

School in the 1880's

A VANTAGE POINTS FLASHBACK

Children of the 1880's looked forward to starting school at age six and if they were fortunate could expect to complete Grade 13. In the earliest years of settlement, the priority was the building of a home for the family, shelter for the animals and the breaking of the first sod. Farmsteads were scattered and travel between neighbours was limited to occasional visits to lend a hand or help in case of illness.

Children coming of school age, or those who had their classes interrupted by the trek to Manitoba, were forced to rely on their parents for help or join with other children around the neighbor's kitchen table. New books and newspapers eventually arriving by mail from back home were shared with keen interest by everyone in the community.

By 1883 and '84 records indicate sufficient students were available in a designated area to warrant the building of a school. Meetings were held, a Board of Trustees was elected, and a Secretary Treasurer was appointed. From this beginning it was not many months until a new school was built, a teacher was hired, and children were eagerly trudging down a new trail to attend the first classes in their new school.

Student attendance ranged from as low as ten students to as many as 45, all interspersed in eight grades and every child needed their share of instruction, as prescribed by the Province's Program of Studies. Eager students sat at their desks neatly lined up in rows, facing the teacher's desk at the front of the classroom. A chalkboard with a rolled-up map at the top hung at the front, and on one wall would be a cupboard full of textbooks and library books. An elegantly framed picture of the reigning Queen Victoria adorned one of the walls.

The school room smelled a mingling of chalk dust, freshly varnished floors and the ink of new books. The most delectable smells wafted from the lard pails lined up at the back of the room, filled with thick sandwiches made from homemade bread and home-cured ham, or pin-berry jelly, along with a wedge of fresh apple pie.

The boys often squirmed in their seats as they caught the scent of the family dairy barn in their

clothes ... or the manure stuck under a shoe. The girls especially wrinkled their noses when one of the farmers caught a skunk in the hen house that morning! The entire yard smelled of 'skunk' after that chance meeting!



Highview School - Killarney - Turtle Mountain

From the morning roll call until the sound of the closing bell in the late afternoon, the students engaged in learning and sharing. Noon hour and recess breaks allowed time to play baseball, or Red Rover, or tag.

But, the last portion of the day was a true highlight, when everyone put away their books and listened attentively to the teacher read from a book of adventures from across land and sea; of pirate ships and treasures of gold, of exotic animals like giant elephants in India, or ferocious tigers and lions of Africa, of comical kangaroos and long-legged ostriches in Australia. Story time was like a touch of magic that swept away the tensions of the day....

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Vantage Points Flashbacks were written by David Neufeld with help from Betty Sawatzky. They were originally aired on CJRB Radio out of Boissevain, Manitoba in the early 2020s.