

RURAL SCHOOL HOUSES IN EARLY OKLAHOMA

By F. A. Balyeat

Many pioneer farmers in both Oklahoma and Indian Territories first lived in make-shift dwellings. They planned to improve and enlarge these as soon as possible or else replace them with better structures. In most districts the first school houses were like the farm homes, —small, temporary, and in most respects inadequate.

The size of the district and the location of the school house varied greatly. In Indian Territory the district grew up around a settlement, the size of which was changed from time to time, a creek or river or, later, a railroad or some irregular line marking the boundaries of the district. Sparsely settled areas often needed large districts in order to justify a school. In Oklahoma Territory the original plan was the township system with four districts, each three miles square. The township system never really functioned, the three-mile-square district plan being the approximate pattern in most regions.

At first there was no public money provided, or at least not yet available, to purchase a site or erect and equip a building. Prior to 1907, on the Indian Territory side, most schools began with the needs and desires of one or more public-spirited families with children of their own whose education was neglected. Sometimes the school began with one family, larger or more ambitious than the others, who would erect a small school house on their farm, often in their yard. This was primarily for their children but was shared with others. A very common means of beginning would be a public meeting called by a small group of interested parents. Then and there plans would be discussed for organizing and equipping a school. Teacher's salary and cost of erecting and equipping the building would be raised by the parents concerned. Often this was donated. Sometimes it was prorated in proportion to the children sent. Supplementary income often came from benefit programs, such as box suppers or other entertainment. There was no legal provision for raising or handling these monies, each community trusting its leaders, and rarely disappointed in their confidence.

In Oklahoma Territory it was different. From the beginning, as each of the several areas was opened to settlement, there was some legal provision for financing schools. But it took time for the tax money to accrue. And even then the raising of bond money to provide school houses was a slow process. So it was often a few years before there was a building and site provided by public money. In

the meantime the interested patrons temporarily provided varied and meager school houses.

As suggested above, the location of the building was often determined by the convenience of the majority of the children concerned. Often, though, the most aggressive or influential parents maneuvered to locate it to favor their interests. Frequently the land was not given by the owner, but merely lent until a site was regularly purchased.

Sometimes a building already available determined the site. The author attended a school in a Lincoln County district where the first three houses used were not on publicly owned land. The first was in a small "box" house, made of native lumber, and used by the owner as a dwelling during the six months that she must live there before "proving up" and returning to her home in Kansas. This was far to one side of the district, but the only house available the first year. The next year another pioneer, a bachelor, vacated his residence in the same way, making available a school house near the center of the district. The third year the patrons donated locally available building material and the labor and a few dollars needed to erect a school house. This was on lent land, and was used nearly four years. In some districts an abandoned store building, restaurant, or even barn or hay-barn was used until a more suitable structure could be provided.

There are numerous cases on record of a school's being held in part of a farm residence, the father, or more likely the mother, being the teacher. Rarely, though, was one room of such a house set aside for school purposes. More often the furniture of one room was pushed aside during the day and then replaced at night for home uses. In some cases the teacher lived in a loft over the school room. Of course, these were the smaller schools, often the brief beginnings of schools that later had more suitable buildings and facilities provided.

The materials used in constructing and equipping the school houses varied with the regions and their locally available supplies. In the prairie areas it was not uncommon to use a tent while a building was under way. Numerous are the reported complaints of the trouble that the teacher had to keep the tent in place or in shape because of the high winds. In timbered regions brush arbors were sometimes used in spring, summer, or early fall. These provided shade and reasonable protection from rain. Many Sunday Schools were held under brush arbors and it was the natural thing to use these as make-shifts for school buildings.

One Indian Territory community was fortunate in having a wide rock ledge beneath which a small group of children and their



SOD SCHOOL HOUSE—Early Day School, Western Oklahoma

teacher were protected from sun and rain. As in the case of the arbors, ventilation was not a problem.

In a few districts rock was used in building the school houses, especially when it was near the surface and in such formations as would require very little quarrying and dressing. For such buildings, labor was about the only cost and this was donated.

There were literally hundreds of Oklahoma Territory pioneer schools held in the dugouts, the sod-house (soddies), or a combination of the two types. Many prairie families lived in such structures. Some such houses were dug out of a creek bank but most were on level land and at a place convenient to a sufficient number of the children to support a school financially. In the largest districts, the more sparsely settled ones, fathers drew furrows from home to school to enable the children to find their way to school and back in blizzards and blinding snow storms. Some of these children reported annoyance from their coyote chaperons.

