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THE COUNTRY SCHOOL IN EAST TEXAS: 1 ROOM + 3 R's

by Bill O'Neal

There were 200,000 one-room schools in the United States in 1900. As late as 1930 there were eighty one-room schools for blacks in Harrison County. In the fall of 1985 the total had declined to 837 public one-teacher schools in twenty-nine states. Nebraska has 385 one-room schools, while just four remain in Texas. There are none left in East Texas.

In the early decades of the twentieth century the fields and forests of East Texas were dotted with one-room schoolhouses. Generations of East Texans were educated in these solitary outposts of learning. Facilities and textbooks and equipment were meager, and the teacher-pupil ratio often was alarmingly high, but students were drilled relentlessly in the "3 R's," and a great many East Texas children received a solid grounding in educational basics.

This paper is based on more than 120 interviews conducted by history students at Panola Junior College. They interviewed grandparents, great-grandparents, aunts and uncles, and parents, as well as neighbors or other acquaintances who attended country schools in decades past. Just this fall a United States history student interviewed her 101-year-old aunt who entered an East Texas one-room school in 1890, and a Texas history student interviewed her ninety-five-year-old grandmother who, at the age of seven, began the eleven-grade, one-room Liberty School in 1896. Others interviewed began attending rural East Texas schools in 1901, 1906, 1907, two in 1908, 1911, 1912, 1914, 1915, two in 1917, and two others in 1918. A great many of those interviewed attended one- or two-room rural schools in the 1920s and 1930s. One student, however, interviewed a parent who attended a two-room school in Nacogdoches County as recently as 1952.

A partial list of the schools attended by those interviewed follows. Such a list may suggest the backwoods flavor of an earlier East Texas, and some may recognize the names of specific schools.

Eagle Mill School	Fair Play	Pine Hill
Arcadia School	Liberty School	St. James School
Maple Springs	Michelle Com. School	Sardis
Mount Gillton	Tabernacle Sound (in	Mount High
West Hamilton Com.	Jericho, Shelby County)	Buena Vista
Wilda	Newborn	Garrett Springs
Center Hill School	Center Point	Harris Chapel
Cross Roads	Rosser	Crystal Farms
Old Salem	Enterprise	Little Viney Grove
Round Timber	Smith School House	Deadwood
Rural Flat	Eden	Good Hope
Smith-Owens School	Mount Carmel	Oakdale (Harrison Co.)
Walton (Panola Co.)	Landers School	Shady Grove

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Gill	Walnut Creek	Piney Grove School
Hopewell Church,	Round Timber	Bowen Com. School
Buncombe Com.	Africa (Shelby County)	Woodside (near Karnack)
Alpine School	Bedias (near Madisonville)	Fulsom Chapel
Community School	Coldwater	Goober Hill
(Rusk County)	Frog Pond School	

The typical country school building was a one-room frame structure. Frequently there was a cloak room in which the children placed their coats and lunch pails or baskets. More than one-fourth of those interviewed attended two-room schools. Often the building was divided into two cubicles by a moveable partition, and in a few structures the partition consisted primarily of blackboards. The partition usually could be shoved upward, creating a large space for plays, recitations, or other exercises.

The Tabernacle School, located in Shelby County eighteen miles below Center, was situated to prevent horse races. It was built astride a race track. During the early 1900s the Good Hope School in Shelby County was blown down by a storm while school was in session, and some of the children suffered crippling injuries. When the eleven-grade Enterprise School of Shelby County burned, classes were held in the churches of Timpson. The Baptist Church was called Baylor, the Methodist Church was S.M.U., the Christian Church was T.C.U. — and the national guard hall was A&M.

Furnishings of the rural schools were simple, sometimes merely homemade desks or benches. Purchased desks often accommodated two students, allowing children to sit side by side in pairs. The top of the desk had a groove for pencils and, in the right hand corner, a hole for an ink well. Little boys, of course, were fond of dipping pigtailed into the ink wells, so that little girls could go home with black- or blue-tipped hair. Chalkboards sometimes were merely planks painted black. A stage often was at the front of the classroom, which sometimes necessitated placing blackboards at the rear of the room. A long recitation bench frequently was located at the front of the classroom, sometimes on the stage. Occasionally there was a paino, especially if the building doubled as a church on Sundays. West Hamilton Community School had a four-by-five metal cabinet which held all of the library books, while the Tabernacle School library consisted of a large bookcase with doors that could be locked. This bookcase held "general books" and a set of encyclopedias. A teacher's desk and pot-bellied stove usually completed the indoor furnishings.

