

1945 Nebraska and the One-Room School House

One of the most enduring themes in American education is the lost virtue that came with the disappearance of one-room country schools almost everywhere. As school districts consolidated and started busing programs to transport students longer distances, the one-room schools came to be regarded as economically inefficient, not to mention somewhat outside the normal sorts of controls imposed on curriculum. These schools usually had only one teacher and often that teacher functioned without any oversight by administrative staff such as a principal. Instead, they often answered only to a district school board and usually that was composed of local farmers that had little knowledge of what might constitute a suitable course of studies. Nonetheless, these small school teachers were usually keenly sensitive to the beliefs and customs of the families which were served by their schools, much more so than teachers today, and they also had the benefit of graduating from colleges that specialized in preparing them for the rigors becoming an elementary school teacher. I had the privilege of attending such a school starting in the first grade in September of 1945. I had turned five years old in July of that year which nowadays would have made me a candidate for kindergarten, but our little country school did not have such a class. When you started school you started in the first grade. As a result, when I graduated from high school in June of 1957, I was only sixteen years old.

This is the story of my three years in country school and also the rural environment that provided the context for that experience. You can't really describe one without the other as schooling always takes place as part of one's overall life experiences.

My story begins in September of 1945 when my dad and all my uncles were not yet back home from the war, and my mom was temporarily living near my dad's last duty assignment in Texas. Until then I lived mostly on my dad's farm in Nebraska, under the care of my grandparents. Before joining the Army Air Corps, my dad inherited half of a successful construction company from his dad. The other half was owned by his uncle John Einung, who was one of the original developers of the business. In short order the two ended up deadlocked with respect to how to run the business and the negotiated solution was for dad's uncle to buy my dad's share of the business. That resulted in dad having a rather large chunk of money and he invested a lot of it in a really good farm in northeastern Nebraska, about eight miles outside Laurel.

Not being a farmer, dad asked his wife's parents, Wayne and Orpha Sutton, to run the farm. The Suttons had always worked as sharecroppers on their previous farms so this arrangement worked out well for them in that their daughter was now a farm owner. Also, their previous farm had been totally destroyed by a tornado about the time I was just a year old. When the war started and dad and all my uncles left to do their duty, my grandparents were left to run dad's new farm.

So I spent most of the war years under the care of my grandmother Orpha. I loved Orpha dearly but apparently having me underfoot was beginning to wear on her so she decided to enroll me in the one-room country school that was located on the far side of our farm. I had just turned five so starting out in the first grade with no previous education of any sort was destined to be a challenge, both for me and for the teacher. I had spent the previous years just being an only child, roaming around our farm either playing a perpetual game of cowboys and Indians (I had to play both roles) or playing with my toy trucks in what was probably the world's largest sand box.

Some of the games I played would not be approved of today. When I was about six, my dad decided it was time for me to learn how to handle weapons. To accomplish that he gave me a single-shot 22 caliber rifle. About once a week, he would give me one bullet, a 22 "short," for me to go hunting. Dad taught me a great deal about gun safety before turning me loose with the rifle, but he didn't teach me much about hunting. I had to learn that on my own by spending countless hours tracking small critters or birds in the grove behind our farm buildings. I knew, of course, that one must always "clear the range" before firing any weapon so I was always mindful to not point my rifle toward the farm buildings or any farm animals. Finally, after many months of practice, I managed to shoot a small bird. I was bursting with pride so I grabbed the little thing and went running to find my grandmother, thinking that she would heap praise on me for my first "big kill." When I showed her the bird, holding it by its feet, she just looked down and almost whispered, "we don't shoot robins." I was crestfallen, but soon got over it and went back to hunting. My next conquest was to shoot ducks out of season. I knew those would be legitimate kills.

For the five years before I started at school, I had wondered what all went on in the small white school house with the little bell tower. Our farm was the typical Nebraska quarter section in that it was comprised of 160 acres. However, a small piece of that acreage, probably about three acres, was devoted to the country school. The school was there long before my dad bought the farm so I have to assume that the local district bought the land from a previous owner of the farm. Our farm house was located on one corner of the farm and the school house was located on the opposite corner. That meant that the walk to the school was approximately one mile (a full section encompassed 640 acres which was one-mile square). You could get to the school through a short cut by walking across our fields but to do that you had to get across the permanent pasture just behind the grove of trees that surround the farm buildings. Often times there was a bull in the pasture and I was severely cautioned to never cross the pasture when the bull was in residence. Also, getting across without stepping in a "cow pie" required considerable agility.

