

# MONTANA SCHIC



A COLD MORNING IN A COUNTRY SCHOOL HOUSE — *Harper's Weekly*, 1875

# OLD TEACHER

by MARY  
HYLAND  
CURRIER



I have good reason to remember the country school teachers who flourished in Montana during the homestead era of the early 1900's. For one thing, I attended country schools, and for another, I always had the same teacher — my mother, Mary McLaughlin Hyland.

"I never wanted to be anything but a teacher," I can hear her saying. "Seventeen, when I started. Some of the boys were older than I was . . . and a whole lot bigger."

She had problems all along the way, I know, but she never regretted her choice. She never gave up, not even during the last cruel hours of her teaching career, forty years later.

"Miz Hyland, I want you to learn 'em," Mrs. Nelson said to my mother one afternoon. She had come to school to pick up the oldest of her eleven children. She carried the smallest in her thin arms. The next youngest pulled at her black skirt, hiking it up over drooping white petticoats.

"And this is for you, Miz Hyland."

Mrs. Nelson had not failed to observe the courtesy of bringing something for the teacher.

"Chokecherry syrup!" Mother said as she accepted the tin pail by its wire handle. "How nice."

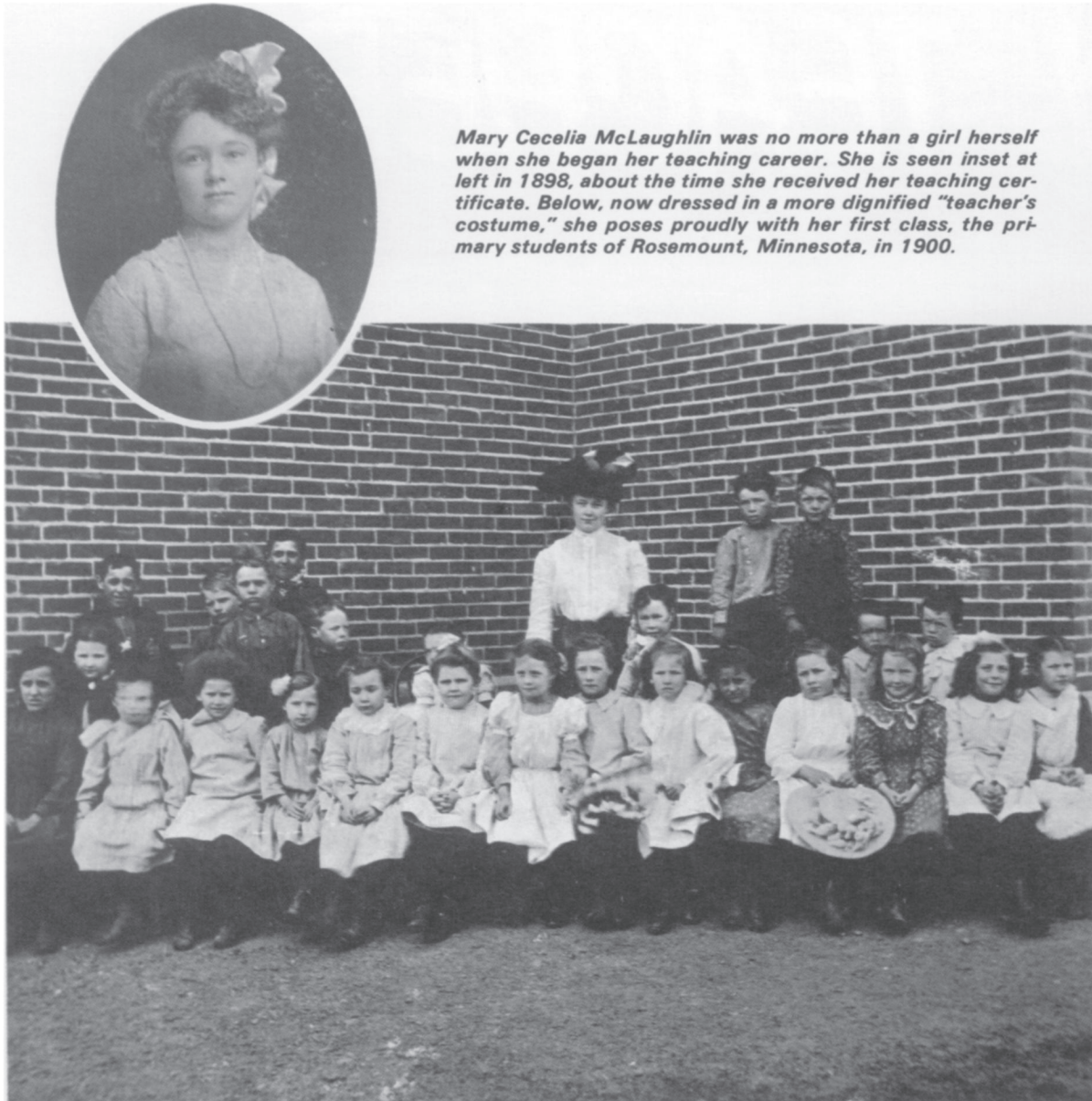
"Ain't hardly nothing," Mrs. Nelson said modestly.

