

School Days and Country Ways
Memoirs About North Grove School

Community Education and Services
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These are memoirs written by students who attended North Grove School or a regional one room school. Some are written by relatives who recorded their family member's memories of their years of learning in the family-setting of a one room school.

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The North Grove School

Adapted from Marion Marsh

Life in the “Swede” or “North Woods,” a section northwest of Sycamore was not easy in the 1860’s. Trees that surrounded some of the open fields had to be cut down and the stumps removed to grow enough hay and grain to feed the farmer’s **livestock**. After taking care of their own housing, the hard-working Swedish people, who had settled there, planned for the education of their children. Schooling had been taking place in the homes, but a special “house” for this important part of life was needed.

On January 2, 1878, the congregation of the Swedish Lutheran Church voted to build a schoolhouse which became the central point for the “North Woods” community. The schoolhouse, still at the same location on Brickville Road three miles northwest of Sycamore in the center of this Swedish community, was to serve as a **parochial** school and Sunday School, **grammar school**, social hall, and meeting place. The location on a country road with the green lawn, the trees shading the ground, and the open fields shows the North Grove School of the past. Instead of fast-moving cars, it isn’t hard to picture the neighbors passing the school in their horse-drawn carriage and wagons without being in a hurry. In the late 1880’s, the farmers passing by might stop to rest their horses in the school yard and cool themselves and their horses with water drawn from George Flink’s well across the road.

The plans for the building included solid **timbers** and a stone foundation. It could not cost more than \$200, even though there were extra costs of \$11. Lighting was provided by installing two windows on each of three sides; the north, the east, and the south. The two windows on the north are original. The two on the east have been covered by the larger porch that was added later, and the two on the south were replaced with a set of four windows. These south windows were changed when rules about schools said that lighting should come more from the left of the students in the room. The sun, at times, became too bright and too hot, so window shades were installed, two on each window. One was pulled up to cover the top of the window, and one was pulled down to cover the bottom part of the window. The outside of the building was covered with wood siding and painted white a year later. The front entry was small but had hooks for coats and space for boots. That was later replaced with a larger entry hall where lunches could be stored and drinking water, from their new well, came from the **bubbler**.

The desks of different sizes and benches held the children who ranged in age from 6 to 13. Their backs were to the door, facing the teacher’s desk. The one teacher taught all 8 grades in the one-room school, using **recitation** time for each grade, with the other children studying on their own. Respect for the others in the room was an important rule so that other children could work and learn. The recitation bench faced the teacher’s desk on the slightly raised platform. The black, wood-burning stove also sat on the platform which was only about five inches higher than the painted wooden floor. There was a protective tin shield around the stove to prevent the children from touching the sometimes-red-hot stove, but it also held back some of the heat. The little children sitting close to the front were much warmer than those sitting in the back of the room. Sometimes they were toasty warm, and other times cold, depending on how long it had been since the fire had been **fed** fuel.

Bathrooms were “his and hers” wooden outhouses outside on the back of the lot. They, too, were covered with wood siding that had been painted white. When teachers drove a carriage to school, a small frame structure was built to **house** the horse. The building was not very wide; actually the horse was led into the building through the back door and led out through the front door. There was no room in the building to turn the horse around. Later, as the teachers began to drive cars, a small garage was built next to the road. As times changed and needs changed, the **structures** around the schoolhouse change, but the basic building stands.

The “North Woods” people mostly spoke Swedish during the early years, as it was the language used in the Lutheran Parochial School held there in the time between when it was built and when it was bought by the county. The children who attended that early school soon learned to speak Swedish whether they were German, Irish, African, or English. The language used in the school changed to English when the DeKalb County School System bought the North Grove School on May

19, 1880 for \$290. The Swedish influence still remains and has affected the lives of all who attended the grammar school and the Sunday School which was held there until 1910.

