

Chapter V

SCHOOL DAYS AT EUREKA



Forty-five kids, one room, nine grades, and one teacher receiving sixty dollars a month! That was Eureka School when I started to school there in second grade. How would some of the teachers of today like to tackle that job? We are told now that forty kids are too many for one teacher when they are all in one grade.

The unpleasant incidents are always easier to remember than the pleasant ones so we will get this unpleasant one out of the way first. The teacher was always cranky about letting kids leave the room. I guess she thought we asked to leave the room to keep from studying. As I grew older, I learned that there were cases where that was so, but it was not so in my case. I waited as long as I could because I was a timid sort of boy and didn't like to be scolded. When I figured I couldn't wait any longer, I raised my hand and when the teacher asked what I wanted I asked, "Please, may I leave the room?" She didn't understand little boys because she looked at me and said in kind of a cranky voice, "No, it is only five minutes to recess so you can wait." Well, I waited about two minutes which was the limit. You can guess what happened. I don't know who was the most embarrassed, the teacher or me. Anyway I think it made her more lenient on kids wanting to leave the room, if it did take a minor tragedy to do it. I think I would agree with the teacher whose philosophy was to keep some dry clothes in a back room for such an emergency rather than punish a small boy.

I would like to mention some of the unforgettable characters that attended Eureka. I won't mention their last names as some of them are still alive and might not like me putting their name in this story. I am sure I wouldn't like it if some other boy wrote a story about our school and mentioned my name as the boy who wet his pants.

Most boys had a nick-name. Usually it was given to them by some other boy or group of boys. There was Tom who was called Tub because he was fat and round like a tub. He was the boy that put a live snake in the teacher's desk drawer one time and a live toad another time. He believed in having a good time and was always playing tricks on other kids too. In spite of all this he was good-hearted and I liked him because he never bullied little kids like myself. Then there was the boy named Bert who was called Toad. The kids said that was a good name for him because he was stoop-shouldered and walked like a toad, or maybe it was because when we sang "America" every morning his voice sounded like a frog. There was Walter who was called Walt for short. He became my closest friend in school. He said I should have a

nick-name so he named me Wes which he said was short for Wilsey. There was Ralph whose birthday was on the same day as mine only he was a year older than I was. He always called his parents Pa and Ma. I thought that disrespectful because all the rest of us in school called our parents Papa and Mama. He had a sister two years younger than he was. All the boys said she was the prettiest girl in school. She was also smart. She was in my class and I couldn't keep up with her. We used to have a spelling bee every Friday afternoon. I could usually last until I got to her then she would spell me down.

There was Harry who was quite a ladies man. He was sweet on a certain pretty girl in school and was always kissing her. She was one of the kind that didn't object. One day he and she worked out a deal together. She was in the woodshed and Harry was offering to let any boy kiss her for a price. The price was a penny. If a boy didn't have a penny he would take five pine nuts or anything else he could get. I paid him two marbles. They were doing a good business but some of the other girls, I think, got jealous and told the teacher. She came out and put a stop to the deal in a hurry. There was my oldest brother Willie. There was a little rhyme popular at that time which went "My Mother calls me Willie, My Father calls me Will. The girls call me Billie, but the fellows call me Bill." About that time Willie's name was changed to Bill by everyone but Mother. About the same time my sister's name was cut down to Nell by everyone but Mother.

I got off to a pretty good start in school but somewhere along the line I got mentally lazy. I guess it was in the third or fourth grade. For our geography lesson the teacher asked us to learn the capitals of all the states. If she had given us two days to do it in, I think I would have done it, but she expected us to learn them all in one day. It looked like an impossible task to me, so I decided to go on strike so to speak. The next morning I had a terrible stomach ache so I couldn't go to school. I figured that as soon as the other kids had gone to school, I would get over my stomach ache and enjoy the day at home, but I didn't fool Mother. She knew there was nothing the matter with me but she insisted I was too sick to be up and around so she made me stay in bed all day. The worst of it was, when I went to school the next day, the rest of the class had fallen down on learning all the capitals so I had to learn the last half with them on top of catching up on the half I had missed.

We lived three miles of bad road, two creeks, and six gates from school. As Ernie Ford would say, "The good Lord willing and if the creeks don't rise" we could make it. Sometimes when the weather was good, we walked to school. Most of the time we rode to school in a buckboard. You perhaps never saw a buckboard. It was what you might call a 19th century pickup - a buggy without a top and the back had room to haul things like a modern pickup. There wasn't room for us all to sit in the seat so we always put a box in the back to sit on. Our buckboard was always pulled by old Dolly,

the mare that had the colt with the long legs. One day I was driving. I was learning to drive and wasn't too good on the start and stop part yet. Earl was riding in the back on the box. We came to a gate. Earl got out and opened it. When we got through the gate and were ready to start, I hit old Dolly on the rump with the buggywhip. She almost jumped out of her skin and as a result Earl went over backward and landed on his head on the ground. It knocked him unconscious. It sure scared the rest of us as all the noise he made was a kind of low whining cry, and he wouldn't talk to us. We took off our coats and put them on the floor of the buckboard, then picked him up and laid him on them. We got him home as fast as we could make old Dolly go. Mother didn't seem to think he was hurt very bad. She carried him into the house and put him on the bed and wrung towels out of cold water and wrapped his head in them. It was about two hours before he came to his senses. When he opened his eyes and spoke you can be sure we were a relieved bunch of kids - especially me, because I knew it was my fault.

