

# SCHOOL DAYS

by DOROTHY M. JOHNSON



My early education was interrupted when we moved from Great Falls, Montana, where the first grade teacher terrified me, to Rainbow Falls Dam, seven miles away, where my father worked<sup>d</sup> as a timekeeper. There was no school because there were no other children. So my mother, who had taught country school in Iowa, sent away for some special books and did the job herself, two hours every day. That worked fine. I wasn't afraid of *her*.

Then we moved to Whitefish, and there was a question of what grade to put me in. Mr. Hayden, a benevolent blond man, asked kindly, "Do you know the multiplication tables?"

I hadn't even heard of them, so he placed me in the second grade. If he had asked about the *timeses*, I would have known what he meant. I knew *them*, clear through the nines.

One teacher had both first and second grades, and on my first day, in March, she whipped a little boy so hard with her wooden blackboard pointer that she broke it. So I was terrified of her, but school ended in May.

The next year we moved to a new building, where an overflow caused one teacher to have some of both third and fourth grades. Fourth grade was more interesting, so she promoted me. Any gaps in my education I can always blame on missing the third grade.

Corporal punishment was customary. (Not *capital* punishment — that's where they execute you). These days, of course, if a teacher speaks harshly to a child, his parents sue the schoolboard.

## GOOD OLD RUB

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But in early day Whitefish, third- and fourth-grade teachers wielded a piece of rubber hose; beyond that, some of the kids were too big, so the janitor was called to administer punishment.

Until we got to the seventh, Miss Mahan, an elderly lady with red hair, knew what we were going to do before we did it, so we didn't do it. She had us so pleasantly mesmerized — a bunch of half-grown cobras swaying before her cute, knowing smile — that nobody needed a licking.

## WHAT DID WE LEARN?

In geography, the capitals, boundaries and principal products of a lot of countries that don't exist any more. Continents — but there's an extra one now, Antarctica, that nobody had noticed. And a lot of stuff about equinoxes, prevailing winds, currents, and latitude and longitude that I never did understand.

A few years ago I was in Fiji, very close to the International Date Line, on my birthday. If I had paid attention in geography class, I could probably have swum across the date line two or three times and skipped that birthday entirely. On the other hand, why not move to Ethiopia, where they use a different calendar from ours and you're automatically six or seven years younger than when you left home? I was there for only a few days and did not notice any signs of instant youth.



# BER HOSE DAYS



In civics, we learned about government, with a memory jogger for the President's cabinet members. ST WAPNIACL had no religious connotation; it stood for State, Treasury, War, Agriculture, and I forget what else. It wouldn't work now anyway.

In American history, we got the usual inspiring facts, but as a Western child I didn't really believe anything that happened east of the Mississippi River or before the Lewis and Clark Expedition set out in 1804 to explore the Louisiana Purchase. Later, when I lived in the East and saw on tombstones the names of some of the Founding Fathers who wore those funny hats, I was converted.

We learned good solid arithmetic, including how to measure a room for wallpaper or plaster (remembering to subtract for doors and windows). This wasn't very useful in later life, except to people who sold wallpaper or did plastering.

In the eighth grade we had a horror known as partial payments. If you borrow money at a certain rate of interest, to be repaid at so much a month, how much is your monthly payment and when will you be out of debt? This was awful until we discovered that the teacher was as bored as we were. She just put our papers in the wastebasket and

graded on the basis of how many pages of numbers we turned in. These problems were an exercise in futility. If you buy a car or a house, the lending institution can tell you what each payment will be, down to the last penny, and no banker will welcome home-grown advice from the borrower.

Another thing I remember from the eighth grade is a boy I'll call Joe because that wasn't his name. He was usually late for school, and the teacher nagged him about it publicly. She never understood that Joe wanted to go to school but his father thought it was a waste of time. The earlier Joe got up in the morning, the more chores his father found for him to do before he could leave home. Joe was a good boy, but his old man won. Joe didn't go on to high school and I never heard what became of him.