The school building continued as an active place not only for the school students, but parents of the students gathered **socially** when a special program was put on by the students, or a special holiday was celebrated. Many times a **potluck** meal was shared, and neighbors were invited to attend. When the school was closed and the children bussed to town in 1952, the parents, neighbors, and **alumnae** didn't want to stop having their neighborhood social gatherings in the school. They joined together with the North Grove Community Club and had meetings in the school with permission from the Sycamore School Board. Students who had moved to towns and other neighborhoods welcomed this chance to be together. It seemed that the school building opened its doors and welcomed the activities carried on there by the North Grove Community Club.

The Community Club maintained the building with loving care so that when the DeKalb County School District decided to use the school as a resource center, the school building was usable. Children came to see and feel what it was like to have school in the 1800's and early 1900's. A grade school art show was held in the North Grove School in the fall for the county schools participating in the Natural Resources Education. During the time of use by the DeKalb County Natural Resources Education-Demonstration Center under the direction of Ward Miller, Jr., a repair and renovation project was completed in 1970 with the help of neighbors, alumnae, and friends. Funds had been received by a grant from Sears Roebuck Foundation, DeKalb Agriculture Association (Roberts Foundation), and Virgil C. Cook & Sons, Inc. With the help of the DeKalb County Historical Society and Mrs. Beverly Southern, the North Grove School is now listed in the Illinois Directory of Historical Buildings.

Pride in their **heritage** and being grateful for the **perseverance** of their ancestors who build the school for education and social life has inspired the neighbors and alumnae of North Grove School to preserve this central spot of the "North Woods." Many of those involved in trying to keep this **monument** to the past in its original location and in its original form have never attended a one-room school and are not "native" to the "North Woods." The sense of pride, nostalgia, and heritage shines like a beacon on the faces of those involved. The feeling that there are some things in this life worth more than money and worth devotion of time and talents has inspired these dedicated people to work hard for a link to the past to the keep their heritage living.

First Grade in North Grove School

Adapted from Marion Marsh

“Junior, it’s time to get up! School today!”

Junior snuggled back under the covers. It was cold out there! The floor and the air in the room was icy, and he could see his breath. The first snow of the season had fallen, so even if the sun came out, it promised to be cold walking to school. Playing in the snow and having to walk in it for a mile were two different things. Junior was thinking that he liked going to school, but it would be fun just to be able to stay at home with mother and Dad. Junior had just turned six when school started, and now it was approaching Thanksgiving.

Clop! Clop! Sister was running up the stairs to pull him out of bed. She grabbed his clothes, threw back his covers, and **hoisted** him onto her back. “We’ll get you dressed down by the stove.” That was a relief!

Junior ate his warm breakfast with his brother and sister. Father generally got into the house to eat with them after getting the early morning chores done. Brother had helped by milking a couple of cows and carrying the milk to the cooler in the milk house. Junior was looking forward to the time he would be big enough to help his dad.

Mom said, “Get your boots on! The snow is kind of deep.” These were the “4-buckle” **overshoes** that fit over his ankle-high, laced shoes. The long underwear had been neatly tucked into his socks that reached up the button-banded knee pants. A flannel shirt, a sweater, a warm jacket, mittens, and hat with ear flaps finished his warm clothing for the walk to the North Grove School.

“Oh, Mom! I don’t want that scarf wound around my neck so tight!”

“If you walk fast, you’ll keep warm.”

Junior, his brother, and sister set off up the snow-drifted road. No **ruts** had been made in the snow yet, so brother and sister plowed through with Junior trying to follow in their footsteps. About halfway to school, Junior’s feet became like stumps, but he kept **plodding** along. The teacher realized that every one of the children had cold feet, so before sitting down at their desks, they marched around the room keeping time to the march played on the **Victrola**.

Junior’s teacher was a large, round lady with a ready smile and pleasant voice. Her tasks included **janitorial** work, mothering, managing and teaching 20 to 25 students. The students were not evenly divided, but there were some in almost all eight grades. She was a very busy lady. Care had to be taken not to favor the three boys and two girls who had come into the school in September as first graders, but special attention had to be given to Junior and the four others to make them comfortable with this new part of their lives. Learning was not difficult for Junior, and if he needed help at home, brother and sister were willing to help.