Visualizing their farmhouse with its dirt floors and no windows, I remember wondering if there would be any flies floating in the syrup. Small, sour chokecherries were the only plentiful fruit to be found in eastern Montana and the tart syrup customarily enhanced the pancake breakfast that started everyone's day.

But it was not the gift or fetching up the children that led Mrs. Nelson to walk four miles on a warm, fall afternoon. It was the terrible loneliness Montana farm women felt — the need to talk to another woman. As was often said, Montana was great for men and cows, but "hell on women."

Neighbors were always so far away, but my mother was always there, in the schoolhouse, available and friendly, even though she had a different background. And she must have seemed very different, I realize now. Even her clothes were different. She often dressed in a sort of teacher's uniform — a much-worn black suit with changes of light blouses. Never mind that the shiny skirt had a three-cornered tear from crawling under a barbed wire fence.

"I recollect when you first come here," said Mrs. Nelson, "and built yer house. Floors. Real hardwood floors." I was accustomed to the impression our shiny front room floor made on the neighbors. Apparently to Mrs. Nelson this was some strange custom my parents had brought with them when they came from Minnesota.



*Mary Cecelia McLaughlin was no more than a girl herself when she began her teaching career. She is seen inset at left in 1898, about the time she received her teaching certificate. Below, now dressed in a more dignified "teacher's costume," she poses proudly with her first class, the primary students of Rosemount, Minnesota, in 1900.*

**I**T WAS IN ST. PAUL that my mother had gone to high school in the 1890's. There had been some doubt about whether she would be able to graduate, for her mother was widowed and had to work hard just to keep her one daughter in food and clothing. When she was a senior, her mother told her one morning that she must wear a "hand-me-down" dress to school.

Mary McLaughlin refused: "That horrid dress — it doesn't fit me. Everyone will laugh. . . ."

"It's perfectly good material," said her mother, "but you certainly don't have to wear it. You can drop out of school right now and go out to work like I do."

Mary stayed home and cried in her bedroom all that day. She didn't want to go out to work. She loved school, and more than anything in the world she wanted to be a teacher. The next morning she put on the detested dress and wore it.

After high school, Mary was able to get in six months of training at a normal school which was then enough for the teaching certificate of which she was very proud. A year's teaching at Rosemount, Minnesota, was followed by her wedding on August 22, 1900 to Edward J. Hyland, twelve years her senior and the oldest son of a prominent farm family. This was the predictable end of her teaching career until their westward migration in 1914 led her to resume her career in far-off Montana.