## SINEINE AND STUFF

Music wasn't taught in the public schools, but we all sang lustily — and in my case, out of tune — for a few minutes each morning. Art we didn't have, but each schoolroom had a couple of framed pictures — standard equipment like the blackboard and the clock. Color printing had not come into its own, so the pictures were sepia reproductions of the great masters or black-and-white portraits of great authors. I sometimes wondered why the great masters painted only in brown and was in college before I found out they didn't. Of course we all assumed that great poets were born with long grey beards.

In the eighth grade we studied physiology; it was not, believe me, sex education. The only thing I remember about it is that you should be careful not to build your privy where it could drain into your well.

There was a library, but it was not a place to go; it was a holy mystery. Available books were listed by title and author on dog-eared sheets in each classroom, showing the number of points each was worth for book reviews. We had to total ten points a semester, or was it a year? A book that might be fun to read carried few points. A five-pointer would be such heavy going that you would consider running away from home and going to sea. We never saw the library. We left a slip with the teacher and our book was delivered. We could get one a week. I first encountered a library with open stacks in college and went wild with joy.

## A MATTER OF SPELLING

Maybe the Whitefish schools didn't turn out the world's best spellers, but our teachers certainly tried. Some decades after I left the sheltering wings of the grades and high school, one of my colleagues at the University of Montana came into my office looking shocked.

"Will you read this paper my little girl wrote?" he asked. "She's in the fourth grade."

I did, and noticed eleven words spelled wrong on one page. There was no grade, but her teacher's enthusiastic written comment was "Excellent!"

"It's no use for me to talk to her teacher," he said dolefully. "Spelling errors don't count any more. Correct the child's spelling and you may block her creativity. It's the new educational philosophy. I can't go over the teacher's head to the principal or I'll get my little girl into trouble."

"I doubt whether her teacher knows how to spell those words herself," I suggested. "She can't spell 'excellent'."

We agreed that the teacher should confine her comments to "good" — she could probably handle that.

So the little girl probably thinks spelling doesn't matter, unless her daddy dared to get tough about it at home. He is a professor of journalism, used to be a newspaperman, and he knows spelling *does* matter.

My opinion is that letting a kid spell wrong does not help him to be creative. Creative people find complete freedom within the bounds of discipline.

All through school, we learned to spell. None of our teachers followed the theory that correcting our spelling would hamper our creativity. We learned punctuation. We learned grammar. We certainly did.

A long time later, when I taught some writing courses in the School of Journalism to University of Montana upperclassmen, I had several students who were very creative spellers. Also they hadn't studied grammar in grade school, they hadn't studied it in high school (because their teachers hadn't had it) and they hadn't had it in freshman English in college because they should have had it in high school.

The only place they got it was in foreign languages, where the professors had to teach some basic English grammar before they could go on with French, German or whatever. How could I enlighten

my juniors and seniors about when to avoid the passive voice if they didn't know what it was? So I lectured on transitive and intransitive verbs.

In high school English we studied, among other things, two of Shakespeare's plays each year and memorized the "purple patches." I've been told that Shakespeare is now considered too difficult for high school and memorizing is out of style.

Current literature textbooks are very NOW. Thirty-two of them that I know of include some of my stories, and naturally I don't object to being a revered writer of classical literature (my agent gets good prices, and I don't sneer at money), but editors of some of these collections make them so very NOW that major writers of the past are out completely. I'm not a major writer.

Eight of my stories made it into these thirty-two school reading books on various levels; seven stories involved Indians; six had the frontier West as background — and the other two concerned present century Indians.

I'd like to believe that all these stories are in all those school readers because the stories are so great. But judging by some of the company they keep, this doesn't follow as the night the day. I have an awful suspicion that my stories got in because they're about Indians, Indians constitute a minority, minorities are relevant, and Hamlet's soliloquy is not. Believe me, it is. The suicide rate among contemporary Indians is shocking.



## THERE WERE FUN AND GAMES

I wasn't much good at shooting marbles, but as a trader I could do you out of your eye teeth. My collection of pretty aggies was magnificent. I had a couple of steelies, even — usually ruled out for shooting, because they were unfairly heavy, but very pretty. They were really ball bearings, not for sale in stores. Legend said they were obtained by stealing from the innards of railroad locomotives. If this were true, there wouldn't have been a train moving on the whole Whitefish division of the Great Northern Railroad.

