

# WASHINGTON SCHOOL

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Our neighborhood school was located about a block west of the Brewer home, and it was here that the Brewer children received their early education. The three room frame building sat back from the road in a grove of hickory trees, and in the fall of the year when the nuts matured and fell to the ground, the students spent recess and part of the lunch hour cracking the hard shells with a rock or brick.

In each classroom were uncomfortable oak desks nailed to the floor (if I recall correctly, they were double desks), a potbellied stove, a brass hand bell and globe on the teacher's desk, a United States flag, and space for coats and lunch sacks. Here were offered the 3 R's, geography, and history with concentration on Washington and Lincoln, who stared at us from their places on the wall. At least once a month one Friday was devoted to special exercises, including spelling bees.

Between the written work, memory assignments, or recitations, a courageous soul would take a pocket knife when the teacher was not looking and scratch on the top of the desk. Sometimes the lines would be no more than initials near the forbidden records of older students. At other times he might add such expressions of love as M.L. + A.G. or a crudely drawn heart pierced with an arrow. With the passing of years each sturdy piece of wood became a chronicle of the many students who had attended Washington Elementary School.

At noon we ran home for the main meal or for hot soup and corn bread in cold weather. The favorite of the family was delicious bean soup, thick and steaming. A dessert, stacked applesauce shortcake or fruit turnovers, we called them half-moon pies, completed the meal. The warm kitchen heated by a coal-burning stove, and the aroma of cooking food gave us a respite from the studious atmosphere of the classroom. We did not linger long, however, for it was important that we rush back to play on the swings and seesaws or to join in other activities.

Several years later a two-story brick building with eight classrooms was constructed in front of the old one. To the students it was sheer luxury to have large, bright rooms, water fountains in the halls, and wide stairways. A long cloak room adjacent to each classroom provided ample space for our possessions and was also used as a restricted area for troublemakers. Better educated teachers joined the faculty, including a personable young man who gave impetus to learning, at least for the older girls. By the time our group reached the eighth grade, the school board decided it was too small for a full-time teacher and we were forthwith dispatched to Lee School in the north section of town near Fifth Street.

Much has been forgotten about the year. Only the new friends that I made and the principal, a large, burly man, stay in my memory. He taught the

eighth grade and oftentimes sat with his feet propped on the desk. To the astonishment of his students he would occasionally lean forward slightly and with little effort spit out the window.

During those formative years the most influential person in the lives of the Brewer children was our gentle and beautiful mother who had been a schoolteacher in Graves County before her marriage. We sat around a coal-burning fire in the family room during the winter months and recited the multiplication table. We studied our spelling lesson by dividing the word and pronouncing and spelling each syllable. She listened as we delivered our memory assignments and helped us with our math problems which at the time were the "bane of our existence."

There was no question who was in command, our parents and our teachers. The unwritten code of conduct - punished at school, punished at home - was much discussed then, but I do not remember that the Brewer children received double punishment for their mistakes, though it is possible that we did. We understood the rules - what we were permitted or forbidden to do. We probed, we tested, but a reprimand, no matter how mild, usually brought us in line, especially if spoken by our father. At school the recalcitrant students, usually boys, who used profanity, talked back to the teacher, or started a fight were punished swiftly, and few questions asked. When we were older, our mother who was an officer in the Parent Teacher Association once mentioned to us that she did not always agree with the decisions of the teachers, but being a wise mother she remained silent.

The so-called good old days were not very kind to young children. During the winter months we wore layers of clothing, including bulky, long underwear until the early weeks of April. The legs, easily stretched, were folded at the bottom to fit into long stockings, giving an unsightly look to our appearance. On rainy days we walked through puddles of water and tracked mud into our homes and schoolrooms. Heavy, buckle overshoes were usually reserved for snow. Children were sick much of the time and kept at home. To protect them from such childhood diseases as measles, chicken pox, whooping cough, and the dreaded diphtheria, a few mothers hung asafetida bags around their children's necks. The fetid gum resin succeeded in one way: it kept us at a distance from those classmates.

In cold, damp weather there were no places to play, and though all the Brewer children did not attend Washington School at the same time we followed a similar routine at the dismissal of classes. Bernie and I went directly home to the warmth of familiar surroundings. Our brothers rushed into the house, however, threw their books on the floor, and called "Mamma." When she answered, they took off again, slamming the door behind them. Happy to be out-of-doors, they stood in front of the house, wrestled with neighbor boys, or more than likely walked briskly to our father's coal office several blocks away.