

The Scoop on One-Room Schools- Told By An Insider

By Phares G. O'Daffer

I. Introduction **Slide 1: Generic ORS**

Hello Everyone! It's a pleasure to see all of you and I can't wait to jump headfirst into the topic of the day. My sisters and I attended a one-room school for eight years, and my mother, mother-in-law, and my cousin taught in one, so ORSs are close to my heart.

What about you? Did you attend a one-room school? Did you teach in a one-room school? **Slide 2: Generic One Room School inside**

Which thumb tells how you felt about your one-room school experience?

II. Full Disclosure **Slide 3: Full Disclosure**

A good part of this talk is about my experiences, so there are lots of I's, me's, and my's in it. This being the case, I want to give you a chance to bail out before its too late. If you stay, just ignore my narcissism and have fun!

III. My First One Room School Experience

It was September, 1939. Having turned 5 in February and really angry, I was fuming and ranting to my mother- Two of my 6 yr old friends, Buddy Clow and Louella Ford, could go to our one room Prairie View school, and I couldn't. It just wasn't fair! **Slide 4: Prairie View School and Me**

My mother listened, and got Mrs. Ball, the teacher to give me a trial period. With the bigger boys forcing Buddy Clow and me to have a chicken fight, and me calling a coconut a kitten ball, my trial did not go well.

But at the end, Mrs. Ball told my mother that "He is a 'mumble' little devil." I didn't hear the mumbled word, but, little devil or not, I started attending Prairie View school for real the very next week. *I'll tell you all about that later*, but first, a look at three important one room school questions.

IV. Three Questions About One Room Schools- *Why* and *How* Did They Get Started, and *How Many Were There?*

Slide 5: Three Questions About One Room Schools

A. Why? Slide 6: Thomas Jefferson's Philosophy The people who settled the United States bought into Jefferson's idea that that "good

education is the essential foundation of a strong democracy”, and the purpose for one room schools was born.

B. How? Slide 7: The Government Land Ordinance of 1785

The how was answered by a Government Land Ordinance brought into being by Jefferson in 1785. It provided for surveys that divided the land into **counties, townships, and sections**. And it contained a special provision that made all the difference- creating our system of free public education!

Because the people in townships *voted to have a school, decided where it was built, and controlled its use*, (e.g. PV school) a deep sense of community developed around these one-room schools, and the resulting bonding had a tremendous influence on the development of this nation.

C. How Many? When I walked in the door of Prairie View School for the first time in September, 1939, I thought I was one little kid entering first grade at my *unique* little one-room school

Slide 8: Starting School

As I'm sure you know, Prairie View School was not unique. But how many other one room schools do you think there were in my county- De Witt. 25 mi x 15 mi-- one of the smallest counties in the state?

Slide 9: DeWitt Co with Nixon Twp highlighted

The small gray arrow on this map of DeWitt county shows that Prairie View school was one of the **7 one room schools in Nixon Township** (blue outline), and the small orange squares show all the **90 one room schools in De Witt county**.

How many one room schools were in the State of Illinois?
There are 102 counties in Illinois, most of them larger than Dewitt.

Slide 10: State of Illinois Counties

So it is easy to estimate that there were around **10,000 one-room schools in the State of Illinois**.

At the peak of the one-room school phenomenon, it was estimated that there were over a **quarter of a million one-room schools in the United States**. My little unique one room school, indeed!

Slide 11: Number of One Room Schools in the United States

V. Some Little Red Schoolhouse History

Slide 12: The Little Red Schoolhouse

Just after the Civil War (1865), people learned to make cheap, but good looking, red paint (Venetian Red) out of ground up iron ore and (guess) buttermilk. And communities started painting their one room schoolhouses red.

It caught on quickly, and a well-known newspaper said, “Next to the Flag, the Little Red School House is one of the most significant symbols of our country.”

But before the Little Red Schoolhouses got a good head of steam, an influential lady, perhaps a First Lady, said that, no matter if red paint is cheap, we should paint our schoolhouse like our house, not like our barn.

And so, in the end, it was reported that only 2% of U.S. schoolhouses were red.

However, this popular icon was not to be disposed of so easily, and became the Impetus for a “The Little Red Schoolhouse” song in 1922 and “The Little Red Schoolhouse” movie in 1935.

Slide12b: Little Red Schoolhouse song

So it’s no wonder that a Secretary of Education would later use the Little Red Schoolhouse as a symbol for the government’s “No Child Left Behind” program.