Outside there often was a hitching post and two privies — one for the girls and one for the boys, frequently equipped with last year's Sears, Roebuck catalogue in lieu of toilet paper. Maple Springs boasted two four-holders! At Mount High, however, there was only one privy, and the boys and girls would alternate days for going first. Goober Hill also had just one outhouse, located behind the school at the bottom of the hill by the spring. Boys and girls had to take turns. They also fetched their drinking water from this spring, and everyone, of course, drank from the same dipper. Students at James School were more sanitary, fashioning drinking

cups for the water bucket by folding a sheet of notebook paper. At Sardis there was a small privy for the girls, but the boys used a patch of woods next to the stream. There were no privies at all at Tabernacle School: the girls used the woods to the north, while the boys used the woods to the south. On rainy days the girls went to the north woods in pairs — so that one could hold the umbrella. Boys required no umbrella holder.

Streams and natural springs provided the most usual source of drinking water, although some schools had wells or cisterns. The older boys usually had to carry the water in buckets. Mount Carmel had rain buckets at each end of the roof, while Michelle Community School had fifty-gallon wooden rain barrels with a faucet on the bottom. At Mount Carmel angry boys once dumped their male teacher into the rain barrel — and “they were severely punished.”

Boys also had to carry wood for the stove from outside. Often community members donated the wood, but some schools purchased what they needed. It was customarily the responsibility of the teacher to arrive early on cold days and start the fire. At least one school, however, had an arrangement whereby each older boy was assigned a day to arrive early and start the fire.

Classes opened with the ringing of a bell. The teacher stepped to the door and rang a handbell, although some country schools, more grandiose, had a little tower and a bell pulled by a rope, or perhaps a sizeable bell placed on the porch. Students lined up by grades in the school yard to march inside; sometimes there were line captains for each grade. There would be a prayer, the pledge of allegiance, sometimes a patriotic song, then lessons would commence.

Classroom procedure generally called for the teacher to work with the members of one grade at a time. Customarily the first graders were seated in front, second graders behind them, and so on to the back rows, presided over by the oldest students. In the winter the youngest children were seated nearest the stove. Usually there was a long recitation bench at the front facing a blackboard. The teacher would call the members of the first grade to this bench, and spend ten minutes or so on arithmetic for that level. Then the first graders would go back to their desks to work problems, while second graders advanced to the recitation bench for their math instruction. When each grade had received instruction in their turn, the first graders would come forward to begin the day's lesson in spelling. It was commonplace, even necessary, for older children to work individually with younger students — a practice which teachers will recognize as most beneficial for those doing the instructing.

Reading, writing, and arithmetic, of course, were stressed, along with geography, history, and spelling. Spelling bees and geography contests generally were held each Friday, and sometimes there were competitions with other schools, often at county meets. Report cards were sent home,

frequently once per month, for signature by parents. One former student recalled, in time-honored fashion, that "I signed as many of my report cards as my mother."

At a majority of schools the day began at eight o'clock, although at a significant minority classes opened at nine o'clock. The later starting hour was popular because transportation was slow and children had to perform chores before leaving for school. Some former students recalled having to arise at five o'clock in order to have time to milk the cow and walk three or four miles to school by eight or nine o'clock.

Classes adjourned in most places at four o'clock, although a number of schools dismissed at three in the afternoon. The typical school day, therefore, lasted from eight until four, with a scattering of nine-to-four and nine-to-three schedules. Typically there was a fifteen-minute recess each morning and afternoon, although some teachers awarded thirty-minute recess periods. At Little Viney Grove there was no afternoon recess, and "after lunch was the worst part of the whole day. In those last three hours we didn't get a break and we had to practice reading, writing, and arithmetic over and over again!" The lunch break at most schools lasted for one hour.

Lunches were brought in syrup buckets. Sometimes several children in a family would bring one large bucket of food and divide it at lunch time. One group of siblings using a common bucket stayed peeved at a sister who left biscuit crumbs in the syrup. So she cleaned out an old axle grease bucket, scrubbing and boiling it until it was clean and shiny for her own personal lunch pail.