The morning was filled with **recitation** with the teacher and special instruction for the first graders, then the second grader and on up the grades. While recitation was taking place for one class, the rest were busy with the assignments that had been given to them at the last recitation. All had to be **orderly** and quiet, since noise causes distraction. Listening to the upper classes recite their lessons and write on the blackboard was a learning experience. The roll-down maps that were mounted above the blackboards were interesting. Junior tried to find the little speck that would be Sycamore on the map. The world sure was a big place.

Junior was learning to print the alphabet and holding that big first-grader’s pencil took so much skill and concentration, but it was fun, too. After about an hour and a half, the teacher stopped the recitations and passed song books to the students. This was fun—learning new songs and sometimes singing some old favorites. His teacher had a very fine voice, and sometimes she sang in Swedish.

After another hour of formal school study, it was lunchtime. All the students were anxious to see what their mothers had packed for the day. Would there be a cookie or two? An apple? A piece of cake? Milk was good to wash down the sandwich, and mother always said it would make your bones and teeth strong. They quickly ate their lunch, because their teacher would let all of them put on their boots, coats, and mittens to go outside. Today there would be snow to play in! The big boys would build a snow fort and have snowball fights. Some of the little ones, including Junior, had to try

lying flat on their backs in the snow, move their arms up and down, creating the **image** of an angel. Of course, again, those little feet felt like stumps. They were so cold and had to be warmed by stomping on the floor. Wet mittens were laid close to the stove that stood on the platform opposite the teacher's desk. The mittens would be dry for the walk home.

The afternoon session was much like the morning, only Junior felt sleepy after having had lunch and being outside in the cold. He laid his head down on his little desk and rested for a while. When it was time for his reading lesson with the teacher, he was re-energized, but he was so glad when the teacher rang the bell and said, "See you tomorrow morning."

One of the bad things about winter is getting all of those heavy clothes on. Junior forgot to buckle his overshoes when he started for home. As he walked, the boots were flopping together causing the buckles to make a clanking noise. The snow flew up and inside his boots, making his socks kind of wet as the snow melted. His first-grade friend laughed and said, "I guess you'd better stop and buckle those overshoes, or you'll drive us crazy!" It was a little warmer as they walked home tonight, and it was more pleasant walking with a friend.

It was always great to get home into the kitchen after a cold walk. Mother had the coffee pot on the stove, and she would pour a cup for the kids, (**lacing** it heavily with milk) and give them a cookie. This warmed the outside as well as the inside. It was good to be home with Mother again. A little time outside before supper and then a little homework of trying to read a new book was bound to make Junior ready for bed early. When his eyes began to get heavy, sister picked him up, put him on her back, and "piggy-backed" him up to bed. The upstairs bedroom had been warmed some during the day, and the bed was not too cold. Before dropping off to sleep, Junior recalled his day and wondered if he had told his mother and dad everything that had happened during his school day.

"Junior, it's time to get up! School today!" Another day had started.

My Best Time of the Year at North Grove School

By Warren Pearson

At the first sign of a crystal white flake in the late fall, it meant winter. We looked forward to winter, although it was cold with deep snow sometimes. At school, we had a good time playing in the snow. We played fox and geese, made snow forts and snowmen. We got to school as early as possible, so we could play with the other school kids. School started at nine o'clock with the ringing of the school bell.

We went inside the school or front hall where we put our lunches, boots, coats, mittens, and hats. We then went through the next door to our desks. The smaller kids sat by the window. The older ones sat opposite of them. The Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag was said after which we started doing our assignments. We had Penmanship, **Arithmetic**, and Spelling in the morning. In the afternoon, we had Reading, **Geography**, and History. Friday afternoon at the last hour, we had Art. Being the Christmas season, we had a large poster on the north wall that we worked on. It was a Christmas scene. It took about four weeks to finish. We also had to learn our "**pieces**" to say and songs to sing. We practiced quite a bit on these, because all of the families in the school district would come that night to hear us. We also had to make ornaments for the Christmas tree.

