

# A Day at Copetown Public School in the Mid 1920's

*These memoirs were submitted by Mildred (Shaver) Sneyd born 1918, of her own childhood school life in Copetown Public School.(Ancaster and Beverly 12 & 20)*

When I was a small girl a typical school day started with a warm breakfast of oatmeal porridge, bread and honey or homemade jam, and a glass of milk. Then it was off to school about a mile down the gravel road from our farm.

My mother had packed lunches for my older brother Barton and me in tin pails that had originally held honey. Lunch might be a peanut butter or cold meat sandwich (from the Sunday roast), homemade cookies, and a Northern Spy apple from our orchard behind the barn buildings. Today was a real treat because I had a sandwich made from home-cured ham processed in the smokehouse, a little wooden building to the east side of the house. Ted and Alice, my older brother and sister, also needed lunches to take to their Continuation School classes which were held at Copetown United Church for a couple of years.

On the first day of school in September we carried a new reader and slate and slate pencils, and a piece of rag which was used to clean off our slates. The slates were of two sizes, about 10"x 14" for larger ones and 8" x 10" for smaller ones. Each slate had a wooden frame around it, about 1 1/2" wide. All this was bordered by a piece of red felt with a heavy black thread, wound around it diagonally. This felt had been glued to the edges of the board. Both sides of the slate could be used. Each of the older pupils had a newly-purchased newsprint scribbler, a pencil and art-gum eraser, and a smooth paper scribbler in which they wrote in pen and ink. They each had a straight pen with a metal nib inserted in its end and some spare nibs. The school provided ink from a large bottle which was poured into inkwells, part of the larger desks used by the older pupils. Some of the pupils would have a wooden pencil box to carry their pens and pencils, etc. My brother's pencil box was a two compartment one. The top one had a lid that slid through slotted sides to close it. When open, the top swivelled around to show the compartment underneath where there was room for more supplies. How I longed for the day when I would be old enough to own and carry such a box!



On any school day we trudged off down the long lane to the road that led to the village and school. On the way we might meet up with our neighbour Neil Dymont and perhaps Frank and Elsie Yeomans. We had to stop for a minute or two at the bridges across the streams to check and see what was

happening in the water, the reeds and the bulrushes beside the streams. On the spring day it was to watch the minnows and tadpoles. I loved to listen to the croaking frogs and the red-winged blackbirds with their distinctive red and white banded wings on black coats. I can still hear their cheery "Oh-kee-li" song.



When we arrived at the school, we left our lunches and went outside to play with our friends until the big bell in the belfry rang at 9:00 o'clock.

Miss Winnifred Weir was the teacher for all eight classes. She had come to teach at our school in 1924, the year I started, and was my teacher for six years. The three-man School Board of which my father was Secretary-Treasurer for many years, had interviewed and hired her. She had

come from Weir, a village to the west of Lynden. Her twin sister, Carrie, was hired the same year to teach at Mineral Springs School.

As one of the younger pupils in the one-room school, I sat at one of the small desks, which, with the other, was fastened to the floor in straight rows. The building itself had a high ceiling with three very large windows on each side, providing the only lighting in the room. The teacher's desk and chair were on a low platform at the front of the classroom. Our coats were hung on hooks just inside the entrance door at the opposite end of the room from the teacher's desk. There was a shelf above the hooks for lunch pails and a bench below where we sat to put on our rubbers or galoshes when we went outside in bad weather.

A large stove stood just inside the door. It was essential in the cold weather to keep that big room warm, and was fuelled by wood chunks that had to be replenished every hour or so during the day by the older boys. At the back of the room there was always a pail of water with a dipper; the water was carried up from Mrs. Hyland's pump down the hill from the school. Also at the back of the room, near the door, was a large supply cupboard. Supplies were few and far between in those days. There was a small globe or two and metal containers for measuring pints and quarts used in the arithmetic lessons. There were several wooden boxes of white chalk sticks packed in sawdust. The school owned a small number of books including a set of The Book of Knowledge. There was a set of green-covered, simple Geography books and some Thornton Burgess story books. As I



looked around the room I could see high on the wall behind the teacher's desk a long narrow box holding the maps which were pulled down and used for History and Geography lessons. To a small child the vast array of blackboards all across the front of the room was impressive. I could also see a Union Jack, a clock, and a picture of King George V and Queen Mary.



