Reflections on the One-Room Schoolhouse

By Polly Pope Hirsch

The letter reproduced below was written in 1926 by my great-grandmother, Frances E. Pope, to her grandson, my father, John C. Pope. She was born in 1840 in Standish, Maine. Her memory had been jogged back to the 1840s by a 1926 article in the *New York Times* illustrated with a line drawing of a one-room schoolhouse like the one in Maine she attended as a girl. She began her education there before she was four. Her father was on the school committee that hired the teachers and selected the curriculum.

*Feb 26, 1926*

Dear John:

The illustration enclosed is from the [New York] Times account of the National Teachers Association which has been meeting in Washington as represented by School Superintendents. It is an exact reproduction of the institution in which I learned the three R's up to the age of nine and a half.

The door was in the same place, opening into a vestibule or entry, as it was then called, the width of the building. The inner door opened opposite the outer. At the right a platform, a few inches high, enthroned the teacher’s desk; in the left corner was the stove. I think there were four rows of desks with seats for two pupils at each, with aisles between and along the sides.

We used to choose our seatmates at the beginning of the term. For the summer term we had a “Master” because big boys attended who worked on farms in the summer. It was primitive, of course, but many an American statesman can trace his development to the “little red schoolhouse.” My father was on the school committee and took pains to secure good teachers and we had some very good. One great thing was, if children showed any aptitude and ambition for learning, they were not hampered by restrictions or rules but could go as fast and as far as they liked, there being no grades. It was “old freedom.”

P.S. There were many trees around the red schoolhouse I went to—oaks and birches. From the latter the master cut the rods with which to thrash the unruly boys. In those days boys were not spoiled by “sparing the rod.” When I was ten we moved to another town and I was put in a Select School for Girls whose teacher was much the worse type that Charlotte Bronte encountered.

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