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FOOT HILLS

The first-prize story in the third quarterly Harmon-Survey Award in the field of public education.

OUR furniture was half in the truck and half on the sidewalk. Mr. Sweeny, the reporter of the *Daily Herald*, begged us for some details of our "flitting." We told him we were going "over the mountain." Why we were willing to leave a comfortable Pennsylvania Dutch brick house for the doubtful comfort of a mountain dwelling, he could not understand. We did tell him that we were going to open a little one-room school that had been closed for two years, but fearing that he would confuse us with missionaries, we said no more.

All the stories I had ever read of fairyland came back to me as our truck plowed through the winding mud road, forded creeks and finally stopped before a tiny white-washed log cabin. The creek, spanned by a rough foot-log, flowed in front, a pine clad hill rose sharply opposite and a small peach orchard climbed abruptly from the back door. I am sure the driver of the truck was relieved to be there but gladder than he were the two young "mammy cats" that had journeyed in hat boxes fastened over the mud guards.

The doors and window frames of the cabin were olive green and the floors were clean. The house smelled of pine wood. Food was to be kept in a cave on a hillside. The chicken house was spacious, with cement floor, but untenanted and uncleaned for two years. Going for water was like a trip to Titania's palace, a narrow grassy path between tall pines, the spring coming "out of the rock" and flowing through a bark trough. With night came the first flaw. The door had no lock. Our nearest

neighbor lived a mile away. In our city ignorance we were worried but a large rat trap soon solved our problem. This set firmly in the door which would not completely close assured us of safety.

Our first breakfast was exciting. My partner, Emma Burgess, economically burned up the scraps of paper and trash found in the house. I was in the act of turning the eggs when a terrific report shook the house. The stove lids rattled and the front panels of the stove flew out. A harmless looking little pill box of salt must have been priming powder.

That night old Lizette arrived. She was twenty-eight, but the proud curve of her neck bespoke a spirit of lingering youth. For hours that day I had labored with the chicken house. Fifty large boxes full of fertilizer had been cleaned off that floor and piled in the garden. Lizette's new home had been scrubbed and whitewashed. My back was stiff, but I forgot it when I looked at that beautiful old mare. We three were to live through many experiences together, some tragic, some humorous, but that moonlight night when she came to us, she won her way to our hearts.

The first month in the new little home was spent in learning to know our neighbors. Mattie Thompson came daily to give me lessons in the care of Lizette. The Urners invited us to a peach paring and we stayed until the moon had set. Then we surrendered ourselves to Lizette, who brought us in inky darkness through seven fordings of the creek to our cabin. We went to the Sunday school picnic held on the school grounds, and my heart sank when I stepped inside that school house. For two years the doors had been opened twice, once in August of each year for the picnic. Apparently the windows had been opened more frequently for there were evidences

that it had been used as a lodging house by young men whose unsteady legs could not be trusted to carry them home. A platform stood at one end of the room and on it a desk with a slanting top. The dust-covered books were strewn in disorder on the floor. A picture of George Washington with the glass broken hung crookedly over the teacher's desk. The ancient seats were screwed tight to the floor which sagged alarmingly beneath the big rusty wood stove.

The week before school was to open we had a meeting with the trustees, Columbus Urner and Van Buren Reisler, and the County Superintendent of Schools. The third trustee, Annanias Brown, had been offended several years before and refused to attend. There were no sanitary arrangements, the girls' privy lying in a ditch and the boys' standing uncertainly over a branch of the creek. During that conversation I sacrificed my reputation for modesty, but achieved two modern sanitary toilets, placed the required distance from the stream, and therefore, conspicuously along the road. They had value as an example to the community; only forty per cent of our neighbors possessed one.

We finished our rounds of the neighborhood by the end of August. We visited every house, met the parents and enrolled the children for school. The grown-ups were courteous, but beneath their politeness we glimpsed their attitude toward "learning." Most of them were sincerely glad that the school was to be opened, but a few made it clear that should going to school affect the corn planting or the campaign "agin" potato bugs, the corn and bugs would come first.

We had been told that Aunt Liz had two children with her, little Maria, daughter of a niece dead at thirty with tuberculosis, and a boy "no kin, only the cow boy." Aunt Liz was glad to see us. Yes, her little Maria was a good child. She'd learn fast too. No, that was the only one. The boy couldn't learn. He was "dumb." They

just kept him to watch the cows and he'd be no use if he went to school. To tell her that he must go, that the law required it was useless. The men "gigged" and dynamited the creek and trapped out of season. What could the law do anyway?

The great first day came at last with an enrollment of 24 boys and girls from 6 to 17 years old, and theoretically from the first to the seventh grade. They came barefoot and curious. We spent the day getting acquainted and by afternoon I had decided that there was only one way to grade my pupils, in two groups, those that had been in school and those that had not. If one child should perchance stray from one group to the other, it wouldn't matter much.

