

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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Education was a serious matter in 1911 when these boys and girls attended the Stoen School on the western prairie of Minnesota. It has been preserved and restored as the one-room country school at the Ramsey County Historical Society's Gibbs Farm Museum in Falcon Heights. See the articles beginning on Page 4.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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On the Cover: School children pose with their teacher, Andrew Peterson, the man in the hat. Ernie Kittleston, who gave this photograph to the museum, is the little boy second from the left in the front row. See articles beginning on page 4.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 26, Number 2 Summer, 1991

CONTENTS

- 3 Letters
- 4 The Little White School House on the Prairie
Harlan Seyfer
- 14 Dog Sled to Private Car: The Peregrinating Hills
Thomas C. Buckley
- 22 Walter Sanborn and the Eighth Circuit Court
Thomas H. Boyd
- 28 A Matter of Time
- 30 Books, Etc.
- 31 What's Historic About This Site?
First National Bank
of White Bear Lake

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A Message from the Editorial Board

While this issue of *Ramsey County History* focuses on the school house at the Gibbs Farm Museum, the peregrinating family of James J. Hill and the career of Judge Walter Sanborn, the Editorial Board already is looking ahead to the fall issue. On November 1, the city of St. Paul will celebrate the 150th anniversary of the naming of the city. *Ramsey County History* will share in this celebration with an article on "the real" Pierre "Pig's Eye" Parrant, a look back at the early days of St. Paul and a fascinating account of the experiences of one of the city's first settlers—the Perry family. We at *Ramsey County History* look forward to this landmark event next fall and hope you will, too.

We also remain interested in your comments on articles in past issues of this magazine. We're inviting you to bring a bag lunch and participate in the second in our new discussion series based on these articles. Please join us from 12-1 p.m. Thursday, July 18, in Courtroom 408, Landmark Center, St. Paul.

—John M. Lindley, chairman, Editorial Board

Simpler Times, Obvious Virtues

The Story of the Little White School House on

Harlan Seyfer

One-room, one-teacher rural schools hold a unique place in North American folklore, representing simpler times with clearer values and obvious virtues. However accurate that portrayal, it was the nation's small country schools which went so far to assimilate a diverse immigrant population into American society.

This is the story of one of those schools, the Stoen school house, which still exists as a living history museum on the grounds of the Ramsey County Historical Society's Gibbs Farm Museum at 2097 W. Larpenteur in Falcon Heights. While it is typical of the one-room schools that educated Ramsey County's children ninety and more years ago when Ramsey County was predominately rural, the Stoen School stood for most of its history in rural Chippewa County, some 140 miles west of its present site. It served Chippewa County School District #35 and the Norwegian immigrants who settled on the western prairie and built the school.

Chippewa County was established in February of 1862 but it remained unorganized, without a county government, until March, 1868. The county was named after the Chippewa River, which joins the Minnesota River there. Six years later, in 1874, Big Bend Township, named for a bend in the Chippewa River, was organized. Early settlers of interest to the future school were Nels Hagen and Nicolai Hanson, both of whom settled in section 4, and Ole S. Gjerset, who took land in section 8.

The country was rapidly filling with settlers from Norway. Schools were needed and on October 2, 1876, School District #35 was formed. It included sections 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 16, 17, and 18 in township 119, range 41, otherwise known as Big Bend Township.

It was around this time that Ole Petter Halvorson arrived and settled in the township with his young family. The land he chose for his farm was the eighty acres

comprising the west half of the northwest quarter of section eight—land upon which the District #35 school house would eventually stand. The 1880 census states that Ole was thirty-two and his wife, Anna, thirty; both were born in Norway. They had two daughters, Gina and Hilda, eight and six, and a son, Henry, three. That year also, the N.K. Hagen family had five children aged twelve or younger. The Ole Gjerset family had five offspring under fifteen. A school obviously was necessary.

District #35 was created in 1876, but it wasn't until six years later that a permanent school house was built. There could have been many reasons for this. J.S. Pound, the county superintendent of schools in the late 1870s, probably painted an accurate picture of the situation, when he wrote in 1877:

"Although the grasshoppers have devastated almost the entire county of Chippewa for two years in succession, and many of the inhabitants have removed to more favored locations, the interests of education are not forgotten. Four neat and comfortable frame school houses have been built, and improvements made on others. The number of pupils enrolled is 30 per cent. greater than last year, with a larger percentage of attendance."

In financially tight times (there had been a depression in the early 1870s), money might not have been available for hiring a teacher. In such an event, school would either not open that year or one of the parents would have assumed the teaching chores. A very common frontier practice, in the absence of a school house, was

to hold school in one of the settler's homes. There are no records from this period in the school's history; however, it is possible that District #35 first convened in the prairie dugout residence of the Gabrielson family.*

We know very little about the first school board members. S.O. Sien was clerk of the District #35 School Board in 1880 through 1883. In 1883, O.C. Saterbakken served on the board with him as director and N.K. Hagen was treasurer. Sander Sien, twenty-seven years old, and his wife, Rose, twenty, must have had their eyes on the future; they had no children when the 1880 census was taken.

In the early 1880s, Chippewa County had one of those rare people—a county superintendent of schools who kept more than the minimum records required by law. We owe to his conscientious efforts and detailed record-keeping a debt of gratitude, for he shows us almost the only glimpse of District #35 in the pioneering days. O.J. Rollevson was twenty-eight when he assumed his responsibilities as Chippewa County superintendent of schools on the first of December, 1881. In November, 1879, when he received his certificate to teach in Chippewa County, he'd had fifteen school terms as a teacher behind him, more than twice that of the next most experienced teacher in the county that year.

Rollevson clearly considered education his profession and took his responsibilities seriously. Upon assuming office, he wrote the following preamble to the record of his superintendency:

** The Gabrielsons counted in their family of seven, three girls under fifteen years of age in 1880. Two of these, Gurine and Ragnhild, appear to have been twins, aged fourteen. Every member of the family had been born in Norway.*

on the Prairie

“Being of the opinion that it is the duty of the county superintendent to keep a systematic record of the visitation, the condition and progress of the schools in the county, and feeling that the educational advancement of the people demand it, I have made it my object to keep the ‘Records’ in such a way as will enable any one to see how we stand with reference to the educational affairs in our county.”

