

The Thrill and Magic of Audio-Visual Day in a 1950s School

by Paul C. Juhl

In doing research for the previous article, I couldn't help but pause and remember personal experiences in audio-visual education at my country school in Webster County during the early 1950s. It was a very typical Iowa one-room school, heated by a cob and coal stove and without running water or even a well. For our geography preparation, there was the standard globe in the farthest corner of the building and wall maps of our state, nation, and the world rolled together and hanging on reels in the front. These maps had been purchased before World War II and so, at some point in the late 1940s, a teacher had drawn in the "new" boundaries of the European countries.

One Friday, late in the day and possibly in 1951, we received word from the teacher that during the next week we would experience audio-visual materials. This was a new word in our vocabularies and had a rather futuristic sound. Sure enough, on Monday morning a panel truck arrived from Fort Dodge, the county seat, loaded with phonograph records, slides, motion pictures, filmstrips, and the equipment necessary to use them. I am not sure if we had a pull-down screen, but most certainly there was plenty of empty wall space for that purpose. It was an exciting moment for me and the other nine students.

Our audio-visual education commenced at the very beginning of that same school day. One of the older boys pulled down dark window shades, blackening the room, and the teacher began the show. I am sure we had breaks for recess, lunch, and the use of the outhouses, but with this highly unusual event happening, we hurried back to our classroom. We didn't want to miss a moment.

The monotony of our little school existence had been broken with these new words to my ears, "audio-visual education." For a few magical days, there was no reading or writing or arithmetic.

Strange voices and sights that we had never heard or seen before came from records and films. By 4 p.m. we exited Washington #1 rubbing our eyes in the sunlight and anticipating the next day. There was no time to tie anything we were seeing or hearing to the curriculum. We would have plenty of time to contemplate it all after the images had moved on to the next school. In lives that had yet to experience much television and only occasionally movies at the theater, we felt honored to have this wonderful entertainment brought right to our door.

I'm not sure if this was planning (or a lack of it) on the part of our teacher to receive a year's worth of audio-visual all at once, or simply the way the county superintendent of schools had set things up. Perhaps they were trying a method similar to the traveling libraries that brought books to country schools: a school would receive different books for a few weeks and, after students had had an opportunity to read them, the books would be packed up and sent to the school two miles to the north. We then received reading books from another school that was two miles south.

As for stereoscopes and the Lincoln Highway stereographs, they never arrived at our school. Evidently they had either not been purchased by our county or were not included with our materials. If they had, I like to think that our Hawkeye pride at Washington #1 would have ensured that the Iowa views in the series were well worn and admired by the time they were passed on to the next school. ❖

COURTESY THE AUTHOR



Washington #1, 1952: the author, in second grade, is in the back of the middle row.