However, as soon as I was old enough to go walking on my own, I made occasional forays to the corner of the farm and, while hiding behind a fence, spy on the kids at the school. Remember, I was an only child and as such I hungered for company. I often wondered if it would be okay for me to just wander out on the school yard to see if any of those kids would like to play, but they all looked way too old to be interested in playing with me. So when grandma Orpha finally sent me off to first grade, it was not something I was fearful of, nay, I had looked forward to it for a long time. Of course, I had no idea that getting an education was part of the bargain.

Our school was typical for the era in that it covered grades one through eight. If you wanted to go further you had to find a way to get to high school "in town," a journey of eight miles or more for many kids with no school bus to get you there. Even getting to our one-room grade school was challenging for many of the kids. I remember some rode horses to school. For me it was normally a walk around the borders of our farm which was done mostly in the company of the little girl who lived on a nearby farm. She was a couple grades ahead of me so naturally she assumed a mantle of leadership during our walks. One time I asked her if I could go down in the ditch (all Nebraska roads have ditches) to go "wee wee." She was horrified and positively refused my request. When I arrived home my pants were soaked as I could not hold it back any longer.

The little girl's name was Nancy and her parents were of German descent, including her grand dad who was born in Germany. Nancy's mom was well known for her lack of adaptation to farm life. She was the only farm wife in the area who didn't kill chickens. Instead, she put their heads on an old stump and "executed" them with a machete, doing it all with her eyes closed. My grandma killed so many chickens that she did it as a casual operation. She would go to the chicken coop, select an appropriate bird, grab it by the feet and then walk back to the house. Somewhere along the way she would hesitate for a moment, grab the bird by its head, and then swing it around until the head was removed. Granddad was much cruder. He would simply put the bird's head on the ground, grab it by the feet and lift up to remove the head. He could do two chickens at one.

I had a bicycle but the gravel roads in Nebraska were not ideal for bicycle riding, especially if you were only five and your bicycle was full-sized. However, a one-mile walk was not the least bit arduous. When my mom went to school she had to walk five-miles and often had to carry her little brother. Later when I was older I did a fair amount of bike riding, notwithstanding the rigors of gravel roads. One quaint custom of the era that was observed by all kids was that whenever there was a car coming you would dismount from your bike and take it down into the ditch. This ensured that you would not be killed by a car. Since very few cars travelled our roads, this was not a great imposition.

Although we had twelve kids in our school not all grades were in session. My first-grade class had three kids, myself and two little girls. We didn't have a second-grade class as all the kids at that level had progressed upward. As I recall, we only had one eighth grader, a girl we thought of as being "adult" and thus not entirely trustworthy with respect to participating in our games. I had very little interaction with the two little girls in my class as, after all, they were girls. It was okay to join them in playing games but not to become close friends. I do remember, however, that one of the little girls had a most unfortunate malady. Every day at about two in the afternoon she would urinate while seated at her desk. We all knew it was going to happen and to spare her embarrassment we all ignored the growing puddle under her desk. I assume that after school the teacher cleaned up the mess. I also assume that the reason the little girl did that was because she was too shy to request permission to go outside and use our privy. This was still an era where prudishness was strongly imprinted in lots of folks.

The ground level of the school house was divided into two-rooms, a very large cloak area for removing and donning winter clothes, and a school room with desks and a windup Victrola. The cloak room was semi-open to the regular classroom area but it took up about one third of the footprint of the building as it required a lot of space to accommodate our needs in winter time. It usually took at least a full half hour to remove the many layers of clothes in the morning, while sitting on the floor, and then hanging them on the wooden dowels mounted on the chair rail that went round the entire space. The reverse procedure was undertaken when class was over in the afternoon. The building also had a half basement which contained a coal-fired furnace and a couple picnic tables used for eating lunch. The basement was also used when the teacher wanted to work with the entire student body. One of the things we did together was work on phonics. The older kids had long ago mastered the subject but the teacher knew that they would get a lot of reinforcement of their knowledge if they could help tutor the younger students. All I can remember is that it worked very well.

