School Days - Early '20's

Starting school at age six was a new exciting experience on the farm. Rigid rules were to be followed:

"You can't speak German anymore, you must speak English".

"You must take a bath, be clean, smell good".

"You must comb your long hair and braid it yourself".

"You must wear shoes, you have to quit going barefoot".

I was looking forward to meeting my first teacher in the small, white, one room, wooden-framed school; house on the hill near Steeles & Hart's Corners. "I must be clean, I must wear shoes, I must braid my hair and I must speak English". A big deal for a six year old!

Saturday night was bath night. The whole body had to be bathed. Water had to be carried from the well to the kitchen. The water was put into a wash boiler on top of the burners of the wood stove. A round galvanized wash tub was placed in the center of the kitchen floor. Water was transferred from the boiler to the tub as needed. Since I "dragged" the water, I took the first bath. More hot water was added as needed for each child. No water was wasted and the homemade soap left a pure, wholesome, clean body with glowing skin. That soap made from grease and lye certainly cleaned off the Summer dirt.

The first day of school arrived. I was awakened early. I had to milk a few cows before getting my school clothes on. Like always, I carried my milking pail and a cleaning pail out to the barn. I learned to love my cows by petting them first. I spoke nicely to each one. Then I would wash the bag and teats before starting to milk. Soon cats would hover around me pleading for food. Just like a kid, I aimed to please. I'd squirt at the cats. They drank eagerly. Since I had not eaten, I squirted milk into my mouth too. Good, fresh, warm milk direct from the sow was delicious.

After the milking, I had to "wash up". Almost like a bath, only using a small wash basin, soap and wash cloth. Then I had to "dress up" for school. I put on my homemade brown dress and my high-top button shoes. Then I combed and braided my brown hair. The one braid hung half-way down my back. The Chiff-robe mirror reflected a proud, six year old girl ready to leave for school.

Mother had tears in her eyes as she bid me farewell. My two older brothers and I started to walk down the dirt road; we hiked three miles one-way to school.

We went around the first bend in the road when I stopped to take off my shoes. My feet were too cramped, I could hardly walk in these high-tops. As I approached school, I forced the shoes back on my feet, buttoned the shoes with a shoe hook, then walked ahead slowly.

There were twenty-nine pupils in our school. There were ten girls and nineteen boys in one room. We had grades one through eight. One teacher taught us reading, writing and arithmetic. We had one "happy family" under one roof getting educated.

There was a pot belly stove in the center of the room. The first graders sat closest to the stove. The eight graders sat in the far corners.

Day one was exciting, yet very disturbing to me. The bigger boys and girls kept laughing at me behind my back at recess and standing up times. What was the problem? Was I weird? I found out what was so funny when I got home that evening. I slipped off my homemade dress. The dress had been made from two flour sacks that had been bleached, washed and dyed brown. The emblem was still visible on the seat of my dress. It said, "Pillsburys' Best xxx xxx!

I remember sitting at my desk with a heap of yellow corn kernels. I made letters, A,B,C,etc. using the kernels. I used a large piece of chalk, printed on the blackboard, A,B,C, etc. Pumpkins seeds and nuts were used to shape the letters. The alphabet was learned rapidly, but Q and 2 caused a bit of confusion in my

memory pattern for years. To this day the letters Q and the number 2 bother me.

Recess was a welcome time. We would go outdoors to play "Crack-the-Whip", "Wood Tag", "Andy-I-Over" or in the winter slide, sled ride or skate on the neighbor's pond. The teacher joined the fun. She was an excellent skater.

At Helloween we had a pie and cake social. The girls brought the pastry. The boy that bought the pie or cake ate with the girl that brought the item. I remember eating with an eight grade boy. The apple pie was delicious. I ate one piece, he ate three pieces. He was a farmer, a growing teen-ager that enjoyed eating.

Our teacher was pretty, youthful, vibrant and loved us. We loved her. She treated us special at the end of the school year. She had two large cans of home-make vanilla ice cream for us to share. That was my first experience eating ice cream. It was memorable, I can taste its cool, delicious, feel against my tongue now as I write.

There were four years of learning to print and write. The pens were straight wooden pieces, a metal point was inserted at the base. The pen was dipped into an ink bottle. Then the proper writing position was required. Sit up straight, feet flat on the floor. Pen must be held between the thumb and next finger, guided by the middle finger. The arm had to rest on the desk. Proceed to limber the fingers with ooooo////, etc, then make the letters, one at a time A,a,B,b, etc. By the end of the year, the writing pad was filled, according to directions from the teach-er.

Luckily, our teacher could play the piano. She taught us many nice songs,and rhymes. Alice Faye Murlin was a real friend and teacher. She is ten years older than I am, but we have been writing to each other for many years. She is the person that caused a burning desire within me to become a teacher. She loved and cared for all of us. I hope my pupils can say the same about me. I love life and enjoy living.