Those shy boys and girls in their overalls and calicoes, many of whose grandfathers had fought in the Civil War, had never heard of America. They thought their country was ruled by a king and that the name of the king was Mr. Wilson. Some were without doubt eligible for membership in the Daughters and Sons of the American Revolution. I soon found that they were lineal descendants of the men who revolted against George the Third, not only in the fact of birth but essentially in spirit. If they had had a motto it would have been, "we won't take nothin' off nobody."

The school tradition was for discipline by beating. Mr. Muller had achieved fame as a pedagogue, by making it necessary for the mothers to sew on each morning the buttons that had been spanked off the day before. I had been advised by a seasoned parent, the father of three "do less" boys and two prostitutes to "treat 'em rough," and so we formed a student government, albeit with difficulty. They had never heard of voting. My oldest girl, who was slow of speech and thought, was unwilling to vote. I finally got her to say that she had been told never to "sign no paper." The two "bad boys" of the school were elected president and vice-president. One of the

rules decided upon by the officers was that there was to be no spitting on the floor. When this announcement was made, Carrie, the one who had been afraid to vote, said loudly and without preface, "If I want to spit, I'm going to spit." This was challenged by the new vice-president who proceeded to prove forcibly that he was able to enforce rules by beating up Carrie's brother since he could not beat her.

A teacher of a formal school would have been horrified at many things. Much dog trading went on among the boys, one of whom owned fifteen. It was no uncommon occurrence to have a nice friendly dog, on his way from one home to another, spend the day tied to the leg of his owner's desk.

We found very early that we could simultaneously learn and play and be of some use to the community. The parents of the children had no recreation. We decided to furnish it. Every month we gave a play or a party of some sort to the grown-ups. First there was an Armistice Day celebration. The owner of the newspaper in the nearest village gave us a flag. The trustees of the school cut and planted a pole in the front yard. Everyone was invited. More than half of the guests refused the printed programs with words "can't read." The children sang and recited. The minister in his opening prayer thanked God that the teacher and the nurse had come to them. The flag was raised with ceremony and a tow-headed boy in overalls read the Declaration of Independence. His sister came to me the next day. That night there had been a disagreement at home which I was to settle, please. "That there word, Pap he said it is 'declamation' and Maw she said it is 'decoration,' which is it?"

Every experience taught us more forcibly that interest is the mainspring of learning. Children who were bored to apathy by school room routine sweated in their efforts to learn to read their parts in entertainments

or the words of the songs they sang so happily.

During these months Emma Burgess was sowing the seeds that were to grow into a genuine interest in and respect for health. A tooth brush drill was introduced. The "chores" of the "Health Crusaders" were counted daily by striving "pages" and "squires," and the stumbling block for most of them was the weekly bath. The "chore" of washing hands before meals made it necessary for towels to be hemmed in sewing class and washed each day after the noonday meal. Hot soup or cocoa was cooked on the new wood stove, the sugar, cocoa and vegetables brought by the children in turn, the milk furnished by the "community cow," given to us by a kindly physician and the State Federation of Women's Clubs.

Christmas, Washington's Birthday, Easter, and the coming of spring were celebrated by school and community together. Mothers came to school to make the boys' costumes for the Health Pageant in May, the girls making their own in sewing class. A sloping hillside above a grassy meadow was our theatre. A sapling poplar was the May pole and an oak stump the Queen's throne.

Early in the afternoon of this festival day, streamers of bright crêpe paper were fastened to the May pole and wrapped around it safe from the slight breeze. Consternation reigned when just before the performance it was discovered that a cow, in protest against this use of her pasture, had chewed the strings of the May pole. Safety pins soon repaired the damage and the little health fairies slew the dragon germs, and pie and fried foods and other enemies of healthy children.

During these months our household had rapidly grown. We had taken to live with us Aunt Liz's cow boy, Terence, little Maria and her two older sisters, who had been infected during their infancy by their tubercular mother. We took them first because

they needed a home, but also because we found out, even in this short time, what happened to children left without proper guardianship. My partner made a six months' survey for the Department of Agriculture, which was an attempt to evaluate the human output of the community during the preceding hundred years. These findings were labelled "dynamite" and left unpublished, but they taught us the sordid future of children left without parents. Another reason for taking the children was the deep seated belief that God sent tuberculosis and that it was useless to expect to recover. The rapid cure of these two girls did much more than any amount of preaching, and besides our neighbors could no longer feel Old Aunt Carrie's contempt for "two old maids telling us how to bring up our children."