VI. One Room School Teachers- 3 Questions

Slide 13: Cherry Jackson and Her Class.

Slide 14: 3 Questions About One Room School Teachers

A. Why were there **so many, and why were they mostly **women**?**

At first I thought “What a coincidence!” Both my mother and my mother-in-law were one-room school teachers. And so were my cousin Cherry, and my good friend Evelyn, and several other women I knew.

But then I realized that there were 100,000 one-room schools in the broader Midwest alone, and their teachers had to come from somewhere! And as we entered the 1900s, women- compared to men- were cheap to hire. Also, a lot of other jobs were opening up to men. Because of this, almost 85% of the one-room school teachers were women.

B. Why were they **so young**?

And then I thought, all of my one room school teacher friends were between 16 and 21 years of age when they taught. Why were they all very young women?

Perhaps these two “rules for teachers” will help you answer that questions:

Slide 15: Selected Rules for Teachers

You are not to keep company with men.

You will not marry during the term of your contract.

C. Why were they **heroes**?

One room school teachers were heroes because of the barriers they faced and what they ultimately accomplished.

Female teachers had to prove they could handle the 8th grade boys, and were expected to do everything imaginable in teaching, and running their school, as well as to lead extremely pious lives to serve as virtuous examples for their students and community. And all this, in 1915, for \$60 per month for 8 months. More often than not, they met these stringent expectations!

Slide 16: Pillars of Moral Perfection

As author Wayne Fuller so aptly put it, “at the crossroads of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was largely an army of young women (200,000) who went out to slay the dragon of ignorance throughout the nation.”

They were credited with positively changing the nature of our communities and our education system forever.

It was totally a very big deal — an unbelievable phenomenon!

Slide 17: An Amazing Accomplishment

VII. Evaluating My Experiences At Prairie View School

Slide 18: My Prairie View Experiences

Now, to put the finishing touches on this “real scoop on the one-room school” I want to tell a few personal stories that, I hope, give the flavor of what went on at Prairie View School.

a. My Teachers and Fellow Students

First, here are photos of two of my three one-room school teachers- Mrs Wene and Mrs. OConnor- and their classes, always with student-teacher ratio of around 15 to 1. **Slides 19,20,21: My teachers**

I remember PVS as being a happy, comfortable place to be, sort of one happy family. (literally, since roughly half of each class were relatives.)

b. Slide 22: My First Exciting Discovery-Evesdropping

Very early on, as I sat at my little desk working on an arithmetic worksheet, I suddenly discovered that I could eavesdrop on Mrs. Ball, over in the corner, teaching the 7th and 8th graders.

What they were talking about was interesting to me, and for 8 years, I multitasked- listening to other grade level groups while completing my worksheets. Silver war

You talk about enrichment and meeting individual needs.
I was never bored again!

c. Slide 23: My First Job

When Mrs. Wene, my 5th grade teacher, asked me to come to school early to help her carry in cobs and coal heat up the stove, I was really excited! And she paid me 50 cents a week to do it!!

I felt proud to be chosen, I felt trusted. I felt competent. I felt responsible. I felt satisfaction about success.

Come to think of it, that’s how I felt later in life about all my other jobs. Teaching life skills and attitudes... on my first job!

d. Slide 24: My Early Acting Career

Mrs. Wene didn't ask me to be in a two person Christmas Play with my second cousin, Sharon Carr- she just acted as if it was a given—and a hillbilly romantic skit, no less.

I received raves from all the parents, and that experience made me want to later take parts in high school plays, and feel comfortable in front of people.

One of the many extra curricular activities at PVS --building confidence and learning how to do things.

e. Slide 25: My First Taste of Leadership

During the war, we had a scrap metal drive- the Dive Bombers” and the “Submarines” teams competing- to help the war effort.

I was leader of the Dive Bombers- organizing the team, planning our collection and delivery schedules, and getting others on my team to collect a lot of scrap.

We were the winning team, and in retrospect I considered it my first successful project experience.

Meaningful learning and leadership training through projects. What Progressive Education!

f. Slide 26: My First Sex Education

One day, not long after I started school, all the boys hightailed it to the outdoor boys toilet at recess. There, in close proximity to the smelly latrine, I had my first introduction to sex education.

I can truly say, looking back, that what I learned about the birds and bees from the boys at Prairie View School was pretty accurate, and sufficed until I read certain library books at Illinois State University.

Cooperative learning and Sex Education at the same time! Wow!

g. Slide 27: My Early Taste of Competition

At PVS, our teacher would have us go up to the blackboard and to do long arithmetic calculations- a ciphering contest, no less!

