2,500 for labor and materials to restore the school house.

In May, 1971, the school was nominated for consideration as the site to placed n the National Registry of Historic Places. It is now on that register.

Note: Avis (Compton) Kenworthy currently lives 2 miles North of Earlham, Iowa with her husband of 67 years, Beryl Kenworthy. The couple resides on the Kenworthy Family Farm that has been owned by the Kenworthy family for more than 100 years. Avis will celebrate her 90th birthday on October 31st, 2008.