Rollekson continued by citing a few facts concerning the progress of education in Chippewa County:

No. of School Districts organized in 1870—1

No. of School Districts organized in 1880—42

No. of Scholars in 1870—0

No. of Scholars in 1880—1,222

No. of School-houses in 1870—0

No. of School-houses in 1880—31

Population in 1870—1,467

Population in 1880—5,362

He first dropped by District #35 on March 31, 1882. His entry for that visit is informative:

“Visit in School Dist. #35, Miss. Tilla Thompson, teacher. Enrollment 37. Scholars not far advanced, but doing quite well under circumstances. School Dist. #35 was organized in 1876; the school house is just built. Nice frame-house 18x24 and 10 ft. high. The school house is situated in Sec. 8, Town[ship] of Big Bend. Cost of school house \$400.”

A few items are worth noting here. Before the turn-of-the century, enrollment could be three or four times the actual attendance. While there was work to be done on the farm, many families could not afford to have a pair of hands, no matter how young, to be away. Low attendance, of course, would solve the problem of fitting the total enrollment into the small school house. Rollevson makes no men-



The little school house as it looked in June, 1941, when it still stood out in Chippewa County, near Milan, Minn. The boys in the foreground are Virgil, left, and Lester Larson. Photo from Lu Ella Dahl.

tion of an entry room. Probably several years passed before one was added. Although he gives the dimensions of the school house as 18 by 24 feet, he was unlikely to have bothered to take precise measurements. The present structure measures 16 by 32 feet.

Tilla Thompson was twenty-two or twenty-three in 1882 and had taught five terms previously. She was paid for teaching a three-month term in 1882. Although we have no direct record of it, District #35 was probably in session only for those three months during the 1881–1882 school year.

A year later, on March 8, 1883, when he next visited the school, Rollevson recorded, “Enrollment 40 — scholars improving, but a little noisy.” Tilla Thompson was again the school’s teacher. As in the previous year, she was paid for a three-month term. This would have been about \$30 a month, including room and board.* She either lived with one of the families in the school district or boarded around. If the latter, then customarily she would stay

with each family according to the number of children they had in the school. She would have stayed twice as long with a family having, for example, four children enrolled than with a family having two.

In the following year, the school would have its first male teacher. Rollevson noted:

“December 6, 1883: Visit in Dist. 35—Mr. P.P. Iverslie, teacher. Enrollment 38 — scholars not far advanced. Mr. Iverslie is a silent teacher, studying hard but saying very little.”

Rollekson seldom visited a school twice in the same school year. However, the uneasiness he felt after his December visit may have prompted him to drop in later that term. This time he came away with a clearly positive impression:

** It is interesting to note that teachers and hired farm hands were considered equals when it came to compensation. Each received their room and board and each was paid approximately the same monthly wage.*

"February 21, 1884. Visit in Dist. 35. Mr. P. P Iverslie, teacher. Enrollment 45 – scholars doing quite well. A brand-new Webster Unabridged Dictionary is seen on the desk—a tally for Dist. 35."

Iverslie had taught twenty-one terms by the time he was forty in 1884. Since he was paid for teaching a four-month term that year, we may conclude that the school year in District #35 was extended from three to four months for the 1883–1884 school year. There is no record of the dates the term started and ended in District #35. Each district's school board was responsible for setting these dates. Hence, they often varied among neighboring districts. Rollevson's early December and late February visits do give us a hint, however:

"January 27, 1885. Visit in Dist. 35 – Mr. P. J. Falkenhagen, teacher. Enrollment 36 – scholars doing well. Mr. Falkenhagen is teaching his first term and his energy and enthusiasm is [sic] commendable."

The year 1885 was an interesting year for the Stoen school. That spring, T.E. Johnson petitioned the Chippewa County commissioners to remove from School District #35 the southeast quarter of the southeast quarter of section 16 and attach it to School District #11. His petition was granted on July 29. Johnson's farmstead at the turn-of-the-century was located slightly closer to the District #11 school, the difference being about a quarter of a mile. He was even closer to District #17's school, but chose for some reason not to affiliate with that institution of learning.

Also in 1885, the first legal transaction occurred affecting the land upon which the school stood. On October 30, Ole Halvorson, having improved the land for five years, met the conditions of the Homestead Act and received his deed (homestead certificate #6299) to the west 1/2 of the northwest 1/4 of section 8. Just in time, perhaps, for on this same date he also took out a mortgage for \$200 with the Farmers and Mechanics Savings Bank of Minneapolis. No mention was made of the school house sitting on his property. Again, the conscientious Rollevson notes another visit in his records:

"December 16, 1885. Visit in Dist. No. 35—Miss Susie S. Moe, teacher. Enrollment—36 scholars quiet and the young

teacher is trying to [do] her duty towards the scholars committed to her care. The school-house has been furnished with home-made desks and seats and they are painted."

Susie Moe was about eighteen at the time she taught in the school. This was not especially young for a teacher. The requirement for a teaching certificate at the time in Minnesota was a passing mark on the county superintendent's exam. The test assumed an eighth-grade education and no more. Effectively, then, the only requirement was that Susie had to have completed the course of study in a school similar to the one she would be teaching. Young girls

Teachers and Hired Farm Hands Were Considered Equal in Wages

frequently progressed more rapidly in their education than boys, since the latter were frequently expected to help out on the farmstead. Because of this, it was not uncommon for a very youthful female teacher to be instructing strapping farm boys several years older and hands taller than herself.