**W**ELL, LEARN 'EM," Mrs. Nelson said to my mother as she collected her children and prepared to leave. "And Miz Hyland, if the kids git a lickin' at school, let us know. They'll git another at home." But doubling up on punishment seemed a bit much for my good-natured mother. She loved teaching and students and achieved discipline as much by the lift of her eyebrows as by the 12-inch ruler that lay on her desk. The threat was always there and students did not misbehave without some thought. That included my brother and me. If anyone was of the notion we would get special treatment because the teacher was our mother, that idea was soon dissipated. I found this out when I objected to sitting next to one young gentleman.

"I don't think Tommy ever takes a bath," I said. I was then in the second grade and inclined to be haughty about personal hygiene, even though I knew water was a scarce item. Everyone hauled water to their homesteads in wooden barrels from the muddy Yellowstone. We never wasted a drop and hopefully set the barrels at the corners of the house whenever it looked like rain.

Over the years, the rains came less and less often. An April green had been on the land when Northern Pacific agents first brought my parents to Sidney in 1914. The railroad was eager to have farmers settle ranches there and raise wheat for shipment east. It was on that ranch that I was born. I soon learned that April green turns to brown in July — a great, flat brownness uninterrupted by tree or hill or mountain. Rain did not come, and there was no irrigation. Another year, it might rain, but then hailstones cut down a promising crop. The next year, it was grasshoppers. It was the continuing drought that sent my mother back to teaching to help support the family. Meanwhile my father was often away driving a coal wagon in Sidney or looking for work in other parts of the state.

"Couldn't I sit by Alice, instead?" I asked. "I don't think Tommy changes his clothes all winter."

Looking back, I suspect Tommy's characteristic smell must have indeed been strong to be noticeable above the normal, heady fragrances of our schoolhouse. Dusty chalk sifted from gray, felt erasers at the blackboard. The sour smell of ink came from the inkwells at the top of each wooden desk and mingled with the scent of apple cores, crumbs from leftover lunches, and the warm rubber odor of four-buckle overshoes drying around the stove.

"And those lunches he brings . . ." I gagged. "Ugh! — Just bread with lard! It makes me sick to my stomach."

"He can't help what's in his lunch." My mother's usually smiling mouth compressed to a thin line. She looked at me over her rimless glasses. I quailed as much as anyone when I got that look.

Then she thought for a moment. "I think I'll make barley soup with vegetables tomorrow. Then everyone will have a hot lunch."

Thus one more duty was added to Mother's already busy schedule. Every morning she lighted the fire in the schoolhouse, swept the floor with a red, oily compound to keep the dust down, washed the blackboard and gave my brother, Bob, the granite bucket to fill down at the "crick." Now she undertook her own hot lunch program.

**A** STRANGER RIDING through Montana on a train could always spot the country schoolhouse, for it was often the only painted building to be seen. Settlers lived in unpainted shacks, but the schoolhouse was always painted white. The windows, trimmed in green, were on one side; on the other there were none at all — the blackboard was there. The yard, inevitably fenced with barbed wire, contained two outbuildings, similarly painted, in the far corners. There were no swings or slides. At recess, we played simple games that Mother directed. When we played "Ante-I-Over" my brother was good at catching the ball when it was thrown over the school roof. He would dash madly around the other side to tag someone for his team.

The inside of the school was seldom better equipped. The Douglass School, where she taught from 1916 to 1921, had no globes, no maps, no dictionaries, and no encyclopedias during her first year.

It was unusual for Bob ever to be sick, but one winter he suddenly got very ill. Since my father was away in Sidney, I stayed home with Bob. On Thursday Bob seemed better and we planned to go to town on Saturday. My mother thought she could take him to the doctor then if he was still sick.

But Thursday night after supper, we heard the sound of a car. Neighbors were distant and callers rare, so I ran to the window. I saw an old Model T, standing with the motor running. Cranking up a car was a major undertaking so one did not turn off the motor for a short stop. At the door my mother greeted a neighboring farmer, the chairman of the school board.

"It's yer boy," he said. "Kids told me — stomach-ache. I come to take him into town."