I should like to linger over those early months. The County Board of Education was generous. The platform was discarded and a new desk placed in the corner of the room. A new roof made the pails set about to catch the rain unnecessary. The children's desks were unscrewed from the floor so that the room could be used for community parties. When the new desks came, the old ones were taken out and placed under the trees. There on warm days the children studied in groups in the open air. One day when a visitor arrived, there were only six children in the room; the others were out under the trees. The student government put down deep roots. One morning our little Terence awoke with a cough and a temperature. I had to drive six miles for a doctor. My way led by the home of the vice-president of the student government. I stopped and asked him to open school without me. Returning at ten-thirty, I found the flag up, opening exercises over and three arithmetic classes in peaceful progress.

During the second summer the physicians in a nearby sanatorium volunteered to make a physical examination of the school chil-

dren. We had one hundred per cent attendance, although some of them had to be "fetched" by old Lizette. The defects disclosed were corrected. This meant many trips to the County Seat where Miss Burgess specialised four cases of tonsillectomy at one time. A generous dentist from "over the mountain" held a dental clinic in our house.

Gradually our work developed and extended. A reading club and a "singing society" for grown-ups met once a week at the schoolhouse. Miss Burgess was authorized by the County Superintendents to extend her health activities to the three nearby schools. During the second year my "free" school was given a setback by the appearance on my wall of a daily schedule which divided my day in twenty-six periods. Its presence had a depressing psychological effect although I can truthfully say I never carried it out consistently one single day of my teaching.

For four years we lived and worked in our schoolhouse and on our little farm. "Manna" from interested friends helped to keep the family together. Now the "dumb" cow boy who had had to start in the first grade although ten years old was ready for high school after four years' study. One of the girls, too, was ready. We knew that just over the next foot-hill was another community exactly like ours, and another and another. We couldn't live in all of them and we couldn't induce others to leave the city for such a life as ours. (In my enthusiasm I had approached a number of colleges and talked to the seniors. This was during my second year of teaching. With more experience there came the conviction that much more than a college degree was necessary, that to place in an isolated rural school an inexperienced college girl—inexperienced in life, not in teaching method—would often be fatal to her and probably only a degree less so to the school.)

The only solution seemed to lie in bring-

ing these communities together. The village three miles away was the logical center and so in the beginning of our fifth year we tore up our roots, not painlessly, and moved our family to the village. For two years I worked in the two-room school as assistant to the principal who had taught in the same room for forty years.

Miss Burgess was taken over by the health department first as public health nurse for the upper part of the county and then in charge of the county as a whole. After six years of class room work I began to feel that what I had learned might possibly be put to some wider use. I did not want to leave my chosen state so I sought the State Superintendent of Schools. "Frankly," said he, "I see no place for you in our system unless you wish to train for a year or so as a helping teacher. But even then I doubt if you would do. You are interested in the sociological conditions surrounding the schoolhouse. That's all right, of course, but we want teachers whose main and controlling interest is in classroom methods." The vision of my daily schedule rose before me and I departed sadly and with many a backward glance at my beautiful adopted state.

Almost two years have passed and I return for the Christmas holidays. I find a vigorous county nursing and health program.

In the village the community club organized with much difficulty three years ago is flourishing. It holds a weekly meeting and dance and owns its own piano. The consolidated school is a solid fact of red brick. Its doors will open next week and to it next term will be brought the children of our little mountain school-house and those of the three similar and adjacent communities.

I think this means more light in the foot hills.

BEULAH WELDON

HEALTH AND THE KINDERGARTEN

WHEN a little boy or girl forms any habit, whether it is a good or bad one, it is very, very hard to change it. "It is easy to change the course of a small stream, but it is not easy when the stream has become a great river." It is important that we start to form good habits while young. The earlier we begin, the stronger and more fixed the habit will become as we grow older. The more fixed the habit is in the child, the less plastic it becomes. It would be very easy to straighten a young tree that had been bent, by merely propping it up straight, but an old tree would never yield. So it is with a person who has formed a good or bad habit. When one has grown accustomed to doing any thing, it is just as hard for him to change as it is for an old crooked tree to be straightened. At first the crooked tree was just as straight as the others, but something bent it just a little, and every time the wind blew it bent the tree a little more until it became very crooked. If when it was young an attempt had been made to straighten it, this could have been very easily done. Strong, straight trees cannot be bent when they are grown. This habit of always being straight has been so firmly fixed that they will always remain so.¹ If the correct habits are formed in the child from the very beginning, by the time the child is grown these habits will be firmly fixed.

We form a habit by doing a thing over and over until it can be done without our having to think about it. After a thing has been done once, it is done more easily the second time and still more easily the third time. In a young child it is just as easy to form a good habit as it is to form a bad one or to form a habit which will count

¹O'Shea, M. V. and Kellog, J. H. *Everyday Health Series*. Book I. p 7.