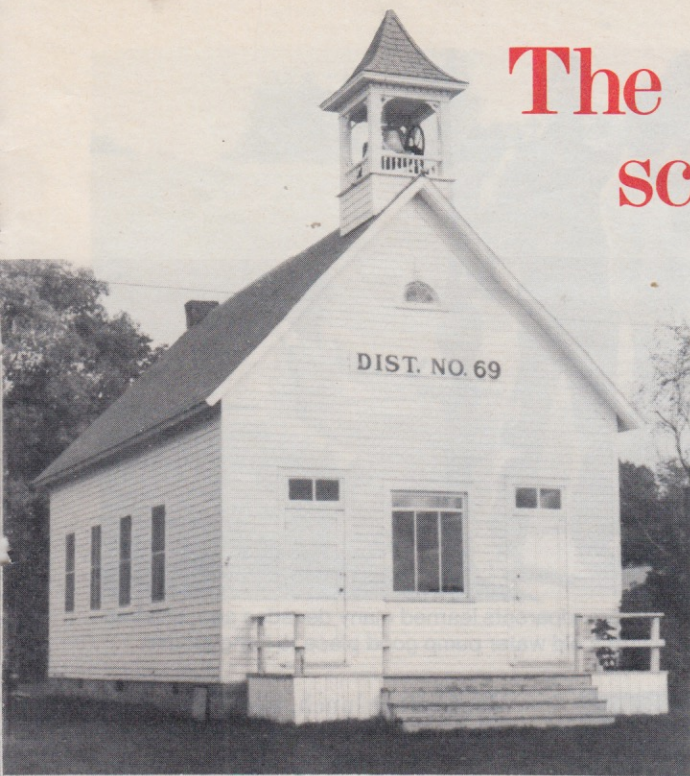


# The one-room schoolhouse is reborn



By Donna Heath

Every summer, this school in Pine City, Minn., comes alive with children studying as they did 80 years ago. Project is run by retired teacher to preserve past.

**A**t 9 A.M., a bell rings at an old one-room schoolhouse. Youngsters wearing clothes of 1900 stop playing in the schoolyard and file into the building.

At the door, they are greeted by a schoolmarm in a long black skirt and crisp white blouse. The pupils—in grades one through eight—begin studying from old textbooks. They write on slates and do penmanship with old pens that need inkwells.

The room has a dunce stool and cap and a clock ticking on the wall. A

bouquet of wildflowers brightens the teacher's desk.

Many older Americans might smile at all this—and wonder what happened to the last 80 years. But it's real.

For a week each summer, two restored one-room schoolhouses in the small towns of Cambridge and Pine City, Minn., come alive with children and old-fashioned teaching. The idea is to give the youngsters a taste of what school was like at the turn of the century.

The schoolmarm—and creator of all this—is Esther Schmidt, whose long teaching career, much of it in rural schools, stretches back to classes not too far removed from the old times she and her pupils are imitating.

Although the scene is merely a re-enactment of times long gone, Schmidt thinks it contains some basics that modern education would do well to copy. For example, she's a firm believer in rural education, which permitted children to walk to school.

Now retired, she says, "I've always had a strong feeling that community classrooms, as in the old rural schools, benefited children because they learned from one another. If they missed something, they heard it repeated often enough that they eventually caught on."

Also, she feels that segregating children into age-graded classrooms is like storing them in boxes.

The boys in her summer classes usually wear bib overalls or black pants tucked into long black socks to give the appearance of knickers. Girls wear sunbonnets, shawls and long dresses, often with aprons.

Penmanship is a favorite subject

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Photos: Donna Heath

A 1900 photo? No. This is "schoolmarm" Esther Schmidt starting a new school day—to show young people life as grandparents lived it.





Each day, the youngsters bring old objects from home to use in show-and-tell session. It's educational—and obviously fun.



As their great-grandparents learned many decades ago, children find schoolyard's old water pump good place to hang around.

of the pupils. They delight in poking their pens into inkwells and painstakingly trying to copy the fancy style from handwriting books.

Specialists are brought in to teach things like embroidery, quilting and woodcarving.

The children do research on the kinds of lunches that youngsters of 1900 carried to school, and bring lunches similar to them.

"Remember," Schmidt tells them, "there were no prepackaged lunchmeats or Hostess Twinkies."

The students have found that citrus fruits usually were a treat saved for Christmas. Dinner buckets often were syrup pails or small baskets covered with embroidered napkins.

Classes are interesting. When the chattering gets a bit noisy, Schmidt might ask: "What is the signal for being quiet? See if you can hear it."

As the noise dies down, the clock ticking on the wall can be heard. "That's it—that's the signal," she says, smiling.

Each day, the pupils bring articles from the past to share in a show-and-tell session.

A hat-stretcher with a large wooden screw is a real puzzler as the children try to identify the mystery object. A hairbrush with different colored bristles made from horses tails also provokes interest.

"This is a golden opportunity to help preserve the history of rural schools," says Schmidt. "Before long the true experiences will be forgotten unless they are passed along from one generation to another."



Specialists teaching varied crafts find the children eager to learn.



Imagine, music from a pump organ! You won't find this in today's classrooms.

Just before lunch, two of the older girls go out into the schoolyard and pump water into a pail. Then, as the others move along in line, the girls pour water on their hands. After they wash with soap, another dipperful is poured on to rinse.

Schmidt has been interested in rural education for a long time. Years ago, she was invited to Washington, D.C., to confer with people from Columbia University and the University of Minnesota on ways to update the curriculum of rural schools. As it turned out, however, most of them were phased out after World War II in the wake of widespread school consolidations.

Around that time, Schmidt took a break from teaching to study at the University of Oslo in Norway. She also observed teaching methods in Sweden, Denmark and England. Returning to this country with a strong background in Old World culture, she became a teacher of social studies.

"I've taught everything from kindergarten to college," she says, "but I guess my favorite age group is sixth graders. They are so receptive."

Since her first teaching days, a lot has changed—including teachers' salaries.

"I remember my first job very well," she says. "I was paid a salary of \$32 a month and had to pay \$12 a month for room and board."

But, she adds, it seemed easier in those days to manage on \$32 a month because there weren't so many things to spend money on. □