Susie may not have realized it, but she was teaching at the school in a significant year for the history of education in Chippewa County. We take it for granted today that everyone attending school is placed in grades. This was not always the case, however. Rollevson noted in his county superintendent's record book that, "The grading of the schools in Chippewa County took effect Aug. 2, 1886."*

Before this, students would progress through each subject at their own pace. Thus a student who was an excellent reader could advance rapidly in that subject. However, if the student needed additional help in arithmetic, he or she could proceed at a more thoughtful pace in that subject. There were sets of readers, McGuffey's perhaps is the most famous, that served, more or less, as the milestones of one's education. By the time young scholars had made it through the sixth reader they were con-

* *Classification of schools into grades began in Prussia during the 1830s. The first graded school in the United States, Boston's Quincy School, opened in 1848.*

sidered ripe for graduation. Another Rollevson visit:

"December 1, 1886. Visit in Dist. 35—Miss Susie S. Moe, teacher. Enrollment 35—grading begun. The school-house has been painted both inside and outside."

New desks last year and a fresh coat of paint this year! It is quite evident that the neighborhood was prospering and taking a lively interest in the condition of its school. This was the last entry that Rollevson, that conscientious public servant who took a good deal of pride in his accomplishments, was to make concerning District #35:

"My official term as Supt. of Schools in and for the county of Chippewa expiring on the first day of January 1887, it may be proper enough, perhaps, to review briefly what has been done during these five years. Entering on my duties as Superintendent, Dec. 1, 1881, I found too much superficial work, but, if 'persistence is the father of good luck,' then we have been in luck, because we have persistently set aside all superficial lustre and taken hold of the elementary part of solid work. During these five years we have advanced slowly but carefully, and I am now enabled to deliver the schools graded into the hands of my successor, who undoubtedly [sic] is competent to push the good work ahead and apply a polishing touch wherever and whenever it may be considered proper so to do.

"From Dec. 1, 1881, to Dec. 31, 1886, I have made 446 visits and examined 471 persons, I have written about 4,000 letters and communications, in short, attended to my business—how well is not for me to say. As an unassuming public servant I have tried to execute my duties faithfully and impartially. That is all I have to say.

"In conclusion I present the outlook for the coming year, as follows:

Schools—graded.
Scholars—active.
Parents—interested.
Teachers—faithful.
Prospects—encouraging."

Wegdah, Minn. Dec. 31, 1886.

O.J. Rollevson, Co. Supt.

With that he stepped back into the teaching ranks. On February 17, 1887, the record book shows that his successor, O.E. Saunders, visited Rollevson, then



Inside of the school house in 1910. Ernie Kittleson, who donated the photograph, is second from right in the front row.

teaching District #29. Coincidentally, on the same day, Saunders also visited District #35:

"February 17, 1887. No. 35 Susie Moe, teacher. Enrollment 37, average [attendance] about 15. Bad weather affects this like all the rest. Teacher tells pupils too much, asks too many leading questions. Think this is a lack of thoroughness. Pupils not independent enough in answering. Cautioned her about the above named faults. Group of the parents visited school with me."

On July 10, 1900, the school district again grew smaller when the remainder of section 16 and all but the northwest quarter of section 17 were transferred to School District #21.

The 1914-1915 school year could be considered typical of the early part of this century. Thea Christianson was paid \$45 to teach each of the six months school was in session. Twenty-two students were enrolled, but there were only seventeen seats in the school. The students ranged from four eight-year-olds to twenty-three-year-old Anton Anderson.

Over time the school year grew, as did the teacher's salary. In 1922-1923 Leona Dalen was paid \$95 a month for a seven-month school year. The school term was increased to eight months in 1930; howev-

er, the teacher's salary remained at \$95. The myth that all teachers were single was put to rest that year by Mrs. Olga Gilbertson. She taught an enrollment of twenty-three students, although the three Olson children left to attend school in Milan.

The school district's title to the land upon which the school house stood remained informal until 1944. On March 1 of that year, Ole Halvorson's original claim was deeded by several heirs to Paul and Olga Paulson. That transaction specifically excluded the 324 square rods of the school grounds. On the same date, School District #35 purchased the school land from the same heirs for \$140.

On February 10, 1951, Paul and Olga Paulson sold their farm surrounding the school to Ernest and Manford Stoen "for the sum of one dollar and other good and valuable considerations." It was probably after this date that District #35 came informally to be called the Stoen School.

The year 1957 was another significant year in the history of the school. Over that summer, the rural schools of Chippewa County were reorganized and renumbered. District #35 became District #297. During the previous school year (1956-1957) enrollment had been thirteen. The year of reorganization (1957-1958), it dropped to five and never

rose above six before the school was abolished. Only the first six grades were now taught. By the late 1950s, the teacher's salary had risen to \$300 a month when the school year was nine months.

By the mid-1960s, it was becoming clear that it was no longer cost-effective to keep the school open for so few students. The school board briefly considered closing the school in 1964; however, the members decided to try to keep it in session for one more year. Unfortunately, during the 1964-1965 school year, just three students were enrolled: Ramona and Nancy Thompson and Cheri Kanton in the second, fourth and fifth grades, respectively. The board finally decided to close the school. The teacher, Hilda Thompson, presided over the last day of school on January 22, 1965.

The school land was sold to Ernie Stoen on August 6, 1965, for one dollar. School District #297, formerly #35, was legally dissolved on August 9, 1965. All students thereafter attended Independent School District No. 128 in Milan. Fortunately, this was not to be the end of the school house. Events to the east, in St. Paul, were taking place to save it for future generations.

The Search

On April 2, 1961, the Committee on Policy for the Ramsey County Historical Society (RCHS) presented its final report. In it the committee recommended to the board of directors that the Society "secure and place upon the Gibbs Homestead property and restore to its original state a one-room school house as our next major project."

It was not until February, 1963, that the search actually began. That August the RCHS board formed a school house committee chaired by Frank Paskewitz and including Hal McWethy and George Nelson. Correspondence, however, over the next year with school superintendents in half-a-dozen counties revealed that the supply of about-to-be-abandoned rural school houses was fast dwindling.

In June, 1964, the first tentative step was taken down the path that led to the Stoen School.

Finally, shortly after New Year's Day, 1966, the school house made its 140-mile journey to the Gibbs Farm Museum.