The big night had finally come. It was usually cold and brisk. We brought a lot of extra chairs for the people. The schoolhouse was packed. All the boys and girls had to sit in the back room and in back of the stove. There was a curtain a fourth of the way down. We were all getting pretty warm with the stove and all those people. One by one, we said our "pieces" and sang a song every once in a while. We were so nervous; we didn't dare make a mistake. The curtain was pulled between each act. The Christmas tree opposite us looked so beautiful. We did a lot of work on it. Toward the end, we sang "Jingle Bells." That was a sign for a loud knock at the front of the school; we then heard bells. All of us smiled and knew that Santa had arrived. He walked up the center aisle to where we were. He had a large sack on his back. He asked us our names and gave us a present. After he passed out all the gifts, he would leave, and we would open our gifts. After that, there were **refreshments** that were passed out. We went back to our **folks**, and all the people were laughing and having a good time **visiting**. It was a night none of us ever forgot when we celebrated Christmas at North Grove School.

The Translator

By Fay Stone

Peter Petcamp, from Bulagria, trudged home from Vinegar Hill School just outside Galena, IL. He was late again. His mother had come to expect it. Peter was just 5 years old and very tired. A small, slender boy, the **belted books** he carried bumped their sharp corners against his bony legs almost unheeded. His heavy, high-topped shoes were not lined with the comfort of stockings. His two piece black suit, was already too small, though he knew he would wear it until an older brother got a new **homespun**, and a larger size could be passed down to him.

Because his mother was the only woman in the mining camp, she'd become the camp cook, earning free meals for her large family, while her husband, his "Daka," searched for the small remains of galena, lead ore in the mines. The job didn't leave her much time for spinning, weaving, and sewing new clothes.

Peter shifted his books to the other hand and looked down the narrow, dusty road as if willing his own small cottage to appear, close at hand. He signed, knowing "willing" would not make it reality.

Every day at school it was the same. The teacher taught the American pupils while he caught words here and there, words that were beginning to make sense to him. But every night, after all the rest went home, he got special lessons, all the words over again; and she wouldn't let him go till he knew them all. In English. Oh, how she made his work!

"Peter," she'd say, "Spell 'safe'. Safe means all right, good, home, 'Daka'. Spell 'safe.'"

"S-A-F-E," Peter would remember and intone the letters. Remember or do it again, he would!

Tired as he was, he loved knowing and understanding the American words. His "Daka", alone in the mining camp, had brought his wife and child from the worn-out lead mines of Bulgaria to the new lead mines of Galena, Illinois, U.S. of A. All the rest in camp were young men of his country who'd come to America, some to get rich and return, some to get rich and send for their families, but all to get rich quickly.

However, it seemed this took time, even in America. **Lodes** were small or debts were bigger, and the lonely strangeness ate at the cold and soggy miners' innards in a way that no amounts of his mother's warm Bulgarian cooking would satisfy long. One day of the long, dark miner's week was brighter—Saturday was pay day, and everyone laid off early to wash up and go to town.

Ordinarily, the event wouldn't be of much **import** to a 5-year-old boy; but, thanks to his teacher, Peter was no ordinary boy. He, and he alone in the camp could speak English to the shopgirls and clerks. He was their passport to understanding!

Early Saturday night, they came by the cookhouse, where his mother was cleaning up, to take Peter to town. Then among pleasant laughter of freedom and anticipation, he was boosted on some miner's shoulder. With many a promise to take good care of him and be home early, Peter was escorted on the men's shopping trip.

These same jolly, kindly men had rescued him once when he went sledding on the forbidden frozen flume that was pumped out to empty the mine tunnels far below. He broke through the ice into the gushing **torrent** of spilling waters. One of the giants of the mines, hearing or seeing him, he never knew which, plucked him bodily out of the sucking, surging grasp of the water as his sled disappeared. The quiet, frightened miners kept him in their shack while they dried his clothes and warmed his little body. The search for the sled was fruitless, and finally Momma had to be told, and he was justly, but unnecessarily punished. The episode had created a bond between these brawny men and the studious little boy.

Every pay day, they came for their little "pet" to translate for them so they could **post** letters home and buy a treat after their long week's work. But one little secret Peter never told on the desperately lonely, kindly men. When they asked him, he ordered their Saturday night candies from the pretty American shop girls one piece at a time.