If you finished first, you took your seat and waited on the others. I was hands-down the fastest cipherer in the school.

When we visited the “town school” in Weldon and a ciphering contest came up, I thought “No sweat, “I always finish first.”

Lo and behold, each time I was still ciphering away when a slight girl named Ada Katherine Pearl was already sitting down, with a big smile on her face.

Slide 28: My Ciphering Nemesis

I learned humility that day, and that there is always someone in this world who can do something better than you can.

Active involvement and developing self-knowledge—in PVS!

P.S. Many years later, when I was a Professor of Mathematics at Illinois State University, my friend, Ada Katherine Pearl, knocked on my office door.

I was very quick to make it clear that, under the circumstances, there would be no ciphering contest in the mathematics department that day.

h. Slide 29:The Essay Contest

Mrs. O’Connor, my 8th grade teacher at PVS, asked me to stay after school one day and told me that I should enter a three county essay contest for 7th and 8th graders that offered a prize of \$25 for the winner.

I thought “I could use \$25,” so I entered.

My essay, “From Little Acorns Big Oaks Grow,” won the contest, and was printed in full in The Weldon Record, a local paper of some renown. Entering and winning that essay contest probably sowed the seed of interest that launched my career as a writer.

Special attention to every student and another teacher who cares. Thank You, Mrs. O’Connor!

i. Slide 30: My first “foreign language.”

No one probably even considered teaching a foreign language in a one room school. Deprived of this opportunity, the kids learned a “foreign language” of their own.

How many of you learned to talk Pig Latin when you were a kid? So you know what I mean. Another benefit of Prairie View School!

VIII- How Did It All End? Slide 31: How Did It All End?

As we moved into the 1900s, a lot of people thought that the one-room schools were the greatest thing since sliced bread. A lot of others thought they were woefully inadequate and ineffective.

After a time of nationwide educational and political arguments, the second group of people won the day.

So by 1938, a year before I went to Prairie View, 19,000 one-room schools had been abandoned in the Midwest. The exodus had begun!

Slide 32: Abandoned One-Room Schoolhouse

And by 1960, 13 years after I left Prairie View, less than 1% of all students attended a one-room school. Tens of thousands of one room schools, like Prairie View were being demolished.

Slide 33: Abandoned Prairie View school

So for 150 years, one-room schools played a major role in cementing communities, furthering democracy, and educating a larger percentage of the student population than in any other country in the world. Then, seemingly in a “blink of the eye,” they were essentially extinct.

IX- The Bottom Line

Today, we look back on the one-room school era, and give credit where credit is due for the efforts of communities and teachers in providing a good education to a large number of children of our country (including me, I might add).

Slide 34: A teacher affects eternity...

Sure, some of us sometimes find ourselves engulfed in Nostalgia, and a yearning for the Good Ole Days.

Slide 35: The Good Ole Days and Nostalgia

But then we look at some of the wonderful things happening in our schools today, and know that changing times require educational innovation. **Slide 36: Educational Innovation**

As a couple of wise people once said, “Nothing is probably as bad or as good as we perceive it.” And, “There is more than one way to skin a cat.” Maybe these simple ideas will help us make sense out of the situation.

Slide 37: Helpful Adages

Perhaps our schools of education that prepare teachers are aware of what worked well in the past and are integrating it into their teacher education programs, while creating and utilizing innovative practices for the future.

From my 30 years experience as a teacher educator, and what I know about teachers today, I have absolutely no doubt that they are!

Extra:

IV. Time Out For a Look At One Room Schools

A. Why and How Did One Room Schools Get Started?

Barbara Bush, in the preface of the book *America's Country Schools*, explained the “**why**” this way. **Slide 6: Thomas Jefferson's Philosophy**

“...The pioneer families settling America's vast frontiers understood one of Thomas Jefferson's most deeply held convictions- that good education is the essential foundation of a strong democracy...”

And the “**how**” came from a Government Land Ordinance brought into being by Jefferson in 1785. **Slide 7: Government Ordinance of 1785**

It provided for surveys that divided the land into **counties, townships, and sections**, *with section 16 in every township was set aside to provide money for education.*

Slide 8 About Counties, Twps, and Sections

B. How Many One Room Schools Were There?

Slide 9 : Aerial View of PVS

As I'm sure know, Prairie View School was not unique. But how many other one room schools do you think there were in my county- De Witt. 25 mi x 15 mi-- one of the smallest counties in the state?

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