The summer school program was begun that first summer of 1966, following the school's arrival at the museum. Much of the curriculum was developed with the assistance of history students from Macalester College. This one-day program was popular from the beginning and has continued every year since then. A portion of the Cahill school program in Edina was based on the RCHS program and inquiries have been received from as far away as New Jersey concerning management of the school house as a living history museum.

In 1966, in the Spring issue of the RCHS magazine, *Ramsey County History*, Frank Paskewitz published his reminiscences of his early school years in a rural Minnesota school. When he began his education in 1906, Minnesota had 7,471 one-room schools. When his article was published sixty years later, these were down to 803. As of 1990, there was but one one-room public school in Minnesota. It was in Angle Inlet in Lake of the Woods County, the northernmost area of the state.



Posing on the porch. This photograph from by Huldah Strand was taken in 1956. Back row, left to right, are Judith Bohm, Dallas Thompson, Jeanne Kanten, Phylliss Bohm and Judith Gabrielson. Front row, left to right: Barbara Belseth, Michael Kanten, Dudley Gustad and Paul Belseth.

‘A Family Feeling . . .’

On Sunday, September 25, 1988, a reunion of former Stoen School teachers, school board members and students was held at the Gibbs Farm Museum. Accompanying each invitation was a questionnaire designed to solicit recollections of the rural school house during the years it stood out on the western prairies of Minnesota.

Seven teachers, one school board member and seventeen students replied and sent the snapshots that accompany these articles. While time has fogged some memories, they otherwise come through crystal clear, demonstrating a closeness to and a love for the little school. Teachers and students alike remembered each other with affection and wrote fondly of the “family feeling” the school engendered. They recalled basket socials and Christmas programs, the highlight of the school year for everyone.

Several teachers reported that they disliked the outdoor privy and that they didn't like building the fires in the wood-burning stove before the school board installed an

oil burner. They praised their students' willingness to help with chores.

Many students described as their favorite lunch the potatoes they baked in the ashes of the wood stove. Nearly all said they walked to school, carrying lunches in empty syrup pails.

The Teachers

Myrtle Olson Thompson taught at the Stoen School during the 1917-1918 school year. She protested that “at ninety-two I have lost my neat handwriting and I hope you can decipher it,” but her reminiscences were written in a clear, steady hand.

“There were twenty-some pupils at the time I taught there. My sister, Selma Olson, also taught there somewhat later. One time we were caught in a snow storm and decided to stay in the school house for the night. We were all set and ready when a couple of near-by farmers managed to come through. They divided the pupils between them to stay with them, as they could telephone their parents who lived farther away. Yes, [Mr.] Stoen came for me and their two boys in a cutter across the field and snow drifts. We did make it, too. I boarded with the Stoen family.”

Lillian Andrews Lang recalled that she taught there at two different periods during the late 1920s and early 1930s.

“The pupil load ranged from mid-twenty to mid-thirty. I always had all eight grades and it just seemed natural. I taught rural schools for ten years in Chippewa County and I enjoyed it.

“The first few years the Stoen School was heated by wood or coal. Later an oil burner was installed, which was such a welcome addition. As teacher, you were nurse, janitor, teacher, recess supervisor and ‘mother to the youngsters.’

“In the fall of the year we had a basket social with a program. Girls brought baskets of goodies and the boys and men bid on the baskets. The highest bidder would get to eat with the girl whose basket he bought. This went on until all baskets were sold. The money was used for things needed at school. At Christmas we had a big program for the parents. Lunch was served by the mothers and gifts were ex-

The Old Gibbs School - Reminder of an Era

Across Larpenteur Avenue from the Ramsey County Historical Society's Gibbs Farm Museum stands the last one-room country school house still on its original site in the county. Built in 1873 on land that once belonged to Heman Gibbs, the school was known as the Gibbs School because Gibbs, a farmer who once was a school teacher, helped organized School District #16. He and his neighbors built the little school so their children, who earlier attended a small school on the southeast corner of present-day Snelling and Larpenteur Avenues, wouldn't have so far to go to school. Gibbs

lived across Larpenteur from the school and an early teacher, Mary Lake, roomed with the Gibbs family. A room in the farmhouse museum is still called "the Teacher's Room."

In the 1930s, the school house was renovated as part of a WPA project. Indoor restrooms, a furnace in the basement and a small work space were added when the building acquired a new entry area. The school served the area, and especially the neighborhood known as the University Grove, until 1959 when it closed its doors for the last time to students.

The University of Minnesota bought

the school house from the Roseville School District and for the next thirty-two years used it as storage for University departments. In September, 1990, an arsonist set a small fire on the west side of the building, damaging it to the point where the University has considered destroying it altogether. However, a citizens group has petitioned the University to repair the school house and help preserve it as a reminder of an era in education now long past. As of this date, no decision has been made regarding the possible demolition of the building. —Tamara C. Truer

changed.

"On the last day of school a picnic was usually held at a parent's home, with lots of food and home-made ice cream. I enjoyed teaching at the Stoen School. We were often crowded, but with a good bunch of parents and pupils, it was fun. However, we really had to work on school subjects as the seventh and eighth grade pupils had to pass real difficult state examinations to be promoted. The part I didn't like was building a fire on cold mornings with no place to get warm until it got warm in the building."

Rose Budd Dahl was a teacher there from 1938 to 1939 and from 1940 to 1941.

"Eight children attended the school each of the two school terms I taught. I can't recall a time when they didn't go outside for recess. The school was kept in very good condition. The upkeep was done without my knowing it.

"I believe in children helping with chores. The children had very good work habits. After an evaluation, the county superintendent wrote that, 'You surely do get good responses.' What I liked least was the responsibility of making fires in the stove to have the right temperature in the school. The students were well behaved in the classroom, but liked a little fun, such as trying to duck out of having a picture taken."

LuElla Harbour Dahl remembered that her first year of teaching was spent there in the early 1940s.