Obviously, for one teacher to teach eight grades she (it was always a "she") had to split up instruction by grade levels. Our little class normally got about an hour a day of individual instruction. The rest of the time was spent endlessly repeating exercises such as adding up columns of numbers and then, eventually, memorizing multiplication tables. We also had reading assignments to keep us busy. As I recall, there were virtually no problems with discipline. Nobody passed notes, nobody threw spit balls or shot rubber bands. I mistakenly assumed that this was the way all schools functioned so you can imagine how horrified I was in later years to discover that a lot of school kids behave like jerks.

Our teachers normally only lasted one year and most of them came from the college in Wayne, Nebraska. This was a college that specialized in producing teachers and, I have to say, did a damn fine job. The reason the young ladies only lasted one year is that teaching country school was probably the worst imaginable thing for a young woman to do back then. For our school, which was the only school in our "district," the teacher was provided room and board by a nearby farm family. This family also ran the local country church and did not approve of any sort of sinful activity such as smoking and drinking. Those views made it extremely uncomfortable for the young lady teachers, especially since they usually had to borrow the farmer's car to get away on weekends. When they did have an opportunity to escape, usually in the company of a fellow teacher, they would travel many miles to a distant town where they could drink and smoke to their heart's content without any fear of being seen by the parents of their students. Looking back, I realize how horribly hypocritical it was to subject these poor women to that regime. In our household, my grandmother was the only person who didn't smoke or drink; everyone else smoked like a chimney and drank like a fish, as did most of the adults in our northeastern Nebraska farming community.

Our school day always started the same way with the recitation of the pledge of allegiance and the Lord's prayer, followed by the singing of a Christian hymn with music provided by our trusty wind-up Victrola--the kind with the image of a dog looking into the speaker horn. No, this wasn't a private religious school; rather, it was simply typical for the traditions of that era. Prayer was not only not banned but was actively encouraged. As for the Catholic version of the Lord's prayer, I guess the Catholic kids didn't object to the Protestant version, even though it was somewhat longer. Of course, we recited the pre-1954 version of the pledge of allegiance which lacked the part about the nation being "...under God." However, our recitation of the Lord's prayer must have made up for that shortcoming.

Every year we put on a Christmas play which required each of us to play one of the roles involved in the birth of the baby Jesus. All parents were expected to attend and I'm sure they all did. Our student body primarily consisted of Protestants, most of whom attended the local country church presided over by the farmer who housed the schoolteacher, but there were also a few Catholic kids. They were thought to be a sort of curiosity, mainly in that they had to go into town for services. I'm positive that none of us were Jewish or Muslim. I guess that's why we could so confidently engage in Christian ceremonies as part of our school routine.

The old country church I've mentioned was a really scary looking affair. It stood naked on a big empty field with no landscaping whatsoever. It was a typical building for that area as Nebraska farmers didn't believe much in painting buildings on a regular basis, although they did band together every other year or so to repaint the school house. The church had lost all its coats of paint, thus adding considerably to the feeling that Norman Bates might be waiting inside to cut you to ribbons.

My main memory of the old church was Sunday school. Sunday school was taught by the preacher's wife, a very solemn woman who took her duties as a birthright. Her main role in life was to set straight the future paths of all the little children she taught. Her message was simple and relentless. There are two primary demons in the world--smoking and drinking. If you engaged in either of those activities you were destined to go straight to hell. Further, she was not content to let us conjure up our own concept of what hell might be like, instead, she provided graphic details. You can imagine what sort of effect this had on a little kid with parents and relatives who smoked and drank. Every night I'd go to bed worrying about the fate of my loved ones, right after I said the common children's prayer of that era: "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, if I should die before I wake." What a horrid prayer for a little kid to recite every night. You are visualizing how your parents are going to be skinned alive in hell while asking God to take you into heaven if you die that night. All of this passed for a good religious upbringing in the 1940s.