Typically the student brought a biscuit or two in his or her lunch pail, often with a piece of sausage or bacon or a hard-boiled egg. Children loved to poke a hole in their biscuit with a forefinger, then pour syrup into the hole. Cookies were rare, but tea cakes were fondly recalled with nostalgic appetite. Other lunch foods ran the gamut of East Texas country fare: turnip greens, cornbread, black-eyed peas, fried squirrel, fried chicken, buttermilk carried in a fruit jar, sweet potatoes, gingerbread, rice pudding, syrup cookies, home-cured ham, and fried pies. Neighborhood dogs knew when lunch was on the school grounds, and haunted these outdoor lunch-rooms for scraps.

Although some children sat on a log or wandered into the woods to enjoy a leisurely lunch, more often the food was gobbled down so that the balance of the hour could be devoted to play. Playground equipment was often non-existent or, at best, primitive: perhaps a rope swing or a see-saw or a flying jenny. All that was required for a flying jenny was a good-sized tree stump in the school yard and a split log, perhaps with a board fastened to each end of the log for seats. A child sat at each end of the log, while a large student began spinning the log on the stump with increasing speed. One ex-student said: "if a kid wouldn't ride the spinning

jenny, they just weren't with it!"

Sometimes a jumping board was placed across a fallen log. A child would stand on the "down" end and another child would jump on the other end to see how high he could make the other go. "Sometimes the board would split which made this a bit dangerous." An East Texas variation of rolling the hoop was called paddle wheel: a wagon wheel rim would be rolled as far as possible by a child using a stick, which would have a piece of board or old tobacco can bent into a U-shape across the bottom as a guide.

Other games were traditional: jacks, hopscotch, jump rope, pitching horse shoes, wrestling, foot races, blind man's bluff, marbles, olley olley oxen, leap frog, hide-and-go-seek, hide 'n switch (someone would hide a switch ...), red rover, tin cannellina (a combination of hide-and-go-seek and kick-the-can), spin-the-top, goose and gander, tag, pop the whip, ring-around-the-rosy, drop the handkerchief, little house on the hill, throw the ball over the school, Annie over, and ring plays. Slightly more obscure games included chicken in the crane crow, the flying Dutchman, spin buttons, cross line, what my game, and Little Sally Walker. In the latter game, children formed a circle and the one in the middle is "Little Sally Walker sittin' in the saucer, In and out the window." The circled children hold hands and weave in and out. A game with a strong East Texas influence was fox and dog: "One kid would take off running and a pack of kids would come running after him." Another traditional pasttime for East Texas girls was arranging play houses out of pine straw: one woman remembered that she and her schoolmates "hung pretty pictures on trees and bushes." Sometimes boys would pull up logs so that the kids would play church: "A boy would preach while the other children would sing and shout."

Always popular among boys was mumble-peg. Depending upon how the blade landed, the knife artist was awarded 25, 50, 75 or 100 points. The first boy to accumulate 500 points was the winner. The *last* boy had to pull a wooden peg out of the ground with his teeth, with a mouthful of dirt and grass as a bonus. Basketball on an outdoor court was a favorite, along with some variation of baseball — scrub or town ball or cat 'n bat ball.

Discipline was simple: paddling, switching, or rapping small children across the palms with a ruler. If a whipping was necessary, a note sometimes was sent home requesting similar treatment from the father. Transgressors at times were ordered to draw a circle on the blackboard, then stand for a required period of time with their nose inside the circle. Evildoers also were forced to stand in a corner, and at least one teacher compelled mischief makers to stand for thirty minutes *on one foot!* In one school the older children were seated in the front rows, presumably so that they would be easier to control.

Punishable sins included throwing spitwads or writing notes. Since notes often were of a romantic nature, students were mortified to have them intercepted, and at Good Hope they "were dropped down the wall through a knot hole, where they remain to this day." Sample verses include:

Roses are Red, violets are blue,
sugar is sweet and so are you.

The ocean is wide, the sea is deep.
Darling I long to lie in your arms, asleep.

A ball of mud on a stick of wood
A kiss from you would do me good
The road is wide and you can't step it
I love you and you can't hep it.

One critic observed: "As you can see, there were some real poets in the good old days." In 1906 a first-grader had an experience with a young poet: "I had an eye defect caused by whooping cough. When we would sing 'I would not be denied ...,' a boy behind me sang, 'I would not be cross-eyed.' "

At one Panola County school a boy received "many a whippin' " at home because his older sister was the teacher. One old man who obviously was rambunctious as a boy reminisced that he occasionally brought homemade toys to school. Once he shot a teacher over the eye with an arrow as she turned around. It was his worst trouble, followed by his worst whipping. At one school the children, when the teacher's back was turned, liked to flick ink from their pen staffs — it "would splatter all across the room."

