

Christmas Concert in a One-Room Schoolhouse

A VANTAGE POINTS FLASHBACK

Ask someone who attended the one-room rural schoolhouse about the memorable times, and you can be pretty sure the conversation will include reminiscence about Christmas concerts!

Many of these memories will touch on some common elements: first there is the preparation. Starting sometime in late November preliminary planning would begin. Little bits of time, often near the end of the school day, would be taken reviewing potential skits or poetry recitations. Call it Reading Class!

As December arrived more time would be spent selecting and practicing Christmas carols, dialogues, drills, and recitations. By late December a teacher might compress all the basics into the morning classes and leave the afternoons for rehearsals and other preparations. In the last week before Christmas holidays, the pressure would be on.

The teachers really worked hard at this. They knew they would be judged on the presentation. Students took their responsibilities seriously as well. Lines were memorized, song words learned. Mothers and the teacher usually made costumes, sometimes on the day before or even the morning of the concert. Lots of crepe paper and old rags were used.

A stage, often of sawhorses and planks, was put in place on one side of the school, with the student desks crowded into the other half. Stovepipe wire was strung above the front edge of the stage and, when appropriate curtains were not available, bed sheets were hung on this wire to conceal the stage until the scenes were ready.

Usually, two of the older students looked after the opening and closing of the curtains while the teacher was busy with costumes and prompting. Then the room had to be decorated and the Christmas tree put in place. The advantage in a small school, then, as now, is that everyone got to participate, and not just as a lamb in the Nativity Scene... (or an angel, which I was every year!)

Real dialogue had to be memorized, dance steps perfected, recitations learned. Each student had a number of tasks. There was lots of learning involved. Some of the skits and other pieces could be quite sophisticated; a former student recalls that

a concert at Verona School once featured a seven-piece orchestra! Imagine that!

The audience sat on makeshift benches – planks on a support. When the concert was over, Santa Claus arrived!

The School Board provided candy, nuts and oranges, packaged in brown paper bags for distribution. Oh! How I remember those peanuts! ...and always allowing extra bags for those children who were not in school yet but were part of the family. These, along with gifts, were handed out by Santa Claus and usually, before his departure he might kiss the teacher, to the great amusement of her pupils!

The Christmas Concert was, for many, a high point of their school year!

Christmas Concert in a One-Room Schoolhouse was taken from *Vantage Points Five*. *Vantage Points* is a 6-book series that shares the rich history of the southwest region of our province.

To learn more about the Turtle Mountain Souris Plains Heritage Association, visit their website at www.vantagepoints.ca

On behalf of TMSPHA, I'm Betty Sawatzky.

Merry Christmas!



A Christmas Concert in the RM of Argyle 1950's