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School Lunches and Concrete Outhouses, Students at One-Room Willey School Got More Than an Education

By David L. Burton

You can still see Willey School, District 27, standing four miles north of Willard, Mo., at the southeast corner of Farm Road 44 and Hwy. Z.

The school stands as a testament to rural education in the Ozarks which, just like the weathered exterior of the small one-room school, has changed a great deal since the turn of the century.

Willey was originally built in 1894 on two acres of land donated July 20, 1893, by Charles and Luther Willey, brothers who operated a steam-powered mill in Willard on Willey Street.

The school building itself has a concrete and block mix foundation and compost shingles with wood siding. In accord with common progressive school design philosophy of the time, light was provided primarily from a large bay of windows running the entire length of the left (or in this case the south) side of the building.

Few changes have been made to the original structure. The three windows on the north side of the building were removed and placed at the east end of the structure, thus allowing better lighting and perhaps making it easier to heat, during the early 1930s.

In a 1929 school survey Greene County's Superintendent of Schools noted that the "lighting in the building is all wrong ... unless you face the seats west." So apparently that issue was resolved by moving windows.

Another characteristic that developed in the 1930s was the addition of school kitchens or "hot lunch programs" so students could receive good meals.

During the 1930s, the Great Depression had impact on all aspects of North American life. As an answer to the critical situation of the country during the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt embarked on what seemed to be the only viable solution, the "New Deal."

In the education field, Roosevelt's "New Deal" did not have many supporters because it left control of schools to localities and failed to deliver federal assistance.

The addition of school kitchens was another federal suggestion that received mixed reviews in the rural areas of Missouri. Only a handful of schools added kitchens. Instead, most schools made use of the existing heating stove and added "cooking lunches" to the duties of the teacher.

Some teachers began cooking for students in the late 1920s but in most districts the cooking began as a project of the local Parent-Teachers Association (PTA) or the Works Progress Administration (WPA).

Reba Bomburger, a former one-room school teacher, recalls that during the depression her school actually received a cook from the WPA.

"The school (Rountree) received rations and our cook came in every day for a few hours to prepare lunch. She was paid by the WPA," said Bomburger.

The WPA lunch program (which originally targeted only the poorest school districts and poorest children nationwide) was such a success that school districts nationwide began to embrace the concept of school lunches for children.

Willey School, however, was actually "ahead of the times" in regards to school lunches. Ed Staley, a former student at Willey, recalled during a 2003 interview that the start of hot lunches was met with enthusiasm.

"Our local school board actually asked the teacher to start preparing lunches for us in the late 1920s," said Staley. "Our teacher usually cooked the meals using a kerosene stove that sat near the back of the room. We normally had potato soup. One student would bring milk and another potatoes and then we would rotate the responsibility to someone else. It worked well for us but the teacher had her hands full cooking for 25 students."

New out buildings, measuring up to state requirements replaced the first out building at Willey in the early 1930s.

"The plumbing in those school outhouses was terrible because there was no way to keep them sanitary," said Staley. "What struck me as funny was the school board decided maybe it would be more sanitary instead of having board seats in there, they'd use concrete. And, on a zero degree day, a kid went down there, sat down, and stuck to it. And he couldn't get loose. It pretty well took the hide off his legs. So, they did away with the concrete plumbing."

Class attendance and the length of terms is another aspect of rural education that changed during Staley's school years.

"Willey held classes for eight-months because that was what our tax levy would support. Still, some students would stop attending December through February because it was too cold to walk or ride a horse to school," said Staley. "During World War II we closed the school because there were so few students."

The ranks of Willey School grew when the Friendship district consolidated with Willey but the overall size of the student body remained small. By the 1920s the teacher was being paid \$30 a month for teaching, cooking lunches and serving as custodian.

In the spring of 1943 the operation of the school ceased and students were transported to the Willard School on a tuition basis. The school district was reorganized as part of Willard R-2 in the "state-mandated reorganization" of 1952.

During recent years the building has been used for storage but has been given maintenance by the Staley family, which has a long history associated with the building. Even now, walking into the building a person can nearly hear the shouts of children and the voice of the teacher who, according to a 1929 county survey, "always reads the Bible to students as an opening exercise."

Willey is an example of the types of educational facilities that helped make America an industrial success. Our county had a high rate of illiteracy until the rural schools began bringing education to agricultural areas. The importance of this movement really cannot be overstated.

One should consider the 55 remaining one-room schoolhouses in Greene County, Mo., as part of the county's historic piece quilt that, when blended together, tells a remarkable, colorful and meaningful story about rural education. Willey is certainly part of that colorful historical quilt.

Burton is author of the book, "A History of Rural Schools in Greene County, Mo.," and a frequently quoted expert on rural school buildings in southwest Missouri. Copies of Burton's book, either printed or on a compact disc, are available for \$18 (plus \$2 shipping and handling) from the Greene County University of Missouri Extension Center, 833 Boonville, Springfield, Mo., 65802.

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