"I had nine or ten students. My salary was \$70 a month and I felt lucky to receive that amount because some of my [college] classmates were only receiving \$65 a month. If the weather was stormy or too cold to play outside, we played games inside, such as Fruit Basket Upset or circle games.

"The students had certain chores to do, such as cleaning erasers. About once a month, someone from the district would come and wash the floor and do other general cleaning chores. I stayed with Mr. and Mrs. Louis Larson and walked to and from school.

"There was a cozy 'family-type' character in one-room schools. Older students helped the younger ones and I think everyone benefited from those experiences. I taught in rural schools in Chippewa County for five years, until I was married. It's rather unique that another school I taught in is now part of Pioneer Village in Montevideo."

Adaline Olson Aarhus taught from the fall of 1951 to the spring of 1954.

"There were about fifteen pupils each year. One thing we did in the winter was square dancing. I taught for a total of thirty years in seven different districts in Chippewa and Swift Counties. In the Stoen School I was paid \$240 a month. I was married when I taught there. My youngest child started first grade that year. I have four children. There was no special maintenance done. I did the chores myself.

"I enjoyed the high level of intelligence and interest in the people. I did not enjoy the snow storms when I worried about the safety of the children. I remember one year I was reading Laura Ingalls Wilder's *The Long Winter*. It seemed as if the weather and the story were hand-in-glove. Transportation was my main concern. I lived about seven miles from school.

"One winter was especially bad. I was snow-bound at a farm place for three days. In the spring when the snow melted, my road was flooded. It was rather frightening."

"The group in school was like a happy family. I enjoyed them very much. We had Halloween and Christmas programs which parents attended. The first year I taught in the Stoen School, I was also attending night courses in Montevideo. Instructors came out from St. Cloud one night a week. In that way I was able to renew my certificate and have it valid for five more years."

Huldah Strand taught for three years, from 1954 to 1957. "I had ten to fifteen pupils. The last year I taught there my salary was \$2,700 a year. At recess time on stormy days we played games indoors. I cannot recall what maintenance was done while I was there, but the children helped me by hanging out the flag and bringing in water.

"I enjoyed everything while I taught there except the outdoor 'biffy.' I had the best students and terrific parents. My

school board was super. I will never forget the good times we had at our Christmas programs. Everyone in the district came, so the little school house was packed. We also had school parties for Halloween, Valentines Day and Mothers' Day. These were planned by the children.

"We had a great time when the first grade and their teacher from the Milan School came out and spent the day with us. They wanted to know what it was like to spend a day in a rural school. After I left the Stoen School, I taught at McCarron's Lake School in Roseville for sixteen years until I retired."

Hilda Larson Thompson taught from 1957 to 1965 and was the school's last teacher.

"The number of students varied from six to twenty-two. During recess on stormy days, we played a variety of games, such as Fruit Basket Upset, and locating cities, countries, rivers and other interesting things on large maps. We also worked on projects that we brought to our booth at the Chippewa County Fair. Spell-downs were frequent. During the nice weather, we played outside on our school grounds, games such as baseball, Anti-I-Over with a ball, King-on-the-Mountain, etc. We were never at a loss as to what to do.

"I also taught at two other schools in Chippewa and Swift Counties. I received the going wages at the time, from \$65 to \$95 a month during the earlier years and \$300 a month later on. I was married when I taught school and took three or four credit courses each year to keep up to date on my teaching certificate."

"The Stoen School had all the maintenance it needed. It was painted and varnished as needed. Everything at the school was well scrubbed and cleaned at least once a month, including floor, windows and curtains. The children helped willingly with some of my chores. They would take turns at washing and drying the blackboards, dusting the erasers and emptying the wastepaper baskets.

"I enjoyed being so busy at school, trying to get all the work done that I wanted to get done. The students were very cooperative and willing to learn. We were like a big family, each helping the other. The older students helped the younger

ones when it came time for dressing up to go out to play at recess time or to go home after school. We also all enjoyed having a 'Play Day,' when all the rural districts would get together at one rural school's playground and have competitive ball games and other games."

The School Board

Harold Bohm was clerk of the school board from 1950 to 1957. He recalled that he became a school board member because he "was asked to run." He also remembered that while he served on the board he "painted, repaired and put in a new floor in the school's entry."

The Students

Ernie Kittelson, a student from 1909 to 1916, through the first through seventh grades, remembered that he walked to school, that he went home for lunch and

'We Were Caught In A Snow Storm and Decided To Stay in the School House for the Night'

that baseball was his favorite recess pastime. One of the chores he performed around school was carrying water in from a well. He also remembered looking forward to the annual Christmas program.

Lillian Andrews Lang was a student from 1913 to 1921. Later, she taught at the school.

"I started school at the age of seven. My first grade teacher was Gertrude Prutt from Northfield, Minnesota, and she was the best teacher I ever had. I can still recall how she taught me the letters using the blackboard and a long pointed stick.

"When I was in the fourth and fifth grades, my teacher was Myrtle Olson from Milan. Our school term was for only six months. In the sixth grade my teacher was Johanna Shervey of Watson. That year we had only six weeks of school because of the flu epidemic of 1918. She was very strict and we learned much in six weeks.

"When I was in the seventh and eighth grades, I had Selma Olson of Milan. At that time we had to pass state exams and they were hard. In the seventh grade we had to pass geography and civics. A passing grade was 75 percent. If you didn't

pass, you had to repeat seventh grade another year. In the eighth grade you had to pass the state exams in grammar, history, arithmetic, spelling and hygiene. If you passed, you were invited to attend eighth grade graduation at the courthouse in Montevideo, which was considered a big event in everyone's eyes.

"During recess and noon hour, we played outdoors when the weather was nice. Games we played were Hide-and-Go-Seek, Pump-Pump-Pullaway, Last Couple Out, Steal Sticks, Nibbs, Anti-I-Over, baseball, Kick the Can and Tag. When there was a lot of snow, we would build forts and have sides and play war.