"Well, I don't know . . ." Mother began uncertainly. "I don't think . . ."

As he stood in the doorway, the farmer certainly did not look like a rescuing knight. He wore an old sheepskin coat and a brown, tobacco-stained mustache curved over his lips. He took time now to spit.



"My brother's boys . . ." he said, "acted the same way. Appendicitis — turned out."

"But Bob seems better. And Saturday we were going to town anyway."

"Yeah, but see . . . You been a good teacher. And good to my kids. I just won't sleep tonight if we don't take him to the doctor. Sounded just like my brother's boy when the kids told me."

Maternal fears aroused now, my mother said, "I'll just dress him."

"Don't bother — just wrap a quilt around."

That was the last I saw of my brother for a long time. In the hospital in Sidney, the doctor said Bob's appendix had ruptured and only gave him a fifty-fifty chance to live. Peritonitis was a grim word in those days. The only reason Bob pulled through was because of the neighborly school board chairman . . . because the teacher had been "good to his kids."

**T**HE DROUGHT THAT STARTED IN 1917 continued for five years in eastern Montana. Grain was burned to the roots by temperatures that reached 110 degrees. My father reaped only two bushels to the acre. As the bills piled up, foreclosure on our ranch was just a matter of time, and Mother had to keep on teaching for the \$115.00 per month salary. After our local school was closed my mother taught at Epworth, north of Sidney on the Northern Pacific Railroad. When we finally did lose our ranch, she had to look for yet another school. The only one she could find was in the remote sagebrush country at Rock Creek.

When she went to the lonely schoolhouse to clean the day before school began in 1927, she found a message from the teacher of the previous year. Scrawled across the blackboard of the shabby little room were these words, written in large letters: "Forty miles from water, forty miles from wood. I'm leaving this grim prison, and I'm leaving it for good."

*Mary McLaughlin Hyland returned to teaching in Montana in 1916. She is seen here as she appeared in 1917, along with a generation of Montana's rural school students. Below are the students of the Epworth School in 1922 at which she taught from 1922 to 1925. The author is on the right of the front row. The Epworth School, painted white and surrounded by its dirt playground, is seen at right on the opposite page. At the far left is the Rock Creek School in McCone County at which Mrs. Hyland taught in 1927-1928. The two pictures on page 26 are provided courtesy of Adell Bakken, Sidney, who also taught at the Epworth School, and Thora Skyberg, who still resides in the Rock Creek area.*



Mother sighed. She picked up an eraser, wiped the words away, and began to print the alphabet across the top of the blackboard for the first graders. Already the schoolhouse began to look less lonely. There marched the familiar capital "A" and the little "a," capital "B" and little "b."

When school started we forgot the sagebrush outside and the rattlesnakes, and the banks that foreclosed. Beyond the school windows we could see Russian thistles blowing in the Montana wind — this way and that until they were caught and lodged against the barbed wire fence. Inside the schoolroom, at least, there was rudimentary civilization.

We learned about geography. Africa and its lions and elephants fascinated us and even before we came to study history we knew our heroes from listening to the lessons of the upper grades. We heard the Gettysburg Address recited so many times that even the youngest student could prompt anyone who forgot.

I remember a peaceful winter day when the snow started falling with deceptive softness before noon. My mother seemed to walk to the window frequently. She saw the rising wind pile little drifts against the outhouses. "Sound it out," she told a first-grader who hesitated in recitation. She was listening, not to him, however, but to the sound of the wind, for the sound of horses, a wagon, a car.

When the first parents arrived for their children at noon, she let the older boys take their horses and go with them. They could all travel safely together. But when all the rest of the children had been collected, my best friend, June, and her sister were still there. By now, it was too late for us to leave or allow them to start off on foot up the coulee behind the schoolhouse. By evening there was no possibility of any of us leaving school or anyone coming to rescue us.