I always looked forward to Opening Exercises because Miss Weir read to us from *Hurlbut's Story of the Bible*, which was easier to understand than the Bible passages sent by the Department of Education in Toronto. This was followed by the Lord's Prayer and the singing of "God Save the King". School was under way for the day.

My class of four or five pupils took out our slates and slate pencils from the shelf under the desk top and proceeded to copy down the arithmetic questions from the blackboard. The teacher had been very busy before school began, filling the blackboard with questions appropriate to the different classes. The older students worked from a grey-covered arithmetic textbook which took them through several classes up to Senior Fourth. They did their work in their newsprint scribblers. Then came Spelling, which Miss Weir dictated from a blue-covered speller. The speller had words and sentences and explanations of common spelling rules, such as 'i before e except after c'. I loved the simple poems which were interspersed throughout the book. We memorized them and sometimes had to write them out as part of the spelling lesson. I still remember and treasure many of those little poems.

As I look back, how I admire Miss Weir who had to prepare and teach, give and then correct assignments from Primer to Senior Fourth. Of course, it was inevitable that we younger pupils listened to and absorbed the lessons she taught to the senior pupils.



The 15 minute recess at 10:30 was a welcome relief. Everyone went outdoors to play unless one or two needed to stay behind to finish work or to receive extra help. It was a privilege to stay in and clean off the boards with the felt erasers and then knock them together outside to get rid of the accumulated chalk.

Outside there was a chance to visit the outside toilet and take part in games that the pupils organized for themselves. Today we could skip because

someone had brought a rope cut to the right size by a kind father. We loved the skipping rhymes such as:

***Ella Bella dressed in yella'***

***Went downstairs to see her fella'***

***How many kisses did she give him?***

***1,2,3,4,5.....***



until you missed a jump. There were many variations of skipping games and jumping rope. We could play marbles if we had marbles. The older ones could play baseball if someone had brought a ball and bat. "Red Rover, Red Rover, let \_\_\_\_ come over" was a favourite game in the Fall and Spring. In the winter time after a fresh fall of snow we could make a great round circle for a track and a game of "Fox and Geese". With the right kind of packing snow we could always make snowmen and snowballs.

When the bell rang again and recess was over it was time for Reading and Literature. With the younger classes, Phonics was the basic tool which got everyone reading. Each class had its own brown-covered reader. The Primer started out with "The Little Red Hen" which was printed as script writing in the book. So we learned script writing right away and we progressed to the printed work, but translated in our minds from printing to script.

The stories progressed through the books with more difficult words and more mature stories. The texts often included stories with a moral, accounts of historical events, longer poems by well-known poets, and descriptive paragraphs from famous authors.

Oh, what excitement! A visitor has come into the classroom. Miss Weir is a little flustered. She introduces him to the pupils and tells us he is the School Inspector who has come to pay us a visit. We all stand up and say "Good morning, Mr. Robinson". We settle back to our work and the teacher carries on with the lesson she was teaching at the time. Mr. Robinson inspects the big blue daily register which records the names of all the pupils and keeps track of the days we are present or absent. The Inspector wanders around looking at our work and then settles down with one of the Senior Fourth class pupils, Ken Lawson, and helps him with his arithmetic and grammar lessons.

Ken and the other Senior Fourth pupils must write the Entrance Exams in June in order to move on into Continuation School next year. We are in awe of these senior pupils and the hard work they are doing. The Inspector eventually leaves and everything is back to normal again.