"When we had to stay indoors, we played Numbers; some of us learned how to do tating with shuttles, which the bigger boys made for us. During the coldest time of year, we had just half-hour noon periods and school would begin at 9 o'clock and dismiss at 3:30. Most of the time we walked the two miles to school, but during the coldest part Dad would take us by horses and bobsled. Our school house was heated by burning wood and coal. It was often real cold in the building much of the forenoon.

"We carried our lunch in old syrup pails. Often we would bring a small potato which we put in the ashes in the stove and usually by noon time the potato would be done. Water was carried from a neighbor's place. Two pupils would go and bring a pail of water. At first, we had no fountain but later on we did get a water fountain and a well at school.

"We learned a great deal in the country school because we listened to the grades ahead so going from grade to grade was no surprise. I'm glad the Stoen School is well preserved, as it really meant so much to me, both as a teacher and a pupil."

Ernest Stoen, who was a student from 1920 to 1927, recalled the basket socials and the games: baseball, Fox and Geese and Anti-I-Over. His chores included carrying water and dumping out the ashes from the wood-burning stove. He brought sandwiches from home for his lunch. For him, the big event of the year was the Christmas Party. He valued the most the education and the social life the little school offered.

Martha Hoas Bertzyk remembered

starting school around 1921 and attending from the first through the fourth grade.

"I carried my lunch in an old peanut butter pail but my brother had an empty syrup pail, which I just loved. There were plenty of big kids in school with me, like Rudolph Torgerson, John Andrews and Manford Stoen and to me they appeared to be Paul Bunyons.

"What I got the most from attending school was my interest in reading. I love to read. Anything I get my hands on. I really enjoyed my classmates. Of course, when I started school they always hired Norwegian teachers so they could communicate with the younger students. Leona Dalen was my first teacher and I fell in love with her. Mrs. Haluison always replaced our simple lunches with all kinds of goodies. I just loved her home-made wieners. I have yet to find wieners to measure up to the ones she made.

Amy Andrews Bohm was a student from 1921 to 1926 in grades three through eight. She remembered that she walked to school but "in winter Dad took us in a sleigh." Like other students, she remembered playing Hide-and-Go-Seek, Tag, Pump-Pump-Pullaway and Fox and Geese. She helped bring in water, put up the flag and dust erasers, and she looked forward to basket socials.

Margaret Thompson Volgerson graduated from the eighth grade in 1930.

"I had attended part of the sixth and all of the seventh and eighth grades there. I had Hilda Larson Thompson for a teacher and also a Marion (I think Oppegaard) in my eighth year.

"We mostly walked to school. When it was nice, we walked across a neighbor's pasture. They had a bull, which we were afraid of, so when the cattle were out we walked around by the road. It was two miles. In the winter, we sometimes got a ride in a sleigh with horses, but we walked most of the time.

"We always carried our lunch in a half-gallon syrup pail. We had sandwiches, cake or a cookie and always an apple. We had a big grove of apple trees and in the fall we would wrap the apples individually in newspaper and store them in our dirt cellar. We wrapped greenings and some other keepers, so we had apples all winter.

"I remember that my brother, Vern



Parents, teachers and young scholars at the school's old entry in 1908. Photograph from Muriel Olson Emerick.

Potatoes Were Baked In the Ashes of the Wood-burning Stove

Thompson, was instrumental in getting the Stoen School for the Ramsey County Historical Society. He was a school board member at the time and, if I remember right, it was sold to the Society for \$1. My favorite event, when I was in school, was the Christmas program."

Earl Benham attended the Stoen School in the early part of 1925 during the last third of third grade.

"We had moved to a farm two-and-a-half miles from the school and, yes, we did carry our lunch and walked most of the way. I do not, much to my regret, remember my classmates but I remember that Lillian Andrews Lang was at the school as a teacher. Later I had her as a teacher in eighth grade at another school and she was my all-time favorite teacher."

Muriel Olson Emerick was a student from 1931 to 1933, during seventh and eighth grades.

"My cousin, Sylvia Thompson and I, during the winter months, would put baking potatoes on a large iron sheet over the red coals of the space heater at 11 a.m. and we would have baked potatoes with our

sandwiches. The students who wanted potatoes brought them each morning with their initials on them.

"I would get drinking water from a well that was outside and put it in the drinking fountain. Sylvia and I were hired by the school board every so many weeks to wash everything and scrub the hardwood floor on our hands and knees. We heated water brought from home on a Saturday. For this we shared \$5 each time.

"I had attended school in Milan but when I moved out to my grandfather's farm I got the experience of going to a country school with all eight grades and children of all ages and it became more like a family with a closeness I hadn't experienced in a city school with everyone the same age in one room.

Virgil Larson graduated in 1942.

"I was there from the third through the eighth grade. I remember LuElla Harbour, Inez Lovhaug, Rose Budd and Delores Blake as teachers. There were ten or twelve students while I was there. I was the only one in my grade. The Christmas program, spring picnic, Field Day with the Big Bend School (to which we all walked) were events we all enjoyed. The games we played were mostly softball in the spring and fall and Fox and Geese in the winter.

Elaine Larson Bergo was a student during the late 1930s and early 1940s, graduating in 1943.

"I got to school by walking two miles, until a neighbor's girl started first grade and her parents drove, so we managed to get a ride. For lunch I had a bucket of 'basics,' all home-made, bread, etc. My favorite lunch, I suppose, was when we put potatoes in the ashes of the fire to bake. For chores, we dusted erasers, got water from the well that had to be pumped by hand, raised and lowered the flag and wiped blackboards.

Christmas Programs, Basket Socials Were Highlights of the Year

"At Christmas we presented a program for our parents and bag lunches were exchanged. I apparently was told that I was like a mother hen, watching and taking care of the younger ones. Being able to communicate and associate with all ages older than myself and younger helped with school work, as well as playing."

Orvis C. Gustad attended school from 1943 to 1947.

"We moved from the Lamberton, Minnesota, area to the Milan area during the spring of 1943. I was ten years old, in the fifth grade, and went on through the eighth grade. My teachers were Mrs. Land and Mrs. Olson.