Jacks I never quite understood; this and mumbletypeg (which required only a jackknife) were for little kids. We usually edged over onto the incipient school lawn for mumbletypeg until somebody yelled, "Stay off the pig-weeds!"

Ring-around-the-rosie and London Bridge were for little kids, too. Then we moved on to Statues, in which somebody whirled you around and then let you go. You were supposed to stay in the position where you landed. Boys clowned; girls tried to strike elegant, graceful poses. Everybody giggled.

Big kids played pump-pump-pullaway and crack the whip, which were rougher.

Jumping rope was for girls, but older boys sometimes favored us with their lordly presence, mainly to prove they were just as nimble-footed as the female of the species. A big boy, trying to keep his feet going while two girls tried to trip him by turning the rope at a speed called red-hot-pepper, was much admired, and well he knew it. That's why he came down from Olympus to associate briefly with us creatures of a lower order.

When I was about nine years old, I was bouncing a ball on the sidewalk when Mr. Hayden came along, benevolently observing. "You see," he remarked kindly, "the angle of incidence is equal to the angle of reflection."

I said, "Huh?"

Now there was an educator for you. He couldn't help it. I never did take whatever course included clarification of that statement, but I've never forgotten it. Or doubted it for a moment, either. Mr. Hayden said it, so it is one of the eternal verities. When life seems confusing I retreat for solace into profound thoughts about how the angle of incidence is equal to the angle of reflection. I don't even want to know what it means. I didn't want to know when I was nine years old, either.



## THE RITES OF PASSAGE

Like some primitive societies, we had our rites of passage, marking the change from little kids to big kids. Ours came mostly with the change from eighth grade to high school. Girls yearned to do their hair up and let their skirts down. Boys yearned to wear long pants instead of knickers. Girls whined and coaxed their mothers. Boys growled and argued



with their fathers. But making the change depended on one's height more than on one's age, and how much we grew was beyond our control.

Besides, prudent parents did not let a boy graduate from knickers to long pants until he wore out the knickers or his younger brother grew into them. A new suit cost money. Girls' clothes were usually made at home and cost less.

Girls wore high-topped shoes, with buttons in grade school, laced when we got bigger. A well-dressed girl had no knots in her shoe laces showing where they had been broken and tied together to make do. (For dress-up we had strapped slippers with flat heels, called Mary Janes). High shoes were supposed to keep a girl's ankles slim, but what good was that if nobody could see them?

Boys, after they began to notice girls, brushed their hair straight back and used grease to keep it there. On a blackboard at the back of a college classroom in my freshman year there was a row of spots where the young men, leaning back, had rested their heads. Above it some wit had written with chalk: THE GLORY THAT WAS GREASE.

Girls of my high school generation, when we were allowed to put away our hair ribbons and do our hair up, wore cootie cages over their ears. These were puffs, either carefully snarled (the newer term is "back-combed" or teased") or filled with small store-bought wads of fiber that tended to fall out before the day was over. We called them rats, but they looked more like mice.

This fashion was followed by one known as the bushel basket; various versions of it have come and gone since. The hair was puffed all over, with small rats at the sides and a big one across the top, and sooner or later something was pretty sure to fall out.

After we graduated came the shingle bob. The local barber did my first one, protesting that he didn't know how. But I insisted, and he was right. I wore a hat except in bed until my shingle bob grew out some.

By 1975 our rites of passage were long forgotten. Both boys and girls wore long pants (faded, frayed and patched) and long hair from infancy onward. It was hard to tell which sex was which until some of them grew mustaches. One big difference between my generation and theirs is that we tried hard, according to our lights, to look nice.



## HOMECOMING AT WHITEFISH – AND A HAPPY MAN

Fifty-three years after my high school class graduated in its brief blaze of glory, the first twenty-one classes (1914-1935) had a two-day Homecoming. It was a great success, with 495 persons attending. This included not only graduates and spouses and a few grown-up children but also all the people who could be tracked down who were ever in those classes but didn't graduate.