A real dugout was what is ordinarily called a cave, so common in the western part of Oklahoma where protection is needed from tornados. Such an excavation was usually covered over with a roof made of poles, brush, straw, and dirt. This provided protection from all sorts of weather until horses or cattle walked over the roof and damaged it. Such a place called for very little building materials that were not locally obtainable or for labor that the farmers could not donate. Some had roofs sufficiently steep and high that a window was possible in the gable opposite the door end, or even over the door.

The door to such a place was usually at the bottom of steps, probably dirt steps, or with thin sheet rocks set into the dirt. Native boards or scraps from shipping boxes made a suitable door which hung unsqueakingly on leather hinges, cut from some farmer's boot. The latch, likewise, was improvised from wood and leather, under the magic of a jack-knife. Hardware costs were kept low.

Like many of the prairie residences, most of the school houses in those regions were wholly or partly above ground, with the walls made of sods. Ground that was mowed or grazed close was so full of grass roots that it held together strongly. A farmer would bring his sod plow and "break" a small patch near the school house site. With spade or ax these long sods were cut in portable lengths, carried or carted by the men, and laid up in walls, rather even and plumb.

These were roofed over much as were the dugouts. A crude beam, often salvaged from somewhere, made a good plate for topping the sod wall and providing a base for such crude rafters as could be had. Again, poles, brush, hay, and dirt made the roof. Window frames were easily placed in these sod walls and closed with

whatever materials were then available, awaiting the time when there would be a window with glass panes.

Walls and floors of these sod school houses were usually of dirt. Sometimes cheese cloth or burlap, if available, made the walls more sightly and useful. Such material, when tacked under the rafters, helped a little to catch the droppings of earth and prevent their falling down on the pupils. Some of the floors, especially in the dugouts, were at levels where clay could be smoothed and hardened into a pretty good surface. Sometimes clay was brought in for this purpose. Often this was covered, but usually not. Dust from the floor was a problem except in rainy weather when inevitable roof leaks turned the dust to little mud puddles scattered here and there over the room.

Later buildings that were framed and ceiled had their problems from wood peckers which drilled their way through the outer wall boards, went inside to some other location inaccessible to teacher and pupils, and then started to drill their way through ceiling boards to educational opportunity within. They preferred to do this trip-hammer drilling during school hours, to the annoyance of the teacher and the amusement of the pupils. The dirt houses had their interruptions from other forms of animal life. Spiders, tarantulas, centipedes, and even an occasional snake, chose these soddies or dugouts for their comfortable abodes. The stings of these were painful, sometimes poisonous, and caused teachers and parents no little concern.

Such dirt buildings were reasonably cool in summer and were warmer in winter than most buildings, but some sort of supplementary heat was essential. Fireplaces were not very practical or common. A box stove would be provided by the patrons, but fuel was a troublesome item to secure. After corn crops were grown the cobs made fairly good fuel, but needed to be supplemented. Sometimes coal or wood could be hauled, as was done for the prairie farm homes. More often than is usually known, the very early schools burned cattle- and buffalo chips, gathered by the boys from the regions near by.

Most of the Indian Territory and a minor part of Oklahoma Territory had sufficient timber, often of a poor grade, to make log houses or else frame buildings built of lumber locally obtained and sawed at a mill nearby. Like most of the farm homes, the majority of the log houses were made of logs laid horizontally, with notched corners that made the building firm. Height of trees that were obtainable in a region often determined the size and shape of a building. Sometimes the bark was peeled from these logs; often it was left on. This took less time and usually indicated what was meant for a temporary building, but often used much longer than was intended.

Hewed log school houses were fairly common. Dressing the upper and lower surfaces made a better fitting and warmer wall. Dressing the inner surface made more sightly and convenient school room walls. But to hew the outer wall meant that the pioneers were taking more interest in their schools. Local pride often demanded a hewed log building. The broad-ax was not uncommonly owned by these farmers and made possible these hewed log buildings.