"I remember that when we arrived at the Stoen School we all (Rodney, Clarice, Marlene and I) had to take the 'six-weeks' test. Rod and I got red marks on our report cards from that test. Our folks visited Mrs. Land about it, hoping to persuade her to use the grades we received from the six-weeks test we had taken before leaving our previous school, but Mrs. Land insisted that we were at the Stoen School now and would just have to keep up as best we could.

"When I graduated, I decided against going to high school. After all, I was going to be a farmer and didn't need to know the scientific name of a cow in order to raise one. However, after receiving a couple of letters from the school superintendent (the last one typed in RED) indicating that I had to attend public school until I reached the

age of sixteen, my folks decided I should go.

"I entered in January but I quit (we didn't 'drop out' in those days) in March, as farm boys could still get excused for helping with farm work. I didn't start again the next year, we didn't hear anything further from the superintendent, so my total high school experience was about two months. Then years later, however, when I entered the University of Idaho at Moscow, a high school education would have been helpful. I received a bachelor of science degree in Big Game Management in 1961 and I credit the excellent schooling I received at the Stoen School for making that achievement possible.

"Among the students I remember were Maurice and Russell Gabrielson, Leo Torgerson, June Larson, Elmira Paulson, Marlene Gjerset, Diana Kanten, Donald Gabrielson, and my other sister, Connie. The greatest event at school was, of course, the annual Christmas program. We also had special programs at Thanksgiving and on Valentines Day.

Marlene Shaw Gustad graduated in 1950.

"I started at the Stoen School in February, 1942, during the last part of first grade, and attended through eighth grade. My teachers were Lillian Lang, Ida Olson, Esther Seatsema, Arlene Larson and Lucille Olson. There were about twenty students in school between 1942 and 1949, when I graduated from eighth grade. I was the only student in my grade.

"We had special programs on Valentines Day, Washington's and Lincoln's birthdays, Mothers Day, all our birthdays, Halloween, Thanksgiving and Christmas. I think we all looked forward to our Christmas program. We would work a month, it seemed, to memorize our dialogue and decorate and hang the stage curtain. We also made gifts for our parents.

"We walked to school unless it was too cold or storming; then my Mom or Dad gave us a ride. We carried our lunch with us. We had sandwiches, fruit and cake or a cookie. In the winter we took potatoes. We rubbed them with lard at home and wrapped them in newspaper. When we got to school, we put them in the ash pan of the heating stove. By noon the potatoes were baked hard and we took our spoon and cut

a hole in the potato, then we put butter in it and ate it. That was my favorite lunch.

"I had to stay after school once. We had one of the boys who had a very loose tooth. The children had a meeting during recess and I was chosen to pull his tooth. So I sat on him and pulled his tooth. He bit me in the back and I had to stay after school.

"Each of our eight grades had reading, arithmetic, English or language, geography or history and spelling. On Fridays we had either penmanship or industrial arts.



Thirteen boys, 1932. Left to right, standing: Lloyd Larson, Leonard Olson, Glen Moen, Arnold Togerson, Vernon Thompson, Arthur Larson, Russell Andrews, Leonard Thompson, Raynold Olson (donor of the snapshot) and Vernon Larson. Kneeling: Raymond Larson, Tonnes Thompson and Sherman Andrews.



Class of 1939. Left to right: Maurice Gabrielson; Juleen, Virgil, Lester and Rudele Larson; Leo Torgerson; Fern and Elaine Larson.

Snapshots

An end-of-the-year picture was traditional for many school students in years past. Pictured here in snapshots are some of the Stoen school's classes.



*School picnics, highlights of the school year. This one held in 1955 features the same cast of characters as those in the photograph on page 8 from *Huldah Strand*.*

Every morning we said the Pledge of Allegiance, sang songs and the teacher would read one chapter from a novel. We had a fifteen-minute break morning and afternoon and one hour at noon. I wish every child could attend a good country school, first grade through eighth grade. I think they would get a better education."

Richard Gjerset began attending the Stoen School in 1946 and graduated in 1954. He remembered that during his first two years there were two students in his grade and just himself after that. Lunch, he recalled, was salad dressing and onions and a potato baked in the school stove. He also remembered that he got a "good basic education."

Camille Bertzyk Dittes attended first grade during the 1947-1948 school year.

"The Stoen School means very much to me because my grandfather and my mother attended the school, too. (Grandpa wanted to learn English.) My teacher was Miss Sietsema. There were four children in first grade and, I think, twelve in the school. I brought my own lunch—peanut butter and jam sandwich, a banana or lefse with butter were my favorites—but if I didn't like my lunch, I went to Jacob and Otta Larson's farm on the other side of the woods and she always had goodies for me.

"We played Cowboys and Indians in the woods after lunch. The older boys, Ronnie Lea and David Gabrielson, made teepees for us out of logs. I used to get into trouble when school got boring. I would hear Paul Paulson on his tractor. Then I would ask to

use the outhouse and never come back. He would give me rides on the tractor or his horses and the teacher would have to come and get me every time.

Carol Gustad May was a student from 1948 to 1956.

"As I remember, each grade had one or two students. Those in my grade, besides myself, all eight years were Joan and Douglas Gjerset. We usually walked to school or rode our bicycles. We would meet the Gabrielsons on one corner; another quarter of a mile down the road we'd meet the Gjersets and continue on to school.

"We brought our own lunch. My favorite things were fresh caramel rolls, chocolate chip cookies and fruit. But about 1954, the mothers of the students brought a hot meal to school at noon for all the students, each of them taking turns.

"Christmas was my favorite event. All the students put on a play for the parents, complete with curtains for the stage and side curtains to stay behind until it was your turn to perform. Mothers all brought candy and cookies for lunch afterwards and we exchanged presents. The fathers would come to school and put up the curtains for us. We used to love to watch Melvin Kanten put up curtains because he could wiggle his ears and we would all laugh. We got friends and memories for a lifetime."

Nancy Thompson Sletten was one of the three students attending the school when it closed in 1965. She had been there for four years.