During a wet East Texas freeze, several boys at Tabernacle School plugged up the hole in a hornets' nest with ice. The nest was placed near the old wood heater. When the teacher lit the fire, the ice melted and hornets swarmed through the school, which promptly was dismissed. In 1928, at the Caddel School near Broaddus, a first-year teacher found her whippings ineffective on older boys, including one lad who threatened to cut her throat if she punished him. At the Eagle Mill School in 1917 a mischievous girl crept outside and threw sweet-gum balls in through an open window. A first-grade girl seated by the window was snatched up by the teacher and accused of the crime. Despite vigorous protests by the entire class that she was innocent, the teacher whipped her anyway — whereupon an older boy gallantly stood and cut his palm with his pocketknife each time a lick was delivered. When the boy also threatened to cut the teacher, the guilty girl became so alarmed that she came forward with a confession. The teacher apologized and the woman who was whipped "said that everything turned out alright except the boy had a very sore hand for awhile."

In earlier one-room schools the only book common to most Texas families was the King James Version of the Bible. A teacher at Fulsom

Chapel taught from the Bible every other day. Until well into the twentieth century many Texas country schools did not provide textbooks, causing parents to purchase any books that were utilized. A Baby Ray primer or Blue Back speller might be handed down from father to son and from brother to sister. At the West Hamilton Community School, textbooks were bought from city schools, always in poor condition. More than one mother sewed book bags for her children from old feed sacks.

Supplies were limited: one first-grader had to bring only a cedar pencil and horse feed. A Red Man or Big Chief tablet and one or two pencils served most schoolchildren, while precious pencils were secured by a loop of string around the neck of a child. Supplementary supplies might include crayons, paste, or a slate. One poor family of five children shared one pencil per month. The mother would cut the pencil into five pieces: the most desired piece, of course, was the one with the eraser. These children would extract paper bags from the garbage for their paper, or erase what was already written and re-use a sheet of notebook paper.

At Christmas children would disperse into the woods to find a tree. Older boys sometimes would cut the largest holly tree with berries that could be jammed inside the schoolhouse. Children would decorate the tree with paper chains, popcorn strings, and flour — to simulate snow — then they might put on a play for their parents. The Round Timber School, like many others, had a community Christmas tree. Each student would give a present to the teacher, and the poor teacher gave each of her students a small gift. The same custom was carried on at Rural Flat School.

Many schools conducted various events to raise money for needed funds. Plays, pie auctions, cake walks, and box suppers raised cash to maintain the school while providing social occasions for the community. Prior to the opening of school in September, parents often would congregate with hoes and rakes to clear the schoolground. Thistles and stickers were primary targets, since most children were barefooted.

The most common school term was from some point in September through May, although some schools were open for as little as six months. Farm duties caused frequent absences, and many children started late because of the necessity of helping with harvesting.

More rural schools offered an eight-grade curriculum, although many stopped at the seventh or sixth grade. A few went to the ninth, tenth or even eleventh grade. Two-room schools were most commonly divided 1-4 and 5-8, as well as 1-4 and 5-7, or 1-3 and 4-6. One two-room school was divided 1-6 and 7-11.

Enrollment in country schools often was quite high. The lowest enrollment recalled, taught in a tiny building which had only a table surrounded by chairs was eight; the highest was 100. Another former student remembered an enrollment of ninety in a Panola County school, although when attendance reached ninety state funding would provide a second

teacher. Several ex-students remembered enrollments in the twenties and thirties, but forties, fifties and sixties were common. Of the figures reported by those interviewed, the average enrollment was forty-seven.

Ages ranged from five to nineteen, and a few former students remembered venerable classmates who were twenty or twenty-one years old. One man who attended school at Sardis stated: "I remember the guy who broke my nose with a wet baseball was 23." Children of five or six were working on their primers in preparation for the first grade, although some who had learned from older brothers and sisters occasionally blazed through their primers within a matter of weeks. First graders usually were seven or even eight years old, because it was unsafe for younger children to walk two or three miles through the woods to school.