To put all of this in context, I think it appropriate to mention the normal routine for a typical Nebraska farm family during this era from about 1945 through 1948. This was an era when farms in that part of the country were just beginning to benefit from technological advancements that other areas, particularly towns and cities, had been enjoying for quite some time. Mechanization had certainly arrived in the form of tractors that eliminated a lot of the manual labor that once characterized farm work. Rural electrification had brought electricity to farms so that homes could be more safely illuminated and that appliances such as refrigerators, radios and farm equipment like cream separators could be powered. But at the same time most of those farms continued to operate much like they did in the 1930s and before. Tractors helped but many aspects of the harvest of grains and corn, and the rearing of animals and the milking of cows, still involved a lot of manual labor. Electricity made some aspects of farm life easier, but the average farm didn't have a whole lot of electrical capacity beyond providing one light bulb for each room. One of our upstairs rooms, for example, had no light bulbs and no outlets.

By the way a "cream separator" was the early predecessor to the centrifuges used to make nuclear material nowadays, only we used them to remove the heavy cream from milk. We milked our cows twice a day and after each milking the product was brought to the cream separator shed where the milk was poured into the big centrifuge. I used to love listening to it wind up as it sounded a lot like a modern airliner's jet engines on takeoff.

In our era of celebrating the labors and frustrations of the so-called "soccer mom" who spends her day herding her kids from one activity to another, we might find it enlightening to understand that the typical farm wife of my childhood had no time to spend with her kids. The week was divided up into six days of continual labor and one day, Sunday, which only involved cooking. Each of the remaining days had some central, labor objective. Washing, for example, was an all-day, outdoor affair starting with setting up the gas powered Maytag wringer washer and several galvanized tubs full of rinse water. Once all the clothes had gone through the wash procedure and had got their final run through the Maytag wringer, the remainder of the day was spent in hanging them out to dry. The next day would be ironing day when the dried clothes were brought indoors and ironed. Everything got ironed except socks. Each item was sprinkled with water and then ironed with an electric iron (not a steam iron). Another day would be devoted to baking bread. My grandmother would spend the entire day making the dough and then baking loaves of bread and buns, all of which would be consumed in the following days of the week. Of course, after four days the bread would start to get stale, which signaled the time to make use of the stale bread by

making French toast and bread pudding. And, of course, no matter what chore the day was devoted to, the farm wife was expected to prepare three full meals a day. If work was being done in the fields, she was also expected to bring snacks and drinks out to the workers in mid-morning and mid-afternoon. If the farm was hosting "threshers" (volunteers from surrounding farms who helped with a harvest) the farm wife had to convert her house into a dining hall and do all the regular meal and snack chores, only now for a much larger group than just the family. Besides all that, the farm's chickens were the exclusive domain of the farmer's wife. You may have heard the term "egg money." This is the money that farm wives made by collecting eggs each day and getting them ready for pickup by the in-town company that came out each day to collect the farm's output of milk and eggs. Those small amounts of cash were usually the only regular income for a farm that served to tide them over between sales of grain, corn and animals. So that was the "soft" life of a farm wife and that's why I was allowed almost total freedom to roam around our farm. Back then, little kids were expected to entertain themselves.

I got to help my grandma a lot. Funnily, I actually enjoyed doing household chores and I did a great deal of the routine ironing of clothing. I wasn't trusted, of course, to deal with delicate things. I also did most of the butter churning. Since we had all the heavy cream we could possibly want, we made butter in very small amounts about once or twice a week, and we made it just by shaking the cream in a jar. We had a very small refrigerator (by today's standards) but it was sufficient to store things like butter or milk that could spoil. Most of the vegetables we ate came out of the root cellar, a facility that looked a great deal like a 1950s bomb shelter. Grandma canned things year round and then stored the canned goods in the root cellar, along with bags of potatoes and apples, both of which seem to last a long time in the cool cellar. We also used the cellar as a place to safely ride out during tornado warnings. Like all farmers, we paid a lot of attention to weather forecasts on the radio and if we got a tornado warning we'd all head for the root cellar. Don't know why we called it a "root" cellar as we never kept roots in it.