"There were two other students. Romona Thompson Gronewold, my sister, who was two years younger and Cheri Kanten, who was a year older. Hilda Thompson was our teacher. Cheri Kanten used to ride her horse to school and we would ride it during recess. For lunch, we could heat hot dogs on the school furnace. My best memory of school was the art work. Mrs.

Harlan Seyfer's interest in the Stoen school grew out of his years as a volunteer in the Gibbs Farm Museum's school house program. He currently is in China as a faculty member of the foreign languages department at Tsinghua University, Beijing.

School Days Recreated

The Stoen School still rings with the voices of children. Each summer since 1966, when the school opened to the public on its new site at the Gibbs Farm Museum in Falcon Heights, the Ramsey County Historical Society has conducted a popular summer school house program there.

Children attend school for a day. Their curriculum is a recreation of that used in the rural schools of Minnesota around 1900. Spell-downs and cypher-downs are held. The children use the old readers, work out their arithmetic problems on slateboards and play the old-fashioned games of childhood on the lawn of the museum.

Dates for the 1991 summer school house program are July 8 to August 16. For information, call the Gibbs Farm Museum at 646-8629.

Thompson drew maps and we'd use different colors to color in the oceans, mountains and lakes."

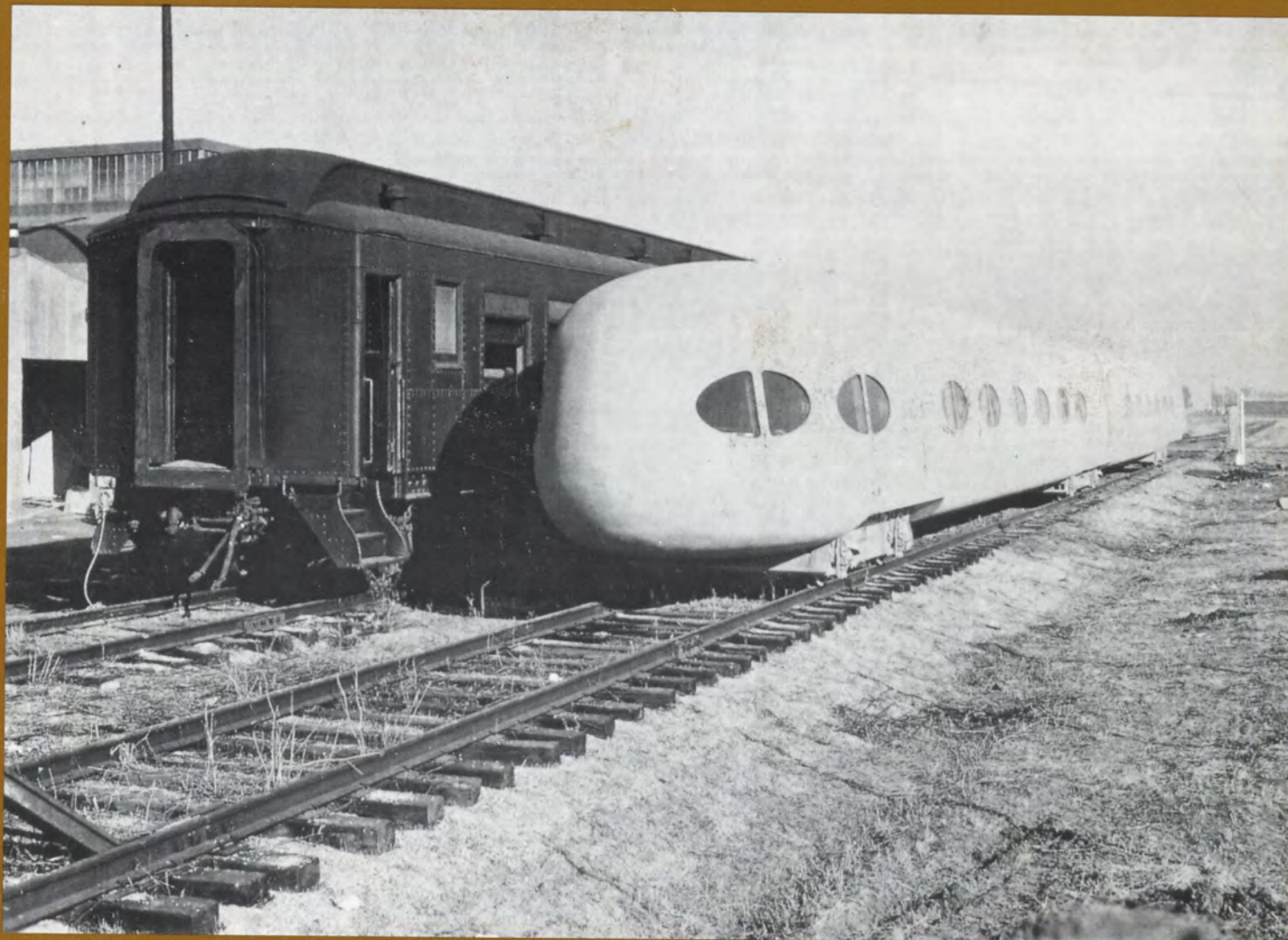
It is clear that those who shared their memories of the Stoen School remembered their years there as a happy period in their lives. Through their reminiscences has run a thread of regret for a vanished period in Minnesota's history.

Notes

Record of Chippewa County Superintendent of Schools, 1876-90, is in possession of the Chippewa County Historical Society, Montevideo, Minnesota.

All correspondence of the school house committee of the RCHS are in the possession of the Ramsey County Historical Society.

A fully annotated copy of this article in manuscript form is available in the office of the Ramsey County Historical Society, 322 Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth Street, St. Paul, Mn., 55102; (612) 222-0701



Prototype of a streamlined passenger coach next to a standard railroad coach of the 1930s at Inglewood, California. The new coach was designed by Cortlandt Hill, grandson of James J. Hill. At 32,000 pounds, the bullet-shaped coach was one-fifth the weight of the older coach. See story beginning on page 14.

R.C.H.S.
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