Most children, of course, did walk to school, although some rode horseback, especially when it rained. Small children were sometimes driven in wagons, and fathers with large families might drive a wagon to school, perhaps picking up other children along the way. In the Snap Community, Fred Soape rode to school with his old maid teacher in her buggy; as repayment he had to tend the horse and build a fire in the school stove. A teacher in the 1930s picked up as many children as she could carry in her car en route to her one-room school. Covered wagons often were utilized on stormy days. Two boys were remembered with admiration because they rode bulls to school. At Enterprise School recess resembled a rodeo as boys took turns trying to ride the bull. Tom Barton was the envy of Bowen Community School because he rode a tame old bull to class. The bull loose-grazed around the school all day, and when classes were dismissed Tom would whistle for his bull, mount up, and head home.

Many children had only short walks to school, but some distances were formidable. A dozen students had to walk five miles one way; two had to go seven miles; one had to trek ten miles. The average distance among more than forty specified was three and one-half miles one way. Nell Buchanan began teaching at Caddel when she was seventeen years of age; her boarding house was two miles from the school, but she walked every day in high heel shoes, rain or shine.

Sometimes students would walk an extra half-mile or so in order to stroll through a stretch of woods or a field of flowers, rather than traverse a shorter distance down a dusty road. The father of one girl fixed steps for her to climb a barbed wire fence, and placed a log with a hand rail so that she could cross a stream dry-shod. Students at Maple Springs knew of a man called "Snake" Gibbs who carried snakes in his pockets and inside his shirt and named each one "John." One morning on the way to school they spotted a coral snake, "so we wanted to see if he would come to us, so we called 'John, come on,' and here he came and away we went on to school, we didn't stay to see how far he came."

A Panola County student remembered that: "Once cold weather set

in we came to school bundled in everything we had to wear that Mother wasn't washing at the time." One girl recalled with mortification that for cold weather "my Mother got me a pair of Union suits and I had to wear those long legged things to school — oh, I was so ashamed." Despite bad weather and distance, however, students often enjoyed their walks, gathered in large groups to make the journey a social affair. At Fair Play in Panola County there was also a certain entertainment for one group of pedestrians, since "the same two boys fought on the way home from school nearly every day."

Teachers' pay often was meager: \$25, \$50, \$65, \$75, sometimes \$100 per month for six to nine months. Frequently teachers were provided room and board — perhaps for a month at a time — in the houses of their students. Dr. Ralph Steen reported that during the Depression East Texas rural schools often opened their teaching positions to bidders — and the teacher offering to work for the *lowest* pay was hired.

Many of these teachers were dedicated, allowed youngsters to learn at their own pace, and drilled their students conscientiously. A former student remarked that the country school "was probably as good as the teacher." A longtime East Texas teacher, recently deceased, attended a one-room school. Regarding contemporary education, he said: "The teachers may know more, and the facilities are much better, but teachers are unable to discipline the children as before, which prevents them from teaching to their full potential."

A woman who attended Eden School in Nacogdoches County stated that "most children looked forward to school as they were eager to learn and there were no newspapers, magazines, or radios in most of the homes. Since there was very little opportunity to leave the house or farm, children were homebound more so than today, and school was someplace to go." A seventy-four-year-old East Texas woman testified: "I wouldn't change the education I received or the way I received it. I believe that the country schools back then educated children better than many of our public schools today." In the words of 120 former students and teachers, this is an account of the rural schools of East Texas.

Interviews

Fannie Adams (2-5-85), by Sonya Adams
 Little Belle Aimmings (3-12-84), by Debbie Ramsey
 Vera Mae Alexander (4-2-84), by Prenzeal Alexander
 Virginia Baggett (2-6-85), by Susan Hughes
 Clois Ramsey Baker (2-9-84), by Michaelle Gatewood
 L.D. Barr (2-3-84), by Charles Barr
 Irene Baxley (2-4-85), by Aaronia Baxley
 Ellie Beard (10-31-84), by Teresa Beard
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 C.M. Bounds (2-4-85), by Tina Davis
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 D.C. McSwain (2-4-85), by Thomas Henry
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 Robert Miller (4-5-83), by Becky Haynes
 Rosie Lee Moody (11-2-84), by Kellie Mattox
 Marie Muse (11-9-84), by Sarah Muse
 Ima Nail (2-6-85), by Ron Lout
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 Emma Grant Oates (10-31-84), by Kathy Cockrell
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 Elva Oliver (11-2-84), by Toni Baldwin
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 Fannie Smith (2-5-85), by Sonya Adams
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 Thomas Smith (11-1-84), by David Smith
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