The lady from Hawaii didn't come the farthest — that distinction went to the man from Guam. One man — with whom I played Indians-and-cowboys in childhood — said later that this was his class's fiftieth anniversary and he had so much fun that he's looking forward to his seventy-fifth, in the year 2000. But I don't think this affair should ever be repeated. It would be an anticlimax.

The outstanding event for me was that I met a happy man. There are few of them, when you come to think of it. I won't give his full name; it would embarrass him. But he is happy, and he knows it, and he is therefore, in my opinion, the most successful of us all.



He didn't graduate, although heaven knows he tried. He was the oldest of nine children. All but one are still living, and most of the surviving eight attended Homecoming. They thoroughly admire one another and don't seem to remember that they had hard times in childhood. Their father had a timber claim. It used to be said that no man who worked a timber claim needed to worry about going to hell, because he had already been there.

Later the father ran a blacksmith shop in town. The boys learned all the hard skills of frontier farming, they learned to work metal, they can still repair anything — including some things that nobody has any more, like a pitcher pump in a farmhouse kitchen. The girls did everything little girls could learn to do, including milking and caring for livestock and helping their mother. They live far apart now, but still that atmosphere of family love surrounds them.

The oldest boy, the one I think of as the happiest, most successful man I have ever met, didn't finish high school. The others did, and some went on to college. What Quentin remembers, and told me about with delight, are his successes. In five years of hard trying, he finished, I think, two years of high school. The rest of the time, he worked, saved money when he could, and helped with money at home.

He got jobs driving a team and wagon because even in his early teens he built a reputation for possessing the old-fashioned virtues — he was dependable, steady, ambitious, uncomplaining, loyal to his boss. He remembers with great satisfaction that when he needed seven hundred dollars, the local banker — not a man to give in to charitable impulses — loaned it to him with no security, and he paid it back. He was not yet twenty.

When there was time, he enjoyed going to country dances, with a team and bobsled for transportation. Because he is essentially kind, he often danced with the wallflowers who didn't seem to be having a good time. And he looked ahead to a happy married life sometime.

"I knew what kind of girl I wanted," he told me. "I wanted one with a big heart. I met her at one of those dances. She was staying out of school that year and working because she was one of a big family and wanted to help out at home. After a couple of years we got married. She has always been just the girl for me."



One of the old-fashioned virtues built into Quentin at home was honesty. He delivered groceries for a store for \$40.00 a month and supplied the team and wagon to do it with. Then he was needed at home on the farm for a while. When he went job hunting again, another grocer asked how much he'd been getting before and offered him \$45.00 a month. Quentin thought this was fine, but when the grocer mentioned that he had his own delivery wagon and team, Quentin felt he'd be cheating if he accepted such high wages. So he explained, making everything clear and expecting less pay. He was hired anyway, to his great delight, at \$45.00 a month.

A man like that can live happily with his conscience. He must have had some failures, but he remembers the joys and triumphs. So for me, one of the highlights of the big Homecoming in Whitefish was finding that we have among us that *rara avis*, a jubilantly happy man.

We old grads can do our *timeses* and spell some things right besides our own names. We turned out to be pretty solid citizens, too, thanks to our fetchin' up at home and that rubber hose our grade school teachers always had handy, just in case.



The series of sketches by Dorothy M. Johnson about her childhood and youth in Whitefish, Montana, began in these columns in our Autumn issue of 1973. By the nature of magazine publishing, the sequence has not necessarily been chronological. We began, for instance, with her experiences as a high school and college vacation time telephone operator, then shifted to how kids made money, entertained themselves and grew up to work in the big city. All have represented not only great nostalgia and great humor, but eminently palatable social history. The piece here shifts again to childhood, with some adult overtones, and there are two more to come: on gardening (*The Preacher Who Kept a Cow*), and *Foreigners in Whitefish*. All segments are currently in preparation for a book, the tentative title of which is so good that we hope it sticks: *When You and I Were Young, Whitefish*.