Such logs, at best, left cracks between them that had to be "chinked" and "daubed" with whatever materials were available. Split sticks were sized and shaped to meet the need and driven into cracks between the logs so as to fill most of the apertures. If lime and sand were available real mortar was used to daub the cracks, both inside and out, and made a fairly smooth and presentable surface. Lacking these, mud from the most usable, locally obtained dirt was used. One Love County school house was air-conditioned in summer by removing the chinking and daubing. In the fall these were replaced and the house kept warm in winter.

The third term that the author attended in Lincoln County was in a stockade, sometimes called "picket", type of building. Smaller and shorter logs could be used because they were stood on end, toe-nailed to beams that made the sills of the house. Again, the extent of hewing varied. Almost any size or shape house could be had with this plan. This building was daubed with lime-made mortar that would have stayed in almost indefinitely had it not been picked out by the boys. The outside, when picked off, made excellent ammunition for throwing at rabbits and at other boys; the inside, for flipping across the room during school, the favorite target being the teacher's derby that hung on the front wall.

Some of the log houses had dirt floors, sometimes pine hauled long distances, but more often native lumber, locally sawed. This was not smoothed and left large cracks down which slate pencils had a way of getting lost, and through which notes could be safely stuffed. After one of these buildings had been used four terms the floor was taken up and replaced. The author, along with some other boys, found much interesting school "history" in the notes thus hidden. Such floors had many splinters. Barefoot children attended summer school and the teacher not infrequently had to stop a recitation to pick a splinter from a dirty-footed lad who came hopping to the front of the room for first aid. Some floors were made of puncheon.

Most of the roofs of log and frame houses were shingled; some were made of long boards with narrow "bats" to cover the cracks. Some of these native boards warped badly, leaving uncurably leaky roofs. Often the shingles were clap boards, "rived" from local timber. Oak was the wood most commonly used for these. The fro, a

large knife set at right angles to the handle and driven through the block with a mallet, was the tool used for making such boards. Native lumber was used for the sheathing. These clap boards made warm roofs, but almost invariably leaked. Seldom were these houses ceiled overhead. Poles were often used to help make the building steady and to be used as joists for ceiling boards, if and when they became available or the farmer patrons got around to putting them on.

Both dirt houses and log houses were erected wholly by donated labor. Their construction was a social event of no little importance. At an open season when the farm work best permitted, a few days in succession would be "taken off" for building the new school house, the number of days depending on the size and nature of the house and the number of interested families. The men would plow, cut, and carry the sods or cut, haul, and prepare the logs. Laying them up would be left to a few with most experience in building. Likewise would follow floor, roof, windows, and doors.

The women served the meals those days, each preparing food at home and warming it up on the grounds while the coffee was prepared. With such work the community spirit and neighborhood ties grew. Pioneers were inescapably dependent on each other for many materials and services. These social contacts, added to the community spending, and planning and sacrificing, made real communities of these settlements. The school house became the center of this local unit.

And such buildings were much more than school houses. In them union Sunday Schools were organized. Preaching, when talent could be had, was at this center. "Protacted meetin's" were held there or in a brush arbor near by, if in summer. The nearest creek or pond provided baptismal facilities. Box suppers and pie suppers were common, the receipts generally used to provide needed school supplies and equipment. Oil lamps, hung against the walls in reflector brackets, were thus bought for night gatherings. Curtains were made for the front of the room to care for the dramatic numbers and for the school programs. Sometimes library books, maps, and globes could be secured with the supper receipts long before tax money was available for them. The literary society was a very common social and educational event. Readings, dramatics, orations, music, debates, jig dancing, gossipy "papers", and similar items provided the opportunities for training teachers, preachers, lawyers, and politicians before enough formal education was provided. The Grange often met there, as did the Anti-Horse-Thief Association. These two organizations were not so popular with teachers because of the condition of the stove and floor area around it when school needed the house the next morning, after a dozen or so active but in-expert tobacco spitters had sat around the stove the night before.

Few school houses had wells. A spring or creek nearby or a farmer's well was the source of water supply. The larger boys, by two's, would get permission to carry the water. A gourd or tin dipper stayed in the bucket and was used by all drinkers. On hot days the bucket was passed up and down the aisles during school, pupils admonished to take small amounts so that when thirst was quenched less would need to be put back in the bucket. Pupils who became thirsty between passings and recesses held up one finger and got permission to visit the water bucket.

Sometimes two fingers were raised, seeking permission to "speak" to another pupil, or three fingers, asking to go to the teacher's desk to have a word pronounced. Four fingers meant permission to be "excused" from the room, the boys going over the hill in one direction from the school house and the girls in the other. In a few years the more progressive districts built outhouses.