Our farm had a large garden that was also grandma's province. Granddad would plow it for her each year but she did all the planting and harvesting. It was about a half acre in size and in season could produce enough vegetables for her canning to last us for the rest of the year. What it didn't have was any lettuce. We take lettuce for granted today and probably get upset if our super market doesn't have at least eight varieties on hand, but lettuce was a fairly rare vegetable in Nebraska in the 1940s. If you bought a hamburger in a restaurant, for example, it would normally consist of nothing more than a beef patty and a bun. I suspect that was because folks back then thought lettuce was pretty worthless.

Many of the things we take for granted today simply didn't exist on farms back then. Our "plumbing" consisted of a water pipe that ran from the well to a pump on top of the Sears Roebuck white metal sink cabinet in our kitchen. The drain from the sink went into a bucket affectionately called the "slop" bucket. Every morning this bucket was taken to the hog sty and emptied into a feed trough. Bathing was only done once a week, usually just before our weekly trip into town. To bathe you took a huge kettle out to the well, filled it with water, and then returned it to the cream-separator shed which had a big cob-burning range used to heat the water. Then you would bring down one of the big galvanized tubs hanging on the wall to serve as your bath tub. When the water was sufficiently warm, you'd fill the tub with it and then take your bath. Afterwards you'd haul the tub outdoors and empty it on the ground. For other bathroom activities your only civilized choice was to use the outhouse. Every farm had at least one outhouse which was just a little hut with wood seats inside that was positioned over a big hole in the ground. From time to time

someone would pour lime into the hole to help control the odor. When the hole filled up, you dug another one nearby and then used your tractor to drag the outhouse over atop the new hole, and then you capped off the old hole with dirt. If a farm was really old, you could see the progression of filled-in holes in a long line next to the outhouse.

Fuel on our farm was of three types. Our cars and tractors ran on gasoline and, as farmers, we were entitled to have a large gasoline storage tank mounted up high so that gravity could be used to fill our tractor and automobile gas tanks. The big tank would be refilled every month or so by a truck that came out from town. The only source of heat outside our kitchen was a pot-bellied stove in the living room that burned coal. There was no heat source for the upstairs bedrooms where I slept. We had two cob-burning ranges, one in the kitchen and another in the aforementioned cream-separator shed. Cobs were gathered almost daily from the pig sty. Pigs were mostly fed corn but they didn't eat the cobs. As you might suspect, the cobs came with a distinct odor of pig waste.

This was the environment that I lived in while attending school. It sounds like a lot of hardship but hardship is a relative term. We didn't think of ourselves as being put upon. We simply accepted the routines of farm life as being normal, after all, except for my dad who had some city living experience, none of the rest of the family had never lived anywhere other than on a farm.

One frequent memory of my school days was the two outhouses just behind the building, one for boys and one for girls. Whenever our teacher went to the facility, most of the boys would clear the building as soon as she closed the privy door, with the express purpose of checking to see if she was smoking or not. This was done by one boy standing on the shoulders of another boy to see if he could detect any smoke rising inside the privy. Almost every time the teacher had lit up as this was the only way the poor girl could have a moment to herself with some modicum of privacy. After the boys confirmed that smoking was going on they would quickly retreat back to the school house, giggling all the way. It was their secret only to be revealed to their parents should it be necessary to excuse some errant behavior on their part as in, "if you think that's bad, wait till I tell you about our teacher!"

I was the youngest boy in school by several years. That would normally make me a natural target for abuse but the situation with my parents made matters much worse. My dad was regarded as being "wealthy" because he outright owned his farm and dabbled with a flying service business in a leased airport just outside of the nearest town. When dad got out of the Army Air Corps he decided to continue leaving the farming to his in-laws and start a flight service to capitalize on the training he had received in the Army Air Corps. Back then, if you read Popular Mechanics or other such magazines, you would be led to believe that the entire population of America was poised to buy airplanes and get into flying. Dad thought he was in the vanguard of that movement, but, alas, it didn't happen that way. In the meantime, however, he was the only farm guy in our community who flew to work every day. He had two planes, both Piper Cubs, and flew every morning from a pasture on our farm to his airport. That impressed the hell out of all the local farmers but it made life extremely difficult for me. Not only did I have the most modern, most evidently successful farm dad, but I also had a grandmother and mother who insisted on providing me with the newest and best clothing. That latter distinction was the most damning as far as my fellow students were concerned. While I would show up in brand new bib overalls, they would come to school in hand-me-downs from older siblings that were well worn and usually full of holes. So I spent many a morning before

school running around the building with a horde of older kids in hot pursuit, wanting to hurl me to the ground and tickle me until I yelled "uncle."

