

Memories of a schoolhouse still shine after 2 generations

By BRUCE KOEHLER

Days have past were

Among the historical treasures stored in the minds of today's elderly people are memories of being educated in one-room, one-teacher schoolhouses.

Mabel Peaden, an 83-year-old resident of north Okaloosa County, harbors such memories of the Oak Grove School. The modest clapboard structure was one of more than 30 rural schools that dotted the countryside when Okaloosa County was formed in 1915, according to a history of the local school system by Nancy M. Kenaston.

"Wherever settlements were created, sooner or later a one-room schoolhouse sprang up," Kenaston wrote. "Usually it was through the efforts of the community members (or patrons) themselves, who provided the land, materials, labor and usually paid the teacher."

Peaden says Oak Grove School was built "in the last of the 19th century or the very first of this century, at least 85 years ago." Located about nine miles southwest of Laurel Hill, the school belonged to Santa Rosa County for years before Okaloosa was created from portions of Santa Rosa and Walton counties.

No physical trace of Oak Grove School survives today. Peaden says the wooden building "burned down to a pile of ashes" in 1923 after someone overloaded the school's pot-bellied stove. The sandy road that once went by the school has long since vanished from disease, and the school site is overgrown with woods "as thick as your fingers," she adds.

Fortunately, Peaden has a sharp mind full of accurate memories. She attended Oak Grove School for about eight years before World War I. She calls her alma mater the "little red schoolhouse" because the school's exterior was coated with the same red stain that preserved barns during that era.

The students, Peaden recalls, ranged in age from 4 or 5 years old to adulthood. Older students watched over the younger ones and helped them learn to read.

Enrollment averaged 30 to 35 students. Most of the pupils, especially the younger ones, were not assigned to grade levels.

"We were grouped by readers," Peaden recalls. "We started with the first reader and when we



MABEL PEADEN

mastered it we went right on to the second reader. We were not held back to a group."

Textbooks were not free but bought at Campbell's General Store in Laurel Hill, she says. Slates were used more often than pencils and paper. The school term lasted six months "from late fall to early spring," she says. "Farm work caused many to be absent and to be dropouts."

Teachers of the day put a premium on memory work. They expected their young "scholars" not only to memorize the multiplication tables but also to know poems, speeches, historical dates and state capitals by heart. Peaden, a retired teacher herself, sees merit in the logy emphasis on learning by rote. "It was therapy for our thinking machines," she says.

Discipline was not much of a problem, even though the teacher divided her time among various learning groups in the same room. Those students who were not seated on the "recitation bench" in front of the teacher's desk were expected to stay busy on their own.

"The rule was they had to keep their noses in their books," Peaden says. "And when they came to a word they didn't know, they'd put their finger under it and go up to hold the book before the teacher so she could tell them the word."

For those students incapable of self-control, the teacher had gallberry switches standing in the corner. Peaden says her teacher gave "lickin's" to disruptive students without warning.

"Before they knew it, she'd be beating the fire out of them across the shoulders and the back. She'd

surprise them."

During recess the students played tag, six sticks, ball-over, crack the whip and baseball, Peaden says. A large wooden paddle served as the bat, and the ball consisted of string unraveled from a stocking.

At lunch time, Peaden says she ate from a pail stocked with a bottle of syrup and biscuits. Sausage, ham and eggs rounded out her midday meals. Her drinks came from a "school bucket of water" that sat on a front porch shelf along with a long-handled dipper.

Some students, she recalls, walked to a nearby slow-running spring and "drank as a cow would." On Friday afternoons, at the end of the school week, the students displayed their knowledge through spelling bees, speeches and acting skills.

"At the close of the school term, an evening program was given," Peaden adds. Parents attended to hear poems, songs, monologues and dialogues.

Though remotely located, Oak Grove School had its share of guest speakers and educators. Peaden recalls the "traveling arithmetic teacher," who spent two weeks at each schoolhouse sharing his knowledge at a cost of 25 per student. Mastery of the multiplication tables was the entry requirement for anyone who wanted to enroll. Even middle-aged farmers took the course, she says.

Preachers also visited. According to Peaden, the school played host to Bob Jones Sr., an evangelist who later founded Bob Jones University, and the Rev. Mapoles, father of the man who caused fellow state legislators to pass a bill allowing the formation of Okaloosa County.

One of the visitors, says Peaden, created excitement among the students by arriving one spring day in 1914 astride a "big black motorcycle." The motorcyclist was Ben Dancy, then a young professional photographer with a studio in Pensacola. Peaden says Dancy is now in his 90s, living in Pensacola with a wife.

Peaden has an old photograph to remind her of the visit. Dancy made nearly 71 years ago. That photograph lends credence to a batch of fading memories about a school that ceased to exist two generations ago.



THE CLASS IN 1914

The teacher and students of Oak Grove School pose for a professional photographer one fine spring day in 1914. Mabel Peaden says she can remember the names of most of the people in the picture. According to her, the four older students sitting on the top step are (from left) Addie Peaden, Claude Milligan, Anabel Peaden and Leslie Peaden. The five seated on the bottom step are (from left) two unidentified boys, Dallas Peaden Jr., Ota Peaden and another unidentified boy who hid his face and torso behind Ota. The group of five standing to the left are (from left) Clinton Milligan, Allie Barrow, an unidentified tall boy, Anabel King and John King. The lady on the porch to the right side is the teacher, Annie Lee Nelson. The four girls standing in front of Miss Nelson are (from left) Alma King, Rosalie King, Mabel Peaden and Lizzie Barrow. The three girls seated on the ground are (from left) Sadie Peaden, Lillian King and Abbie Peaden.

Ex-teacher a good source on county history

Local history buffs and genealogical researchers may want to contact Mabel Peaden for detailed information.

When north Okaloosa County residents try to recall a forgotten name or obscure fact from the past, they often refer to Peaden as an authoritative source. Though not one to boast, the 83-year-old retired teacher does claim to remember nearly all the teachers who worked one time or another at the Oak Grove School between Laurel Hill and Blackman.

Here, according to a handwritten list provided by Peaden, are names of the people who taught at the one-room schoolhouse: Sarah

McLeod, Charlie McLeod, Tom Hathaway, Lizzie Alabrook, Maggie Cobb, Amanda Baggett, Frank Leonard, Rosa Guiney, Rosa Baggett, Tom Ciyall, Beatrice Cordean, Emma Miller, Addie Wyatt, Ada Campbell, Georgia Lester, Minnie Tippen, Dessie Hart, J.F. Watson, Franklin King, Katie Lee Howell and Annie Lee Nelson.

Peaden has fond memories of Miss Nelson, saying she was a beautiful, blue-eyed blonde with a "fashion-model" figure. "The students just worshipped her."

Peaden recalls three girls who grew so attached to Miss Nelson that they cried on the last day of school knowing "they would have

to part with her."

Other students controlled their affection, Peaden adds. "The three girls cried and we laughed. We were glad school was going to be out."

Peaden also claims to recall the family names of most of the students who attended Oak Grove School. She listed them as follows: King, Howell, Barrow, Milligan, McKosarna, Holley, McClellan, Rice, Henderson, Hutto, Wright, Helms, Carmas, Bean and Mason.

Also: Snider, Griser, Peaden, Sowell, Wilkerson, Wyatt, Leonard, Baggett, Cook, Madden, Jordan, Fugasa, Sn, Bracewell and Blackman.