"And no wrapping, please," said Peter. That way, takin his candy, each miner got to feel the warmth, for a moment, of a soft, young girl's palm.

Eventually, the lead mines played out and Peter's father followed the lure of the goldmines in California. But the little boy grew up with a genuine love of books and knowledge of words. His

learning from a little schoolhouse on Vinegar Hill took him to a career as a librarian at The Library of Congress in Washington, D.C, where he told his story to me.

Walter By Marion Marsh

Walter Marsh was not only my father-in-law but a person I admired. He was born on a farm on Motel Road on May 28, 1885, the only child of immigrant Swedish parents, which gave him an insight into two cultures. In time, Walter's height and **girth** gave him a presence that was not easy to ignore, and a booming voice put him in the forefront of any group. When I first met him, he was a working farmer. If you dropped in at milking time, you'd find him in overalls, faded blue shirt, and an old felt hat with the brim turned back. There would be a sparkle in his pale, blue eyes as he greeted you with a smile that showed teeth stained with **snuff**.

Walter was educated in the North Grove School, attending from 1891 to 1899. There, he was inspired to become an avid reader and to be interested in concerns about farming, the economy, and politics. Being involved in community affairs gave those around him to know that he had definite opinions. If the argument was strong in the opposite direction, he was wise enough to change his mind. Visiting was one of his favorite pastimes. He could be found standing on the corner downtown, exchanging views with most anyone. Even though standing was a problem, since he had a limp caused by an accident with a runaway team of horses, he would stand as long as anyone would talk with him.

Visiting with Walter took the form of a debate many times, as Walter had strong **convictions**. His background in politics had been "**staunch**" Republican until President Hoover and the **Great Depression**. With the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt, the New Deal, and new farm policies, Walter changed his politics drastically, and his allegiance was to the Democratic Party. He would discuss for hours the new farm policies such as cutting back on production, use of new fertilizers, use of new equipment, and creation of price supports. Being a dairyman, he **pioneered** the testing of cattle for **tuberculosis** in this area of DeKalb County and played a prominent role in getting all dairy cattle tested. There was some resistance on the part of dairymen, and to make his point, he set up a booth at the Mid-Winter Fairs that were held in Sycamore. At this booth, he displayed parts of butchered dairy cows showing the presence of tuberculosis in the organs of the animals. This was back in the 1920's, and this testing was instrumental in the **curtailment** of tuberculosis. Another subject for discussion and debate in Walter's time was religion, and again, Walter was quick to disagree with the Catholic religion and showed tendencies of racial prejudice. As time passed and thinking changed, Walter **mellowed** in all of his views, but he still liked to make his point.

The North Grove School, and the people who attended the school when he did, was one of Walter's favorite topics along with his Swedish heritage. He often told about the black family who lived around the corner. Walter's daughter tells of the time that a black man came to their door and asked for her father in Swedish. She was so astonished, she ran to her father with the news that a black man, who talked Swedish, was at the door. He knew immediately that it had to be one of the Beard boys who had lived around the corner. Many children learned Swedish if it wasn't their native language while attending the North Grove School. Since Walter was married to an immigrant Swedish girl, Matilda Anderson, they conversed in Swedish at home. Their two oldest children, Sheldon and Doris, spoke the Swedish language when they started school at the North Grove School. Of course, school was taught in English, so they had to adapt to the prevailing language. By the time I knew Walter, his speech did not reflect a Swedish accent, probably because he lived here all of his life.

His span of 73 years had been inspirational to many, as he served in community service organizations including having been on the school board that governed the North Grove School for many years. Attendance at the Sycamore Methodist Church has been a "must" for the Marsh family. Walter served on several commissions of their church. Being a dairy farmer, he served on the local Pure Milk Association board for many years and was an active member of the DeKalb County Farm Bureau.

During the last couple years of his life, Walter would ride around the neighborhood just to see his favorite **haunts** and to keep track of his friends. He was born in the house on Motel Road, and, at his request, died there in 1958.