There was another distinction factor that made school life difficult and that had to do with toilet paper. We pretty much take toilet paper for granted nowadays but back on the farm in the 1940s toilet paper was regarded as a luxury that only city folks could afford. My dad, probably after spending most of the war enjoying GI issue toilet paper, was determined that on his farm there would be rolls of toilet paper in our three-holer outhouse. There was no way to conceal that fact from our neighbors. Every time a neighbor would come by for a visit the word would go out. Those "uppity" Einungs actually have toilet paper in their outhouse. We were "too good" to use the Sears catalog like all our neighbors. I heard a lot about that in school, even though our school's two outhouses had toilet paper. So when the hordes were chasing me around the school yard I could hear insults coming my way about toilet paper, new clothes and my uppity parents. All that started my first year in school when I was just five-years old.

I don't want to give the impression that in any way I regret having attended country school. It was a unique experience and also a profitable one. Whatever indignities I might have suffered, I profited from a first-rate education from three different teachers, each of whom was truly dedicated to not being satisfied with anything other than success in her endeavors. At the end of three years in that school, I could read most newspapers and magazines, I could add a column of numbers and knew my multiplication table up to 12 X 12, and, most importantly, in compliance with the one standard imposed by the State of Nebraska, I could recite the names of every Nebraska county and its county seat. Today, of course, I can only remember the county we lived in, which was Cedar County.

We no longer accept any connection between religion and public education, and I think that's a good thing, and especially for those who wish to provide religious education for their children. Whenever the state gets involved in religion it makes it common place in the view of children. It takes away from religion the mysticism which makes it so attractive and replaces it with a form of repetition that guts the message of all meaning and emotional significance. However, back then, in 1945 as our nation was just finishing two horrible wars and our men folk were returning home, those that survived, having some religion in school was probably a good thing. Most of the little guys and gals had a lot to pray about when dad was still fighting overseas and when telegrams continued to arrive at homes, converting them from "blue star" homes to "gold star" homes.

In 1980 my wife Carolyn and son Robert, who was only ten at the time, paid a visit to Laurel Nebraska, the town we moved to after we left the farm. I still had an uncle there and he acted as our tour guide as we visited all the places that were part of my childhood. Some of the changes were regrettable as Laurel, like so many small towns, tried to "modernize" by destroying lots of old buildings and covering up 1920-style facades with smooth, bland exteriors that suggested modernity, but the worst scene was at the old country school. The school yard was still there but the building was gone, with nothing left behind but the old concrete basement. The yard was filled with weeds and my uncle shocked our son by informing him that the weeds were marijuana plants, plants that grow wild all over farm areas, a leftover of war time hemp growing efforts. I had to choke back some tears as the memories of the old school were still very active. I could close my eyes and still hear the sounds of the kids playing. I could visualize how we played softball even though we didn't have enough kids to make up two teams, and how the older kids tolerated the play

of the younger ones, not because they were tolerant but because without us they couldn't have a game. Our "diamond" was probably the most poorly groomed ball park ever as the only way the weeds were kept under control was by us kids running all over the area. The old tree was still there and I could remember how there were usually at least two horses tied to it every day. But most of all, surprisingly, I could remember what the inside of the school smelled like. It was a smell that I grew to love.

After country school I attended a lot of different schools, some in small towns and some in large cities. My dad lost most of his money so my younger brother and I spent the rest of our childhood moving from place to place as dad sought employment. It was difficult, of course, for us to adapt to schools where teachers didn't seem to have time to make a connection to their students, but we survived. I have to say, however, that I owe a great deal to the three young ladies who insisted that I learn important things in grades one through three. As we know today, it is very difficult to make up for a lack of learning in those grade levels.