

Return to Phillips County's early school years at Pleasant Prairie

Written by April Peregoy

Those looking to get a good feel for the one-room school house setting in Phillips County during the late 19th and early 20th centuries would benefit from visiting the Pleasant Prairie School building at Phillips County Museum, located south of the museum building and the old Reimer gas station.

Donated to the museum by Dennis and Joyce Weaver in 2001, the building's original location was four miles south and two miles west of Holyoke. After the school doors closed for good in 1950 or '51, the building was moved into Holyoke and added on to for use as a house at 233 E. Emerson.

Upon its donation to the Phillips County Museum collection, the building was restored to its original use by museum board members, with some help from the local Boy Scout troop. A teacher's desk, given by Jon and Pam Erickson, along with other miscellaneous school items in the museum's collection, were added to make visitors feel like they have traveled back in time 100 years when they walk in the door.

Outside, on the south side of the school house, is the original school bell from Hilltop School District #9, which was four miles east and seven miles south of Holyoke. It has been placed on a pole donated by Highline Electric.

Included in the interior decor of the little school, on the back wall, are two paintings that were given to the museum from Holyoke High School. In the early years of the high school, it was customary for the graduating senior class to present the school with a gift. The paintings in Pleasant Prairie were gifts from the graduating classes of 1912 and 1913.

Completing the authentic look is a paddle board hanging just inside the school door to the right on the coat hooks. Jokingly labeled the "Board of Education," the paddle, donated by LaVern Gibbs, is a symbol of how much school discipline practices have changed over the years.

Pleasant Prairie School District #14 was established May 22, 1913 after a petition, signed by E.G. Summers and others, was presented to the County Superintendent of Schools to form a district from 15 sections of unorganized land. Also known as the Summers School, the total cost of the first building was \$165.50.

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In 1917 at the general school meeting, the board voted to enlarge the building from 16x20 feet to 20x32 feet. Bookshelves and hooks for hanging coats and other winter apparel were placed in the new space.

Though it appears similar, some of the features are not placed exactly as they were in the original setting. As recalled in "Life in the Sandhills of Northeastern Colorado During the Dust Bowl and Great Depression," author Dick Waln said the coal heating stove was in the front left corner of the classroom, instead of in the center of the room as it is now.

"We would go out at recess or over the lunch period, play in the snow, and then bring our gloves in by the fire hoping to get them dry before we wanted to use them again," he wrote.

A bench or pew in the front of the room acted as the dreaded "hot seat," where students would sit when it was their turn at recitation.

In the entrance hall, a stand for the drinking water crock or urn was also kept. All students drank from a common dipper. This is something health inspectors and the general public would certainly frown on today, but back then it was a common system used by most small country schools.

There was no source of water at the school, leaving the teacher or students to fill a cream can of it at the neighbors' house, about a quarter-mile south, and carry it to the school every morning. Often, if there was water left over at the end of the school day, students would stay after school and use it to drown out gophers.

Also located on the school grounds was a barn to house the horses that students drove or rode to school. The parents of these students would bring feed for their horses and leave it in the barn.

The only other building was an outhouse. It was divided into boys' and girls' facilities with a coal shed in the middle. For recess a teeter-totter and merry-go-round were placed in the southeast part of the grounds and the outhouse building served as a backstop for the baseball diamond.

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Though numbers dwindled drastically during the 1930s, in its early years the small school had as many as 20 students attending. This becomes more impressive when considering that the building was not only used for education, but also served as the center for community activities, as did most rural schools at that time. Various school programs, box suppers, picnics and community meetings took place at the Pleasant Prairie school.

With students ranging in age from grades one to eight, rural school teachers needed to be knowledgeable in every subject, and have separate lessons prepared for each student.

In an informative essay written by then-County Supt. of Schools Earlean Jung in 1963 on the early schools in Phillips County, Jung wrote, "A rural teacher was all things to all pupils. By that I mean that while listening to recitations, she would help other pupils with reading, spelling or arithmetic, as the case might be, and all the time have an eye out for a discipline problem to be nipped before it developed."

Waln wrote in his book, "Having spent most of my adult years teaching school, it is difficult for me to imagine how a teacher would divide his or her time and resources to cover all these individual subjects and individual students."

The days of the Dust Bowl and Great Depression during the 1930s were the beginning of the end for the Pleasant Prairie School. In the school year of 1933-34, there were over 20 students enrolled, with 15 of them coming from just five families: Linnenbrink, Ellis, Waln, Goddard and Schaeffer.

As these students grew older and left the school, either to farm or move on to Phillips County High School, no new families moved into the area to replace them. Some of the farming families moved away because of the drought.

Recalling their memories of the Dust Bowl years, former students wrote in Waln's book that during the storms, the school house would become so dark the teacher would have to light the lamps. Many times, school was let out by noon due to the storms.

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Though many of the students rode their horses to school, during the dust storms the parents had to come pick them up in the family wagon or automobile. Betty Linnenbrink Hines wrote, "Sometimes the dirt was so bad one could hardly see beyond the radiator of the car. Mother put wet towels along the windowsills and under the doors to help hold the dust out."

By the fall of 1941, Patty Linnenbrink was the only student left at Pleasant Prairie. That year, the school board closed the school and Linnenbrink was sent to Holyoke Grade School.

During the school year of 1941-42, the Board of Education paid Gladys Kelly to come to the school and sit for a half-day. This was to fulfill some legal requirement which would allow the school district to reopen in the event other students moved into the district.

Pleasant Prairie School reopened its doors in the fall of 1946. It is thought there were five students who attended that year, including the daughter of new teacher Mabel Grayem. The school remained open until the spring of 1951. The school was then closed permanently and the district was annexed into Holyoke District #39.

Beginning in 1945, a club was founded with its membership made up of former schoolgirls. Known as The Pleasant Prairie Club, members met for fellowship on the first Friday of the month. Monthly dues of five cents were charged and lunch was always served.

The club continued to meet over the years, but eventually lost most of its members to failing health. One of its charter members, Velva Heimer, reported the club had no officers or traditions; it was simply a way to visit and keep in touch.

Several of these ladies, including the Goddard sisters Velma Sprague, Verda Pollock and Edythe Rossi and former teacher Bernice (Heimer) Ferguson were present at the Pleasant Prairie School dedication ceremony at the museum in 2001.

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