At first it seemed like a lark, for June and I could play together. Mother eyed the empty coal

scuttles. "Tell you what," she said. "You and June are the oldest so the three of us will play a game. I'll take the rope off the bell and tie it around me, like this. You hang onto this end."

Then she disappeared into the swirling snow in the direction of the coalshed. We held tight to the rope. As the slack was taken up, we felt we were personally saving ourselves from freezing to death. Then the rope slacked again. We pulled gently to guide Mother back to the schoolhouse.

Our warmth assured, she investigated food. She made barley soup for supper and afterwards, she found corn for us to pop on the glowing stove. We slept on the floor, covered with our coats. During the night I recall she got up several times to feed the fire.

The next day we had barley for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Mother played the organ and had us do lessons to break the monotony. By the third day we were all sick of barley, confinement, snow, and each other, and morning's sun was as welcome as the sight of a sleigh pulling into the schoolyard. June's parents had not worried. They knew the teacher would keep their girls safe.

ON FRIDAYS, wherever my mother taught, there was always a break in the routine. Besides getting out a little early, part of the afternoon was set aside for songs and stories. The girls all begged for Little Nell and OLD CURIOSITY SHOP. "Is she going to die, Mrs. Hyland? Does she have to die?"

"I can't tell you that. But we're near the end of the book. And the author, class?"

"Dickens." The name meant little, but when Mother read the death of Little Nell, everyone cried.

The boys wanted TREASURE ISLAND. When that was read, Long John Silver could almost be heard "click-click-clicking" his way right down the classroom aisle. Imminent danger to the ship's crew was sensed but would not be revealed until next Friday's installment.

We also sang mournful songs like "Ramona" and "Little Brown Church" in loud, cheerful voices.

"We need a piano," my mother said wistfully one day. "Maybe we could raise the money with a box supper." It was 1929 by then, and the depres-

*Mrs. Hyland's students at the Springdale School in Park County pose on the front steps in 1930. The author is second from the left in the back row.*



sion had begun. Mother was teaching in a very small school in the Crazy Mountains north of Springdale.

"I could make decorations for a program," Chris Payne volunteered. Chris was inclined to draw pictures in his arithmetic book instead of doing problems.

"And we could have recitations." Anyone but Pat Hart would have said "speak a piece." But the Hart family had come from England, settling by some unlikely chance in this remote part of Montana. Pat Hart could memorize anything. The only girl in a family of boys, her red hair was cut short like a boy's and she rode a fast pony to school. Her older brothers always wore black shirts and trousers. Since I never saw them except astride their black horses, it seemed to me they existed in no other way, perhaps not even getting off to sleep.

The Harts owned a ranch stocked with purebred cattle which they continuously suspected was being rustled by their neighbors. This made for poor neighborly relationships. Mr. Hart was rarely seen but his wife made up for that by getting about in a black English riding habit that was no more astonishing than her non-stop English voice.

"My deah Miz Hyland," she said when she first brought Pat to school. "We ah allowing Patricia to start seventh. Later, we may send her to England, or engage a governess." She flicked dust from the skirt of her habit with her riding whip. "We're not sure we want her associating. . . ."

I sensed that condescension from an Englishwoman did not set well with my Irish mother, but Pat looked like a bright student. My mother said, "Welcome to school, Pat. We'll try to see that she gets a good education, Mrs. Hart."

Pat did indeed prove bright and merry, and as for the Hart's suspicions about cattle rustling, these were kept out of the schoolroom by a teacher who knew that was the unforgivable crime in Montana.

In the weeks before the box social, Friday afternoons were wholly given over to practicing for the program. Chris Payne made beautiful paper chains of red, blue, and yellow. Although he was given the shortest of recitations to memorize, he balked anyway. "It's too hard," he said, looking at the four-line stanza Mother dropped on his desk. "I'm gonna quit school."

My mother had become used to this reaction to any new assignment. "I'm gonna quit school," he said when they started subtraction. "I'm gonna quit school," when he got past subtraction to division, "It's too hard." Chris was the baby of the Payne family, and already his older brothers had quit school because it was "too hard."

