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The Rise and the Fall of the One-Room Schoolhouse

Betty Matalavage and Gerry Stoner

In 1800, southern Schoharie County was an area of small, one-family farms evenly spaced over the countryside with little clustering of population. Education generally took the form of on-the-job training—a family would teach their children the skills needed on the farm, and any additional education occurred at night from the family's Bible.

Nevertheless, there were some hamlets in the area: a general store, inn, or even a cluster of farmhouses could concentrate population enough to support a small school and a local church. The Horace Lawrence article in this Newsletter describes this population and the source of funding for School District 6 (Kemper Mountain Road) and the 53 students that he reported attended school in 1826.

With the advent of the railroad (according to the Ulster and Delaware Historical Society, the first southbound train stopped at mile post 70.6, South Gilboa Station, in 1874), farmers became connected to the outside world and could market milk economically to New York City. Railroading brought an economic boom to the area and a population boom to the schools. Families on more distant farms moved to work as hired hands on farms closer to the railroad, swelling the school-age population of their new school district.

Schools were of variable size: Horace Lawrence mentions 53 students at the Kemper Mountain Road schoolhouse, while Betty Matalavage remembers a peak enrollment of 20 in the Shew Hollow School. Betty's school was on the southwest corner of Shew Hollow and Souer Roads, and had children coming from the nearby Shew, Decker, and Wells farms as well as coming cross country from the more distant Meeghan and Bates farms on Meeghan Road. Shew Hollow children walked less than a mile to school. The school was destroyed by maple in 1948: a tree fell on it and the building was subsequently lost.

Betty also remembers three other schools in the neighborhood: South Jefferson, Cornell Hollow, and South Gilboa. The South Jefferson school has been converted to a private home and is across Cape Horn Road from the South Jefferson Baptist Church at the corner of Blenheim Hill Road; the Cornell Hollow School serves as a portion of a private residence at 549 Shew Hollow Road; and the South Gilboa school served as a Grange Hall and now is a private residence at 505 South Gilboa Road.

Students at these schools were generally children either of the farmer or his hired help. By the 1930s, however, labor-saving equipment reduced the need for a large labor force, farm populations were aging, and school enrollments were dropping. Betty's last few months in the Shew Hollow School were basically private tutoring.

The internal combustion engine delivered the coup-de-grace in the form of the private car and later the school bus. After Shew Hollow closed, Bill Wells was hired to transport Betty and the younger Wells brothers, Walter and John, to the Jefferson Central School in his private car. Later the system hired Clarence Hartwell to drive a 27-passenger school bus on a loop that picked up children from Cape Horn Road, down Meeghan Road to the Pete Meeghan farm, and then back on Shew Hollow. As a bus monitor, Betty once had to crawl out of the back door's emergency exit to get to a farmhouse for help when the bus went off the road and slid down a hill.

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