Manufactured blackboards were uncommon for several years. Three twelve-inch smooth pine boards that matched fairly well made a pretty good writing surface, when coated with an improvised paint, usually made of linseed oil and lamp black. This got shiny very quickly and needed repair much oftener than occurred. Discarded socks or old coat sleeves made good erasers. Sometimes a paint-coated cloth was nailed to a ceiled wall or board background and used for a blackboard. Crayon was rarely wasted.

Penmanship copies and other written assignments were put on the board by the teacher for the pupils to do on their slates. Tablets were few and expensive. Slates were as everlasting as they were dirty and squeaky, but they were convenient, especially the double slates. Compositions, problems, sentences, and maps could be carefully prepared and folded inside until read by the teacher. Fastidious girls brought little bottles of soapsuds and little rags for cleaning their slates. Boys were more ingenious. They would spit on the slate surface, rub it clean with palms, and then dry with sleeves. Slate pencils, wrapped with red and white striped paper, made good Christmas gifts.

But school houses needed seats and desks for teacher and pupils, as well as longer benches at the front of the room for classes to use in turn while other classes prepared their lessons. "Class excused" was the signal for one group to return to seats to study and immediately "B-Geography, turn, rise, pass" meant that the next group was ready for its ten or twelve minute recitation. The heavy shoes, and especially the boots, caused much confusion during this exchange of classes.

Few pioneer schools purchased either desk or chair for the teacher. If living in the district she, or more probably he, brought a chair from home. If the teacher could not provide it some patron

gave or loaned a chair. Sometimes a crude table was provided in the same way, rarely with drawer or other storage space. Often a box was used for a desk, or even a block of a log, supported by three or four wooden legs set in augur holes. Sometimes the teacher's chair was of this home-made type.

Pupils' seats and desks were a bigger problem for all concerned. At least one case is reported of a prairie district which began school with each pupil sitting on a bale of hay with two bales in front of him for a desk. Very common was the use of native lumber boards nailed to cross timbers or to blocks which served as legs. Books and slate were laid on the seat beside the pupil or on the floor beneath. The pupil's knees served as his desk. Sometimes a table was provided for the pupils to stand at and do their more important written work, patiently waiting their turns for such standing space.

In timbered regions split or hewed logs made the deskless seats for the pupils. Augur holes bored partly through this slab made good places to insert the pole legs. These seats were as substantial as they were uncomfortable. As in the case of the board seats, the seat or the floor was used for a book depository. Most pupils carried all their books back and forth each day in sacks suspended from the shoulder. Teachers in these schools were discreetly silent about proper posture and rounded shoulders.

Some more enterprising or able parents made for their own children seats with backs. No desks, though, in the very early days. The author attended a rural school in Logan County where the majority sat on the district-provided board benches. The children, a small majority, whose parents made benches for them with backs, were considered rather aristocratic and either envied or teased by the other pupils. That was about the only class distinction, for nearly all pioneers were "broke" when they reached Oklahoma and stayed that way through the difficult 'nineties.

For a good many years the school bell was not heard in most districts. To "call school" the teacher might "ring" the fire shovel with the poker or rap with a big barlow knife on the door. A few teachers had cow horns properly cut and polished and they learned to blow them to call the pupils to "books."

And those books! Parents sent whatever texts they or their older children had used "back in the States." Nothing could be done but to use them, varied as they were. Gradually, though, Ray's arithmetic, McGuffey's readers and spellers. Barnes' histories and geographies, and Steele's physiology became fairly uniform. No library or other supplementary materials were known for several years, and then meager and highly prized. Books loaned by the

rare and small home libraries sometimes enriched the school's study materials.

Out of these meager facilities came little book learning, as such, especially with the three month terms, and so poorly attended. But much good and greatly needed education did result. These meager opportunities were really more appreciated by most parents and children than when school facilities grew better and more common. Inventiveness and ingenuity often result from lack of what is needed or wanted. Parents and pupils devised and improvised in ways that developed abilities and skills which the pioneer needed. Considering the shortage of material facilities, the short terms taught by teachers with so little training, and drawing twenty to thirty dollars a month (minus the usual discount for delayed tax payments) —these meager provisions really brought big and valuable results. The school was a most important part of pioneer life.