On the night of the program, Chris had to be pushed bodily outside the curtain of white sheets



*The schoolhouse was always a focus for activities of a rural community. On display at the Springdale School in 1931 is a sewing exhibit.*

strung together on a wire at the front of the schoolroom. But he managed to get through his four lines so well that his relatives seated in the front row of desks could hardly stop clapping.

After the program, desks were pushed back. Mr. Payne sprinkled the rough wood floor with wax, and square dances were called to the chords of the fiddler. No one noticed the older Payne boys stepping outside with increasing frequency.

"Hart boys just rode up," Chris announced. Since they never did come inside, I still didn't get to see them off their horses. "They're having a big fight. My brothers are in on it, too." He disappeared to see the fun.

Off and on, all the men went outside to drink from bottles they had secreted in their cars. With due respect for the school ma'am, all the drinking, fighting and cussing took place outside. The women-folk, quite properly, stayed inside and ignored the proceedings.

For my part, I longed to stay awake for the midnight supper. Strong coffee brewed in a copper boiler atop the stove. Shoeboxes decorated with crepe paper rosettes were stacked on the teacher's desk to be auctioned by Mr. Payne to the highest bidder. The hearty sandwiches and homemade cake inside those boxes would allow the dancers to continue until four o'clock in the morning. In this way, everyone would get home in time to milk the cows and go to bed. But, as usual, I did not last that long. Lying down, just for a moment, on the big pile of overcoats in the cloakroom, I knew nothing more that night.

**B**Y MONDAY, it was well known that the Hart boys had called the Paynes "cattle rustlers." Some of the boys had taken them on. Black eyes had been evenly distributed and no one was happy. As soon as school was out Monday, my mother received two callers. The first was Mrs. Hart. She strode in, black skirts flying. "Get your things together, Patricia. No offense to you, Miz Hyland, but this school is no proper place for my daughter. Cattle thieves. . . ."

"Really?" With big, round schoolteacher figures, my mother marked a fat 100 on a paper and handed it to Pat. "You did very well on your test."

"Thank you tea-a-c-h-e-r- . . ." The words came out with a sob. Pat Hart, who always laughed and never cried, said: "Mother, I don't want to leave this school. I like it here. I like the teacher."

"Patricia."

"Please, mother. . . ." For once Mrs. Hart was speechless.

"She is doing splendidly, Mrs. Hart, A quick mind."

Although Pat's mother continued to sputter, she finally departed.

As though waiting his turn just outside the schoolyard gate, Mr. Payne arrived in the doorway. "We don't aim to complain, Mrs. Hyland, but little Chris says school is gettin' too hard. He's going to quit."

MARY McLAUGHLIN HYLAND  
Mother  
1912



"He does say that once in a while," my mother admitted. "But come in. Let's take a look at his grades."

"If Chris wants to quit, it's all right with me," said Mr. Payne.

My mother consulted the long, black papercloth book, in which were enshrined, alphabetically, all names and marks. "Let's see. Spelling — 72. That's passing. Arithmetic — 79. And Art . . . Art 95. He's very good in Art, Mr. Payne. Did you know he made all those window decorations?"

"All of them?" Mr. Payne gazed at the paper chains in red, yellow and blue. "By himself?"

My mother nodded. "He gets discouraged with new things sometimes, but so far, he always keeps on trying."

"You make him keep trying," said Mr. Payne. "I didn't know he was good at Art. Take no mind if he wants to quit. His brothers all quit. Kep' saying school was too hard."

"Well," he picked up his hat, "like I say — make him work."

When Mr. Payne had gone, the schoolroom was quiet except for the droning of a lone fly caught behind Chris' window decorations. Mother looked at me and said, "It's too hard. I'm gonna quit school." We both laughed.