What an exciting week it has been! Earlier in the week the School Nurse was at the school. She came monthly and checked everyone over. She inspected our hands and looked in our mouths. A few weeks before she had been here with Dr. Farmer who gave us all shots for diphtheria and scarlet fever. This was a necessary experience, but not a pleasant one.

We shall have another exciting day tomorrow because it is Arbour Day! We will spend the day cleaning the school inside and out. We scrub everything in sight inside the school. We are to bring rakes to clean up dead leaves, long grass and twigs. In the afternoon, perhaps we will take a walk into the woods at the back of the school. We hope to see white and red trilliums, dog-tooth violets and Jack-in-the-Pulpits. Miss Weir has warned us not to pick these so that the roots are not disturbed which will promote further growth. We are allowed to pick the purple violets if we want to. They are so pretty at first but soon wilt in hot sticky hands. It will be fun to have a ball game with the whole school. We will have a longer time than the 15 minute recess or the noon hour game when many of the children who live near the school go home for lunch.



But to get back to today. 12 o'clock is a welcome break for lunch. It is warm and sunny today so we can sit under a shade tree or lean against the shady side of the red brick school. Perhaps a friend has something in her lunch that looks more interesting than yours and you trade something or share a taste. Perhaps you have to make plans for a visit to spend the night with your friend. Or perhaps you can talk about the birthday party to which you were invited last week. There is plenty of time for games again.



At 1:00 o'clock, the bell rings again and it's back to classes. After lunch Miss Weir always reads to us from a story book for 15 minutes. Today, it's a chapter from the Thornton Burgess book, *Reddy the Fox*, that villain of the animal world who was always scheming and trying to trick the other animals, but who always failed in the end. How we look forward to story time! The lessons this afternoon are Reading and Writing. Now

in the springtime we must practise our writing so we can enter it in the Ancaster Fair competition in September. Art pieces are prepared also. Some pupils have taken home vegetable and flower seeds supplied by the Agricultural Representative from the Department of Agriculture to grow for exhibition in the Fair contest. Someone is practising a speech for the Public Speaking Contest.

The older classes will be having lessons in Geography, History, Grammar and Literature. For Geography and History lessons the map box contains maps of the World with the British Empire indicated in red. It looked as if it were half the world. There were also maps of Canada, Ontario and Wentworth County and its townships. Civics was taught also. I remember having to learn the names of the Prime Minister, The Premier of Ontario and the Civic officials.

Oh, how I wish it were Friday so we could have Art! It was such a treat to get out our art books which had been purchased at the beginning of the school year along with a box of crayons or a box of paints. The younger classes had small art books, about 8" x 10". The older classes had larger ones about 9" x 12". They were made of rough paper and each page was perforated along one side so it could be easily detached. We drew seasonal things — flowers in springtime, autumn leaves in fall, snow pictures in winter with glorious sunsets. Perhaps next week we would draw and colour a Union Jack Flag because it was getting near the 24<sup>th</sup> of May, Queen Victoria's birthday. Those red, white and blue bands had to be exactly right.



After recess time at 2:30 the younger ones were dismissed. I usually waited for Barton, but since it was a nice spring day, decided to walk home by myself, thinking about our neighbours and friends who lived in the different houses along the way. I would imagine what was happening at the General Store, the Railway Station, the Feed Mill, the Blacksmith Shop and the Church. Of course, I had to check again the wild life, reeds, grasses, and pretty weeds that grew along the road-sides. It was a long walk for a little one, but finally I would be home looking forward to a snack and a drink of milk to tide me over till suppertime. It was time to check on the animals on the farm: the new kittens, the dog, the baby goats, the calves, and the baby chicks and ducks. Lessons about so many things did not need to be taught at school. We learned them all naturally in the world around us.

So ended a typical day of formal and incidental learning for a pupil at Copetown Public School in the mid-1920's.

*Mildred (Shaver) Sneyd, 2008*