**A**FTER I FINISHED grade school, I went to board in Livingston to go to high school, and I knew less and less about my mother's teaching. But in later years friends would tell me, "Your mother is the best teacher I ever had." Or, "I sure hated fractions. She made me learn 'em anyway."

With the passing years, Mother had to work hard to keep her teaching certificate in force. Montana graduated more and more young teachers from the teacher's colleges, and there was no longer a scarcity. Times were still hard and married teachers were looked upon with some scorn. With husbands to support them, it was thought they were taking work from those who needed it more. My father did indeed work on the Red Lodge-Cooke City highway, but he was aging and partially disabled with arthritis, and Mother had to keep teaching.

She took correspondence courses—Educational Philosophy and History of Education — and one year she went away to summer school in Billings. She had one class in basket weaving. I saw her rough, stubby fingers, used to shoveling coal, trying to manipulate the delicate reeds into graceful baskets.

Another class was entitled Rhythmics. "It's embarrassing," she said, "now that I've put on weight to try to compete with the young girls."

**M**OTHER HAD no plan other than to keep teaching until retirement, and her enthusiasm for her pupils never waned. "One of my eighth graders took first in arithmetic for the whole state," she would brag. In 1938, when she was teaching up on the Boulder River out of Livingston at the Beaver Creek School, she had the pleasure of welcoming her first grandson to her first grade class. Bobby, Jr., for his part, had to learn the same lesson of the previous generation. There was no partiality to be expected from the beloved "Gramma" who had mysteriously turned into a rather strict person called "Teacher."

It was the next year, in the middle of a February school afternoon, that something happened. Mother had been going over the Preamble to the Constitution with the seventh grade Civics class. The words were as familiar to her as her own name. "We, the People," she began. And then her voice stopped. Just stopped. She willed herself to continue. The words formed in her mind, but she did not speak them. She could not speak at all.

The seventh graders looked at her questioningly. She turned her back so they wouldn't see her struggle to get the words out. She remembered some dizzy spells and headaches now and was frightened. Yet she could not, would not, frighten her students or upset the schoolroom. Since her hands still worked, she picked up a piece of chalk. "We will have a silent study period until 3:00," she wrote on the blackboard in her round, plain schoolteacher's writing. And then added underneath, "Dismissal will be half an hour early."

With that promise of reward, the children applied themselves diligently and silently. In the quiet, what had happened became clear in her mind. She had suffered a stroke and it had affected her speech. She feared the children might notice her silence when it came time for them to get their lunch buckets and say goodbye. Mercifully, their happy noise covered her silence.

"Good bye, teacher, Goodbye."

She simply stood in the schoolhouse doorway, silently waving. They did not notice. They did not



**MARY McLAUGHLIN HYLAND**  
*Retired Teacher*  
1943

know they had said goodbye to their teacher for the last time.

The seizure she had hidden from her students did indeed mark the end of Mary McLaughlin Hyland's forty years of dedicated teaching. A doctor in Livingston diagnosed her condition as acute hypertension and insisted that she resign from teaching and move to a lower altitude. After spending some time with relatives, in 1943 my parents come to live with me in Portland, Oregon. Father died there in 1956, my indomitable schoolteacher mother in 1962.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

This manuscript by Mary Hyland Currier was, regrettably, received too late for inclusion in our Summer (1974) issue on Women and the American West. Here Mrs. Currier writes with sympathy and feeling about the country schoolteachers (mostly women) who made such great contributions to educating rural America. Mary Hyland Currier graduated from Park County High School, Livingston, Montana, while her mother was still teaching at nearby Springdale School. She attended Montana State University on a scholarship for one quarter, dropping out for financial reasons. She later graduated from Oregon State University in 1942. When her parents came to live with her, Mrs. Currier was working for Pacific Power & Light Company, a position she held for sixteen years. In subsequent years her travels took her to England, and she is now living in the Boston area. A published writer, her work has appeared in *THE WRITER*, *THE AMERICAN MAGAZINE*, and a British publication, *THE WOMAN*.