The fall evidently didn't affect his brain. He went to college directly out of Eureka School. He worked his way through college while studying engineering. He graduated from Oakland Poltechnic College in 1915. He was first employed as an engineer by San Mateo County. Later he became City Manager of San Mateo. After serving seven years there, he became City Manager of Hillsborough where he served eighteen years. When he retired as City Manager of Hillsborough he was one of the three oldest City Managers in point of service in California. During these years he worked up a profitable private engineering business. His firm did the surveying for the development of Squaw Valley for the 1960 winter Olympics. When Earl died of a heart attack at the age of 65 he left an estate valued at a half million dollars. Not a bad record for a hillbilly boy who got his start in a one room school.

I want to tell you more about Dolly. She didn't always start with a jerk when you hit her on the rump. The fact is, sometimes she wouldn't start at all. She was what in those days they called a balky horse. The nearest thing I can think of to compare a balky horse with is a car with the starter stuck. In the case of the car, you can put it in gear and rock it back and forth and the starter will usually come unstuck and the car will start. Not so with Dolly. When she got on one of her balky spells, she would just refuse to go. This was usually on the way to school and sometimes she would make us late to school. She never balked on the way home. When she balked we always tried the rocking method of unlocking her starter first. We would pull the buckboard back until the tugs were tight then shove it against her as hard as we could. If this method didn't work after trying three or four times, the next best method was to pet her and talk nice to her. We had learned that she never would start if we used cuss words or the whip on her. Another way to start her was to unhitch her from the buckboard, pull it up the road a hundred feet or so then hitch her to it again. Somebody told us a sure way to start a balky horse was to build a fire under her. We carried some kindling

and some matches with us and the first time she balked we tried it. She started all right but just moved enough to get the fire from under her belly and leave it under the buckboard. When all other methods failed we had to let her stand until she got tired of standing, which was anytime from ten minutes to a half hour.

School days at Eureka were not all tragedy. Neither were they all hard work. One of the fond memories of boyhood was the Christmas trees and Christmas parties we had at school. I used to think that the smell of the fresh cut fir tree was the best smell in the world. I still like the smell of fresh cut fir and I think it is because the smell is associated with the good times we used to have. I suppose I believed in Santa Claus at one time but I got over it pretty young because I knew our Santa Claus at school was always Uncle Ben. Each kid was only allowed one present on the tree. In those days if we got a twenty-five cent pocket knife we were as happy as a kid is today with his twenty five dollars worth of toys. There was always popcorn, hard-tack candy and sometimes oranges, which were a real treat in those days. I know we never had oranges only at Christmas. Then there was the program in which most of us had some part. When I was in the third grade a girl in my class named Effie spoke "The Night Before Christmas" at our Christmas party. She had a good loud voice. She never missed a word or made a mistake. I felt ashamed of myself because I had a hard time learning and speaking a piece with two short verses in it.

This same year the teacher announced about two weeks before Christmas that she was going to have a surprise for us this Christmas. Of course we had a hard time waiting to see what the surprise was, especially us little kids. I guess she never gave the secret away to the big kids because we could never find out from them what it was. When the program was nearly over the teacher announced, "Now we will have the surprise." The curtain was pulled back and there on the table was an Edison phonograph. It was one of the first out, and of course was something to see and hear as there wasn't a kid in school that had seen or heard one at that time. The first record or tune played was band music, then a comic song, "Who put the Overalls in Mrs. Murphy's Chowder?" We all thought it was great and later we found out where it came from - Uncle Ben. He was an unforgettable character and I will tell you more about him later. He was kind of sweet on Miss Sheppard, the teacher, and he bought the phonograph and loaned it to her to use Christmas evening. It was a Christmas present from him to our family and we enjoyed it for years. The only change we made in it was to buy a larger horn for it.

The Eureka School building still stands in 1966 though it has not been used for years. It must be about a hundred years old for when I started to school there, kids that had gotten their education there were grown men and women. If it has any life in it and maybe it has or it wouldn't still be standing, I'm sure it can be proud of most kids that got their education under its

roof. I never heard of any of them becoming delinquents as so many do today. Some of the boys became successful farmers and cattlemen. Others worked themselves up to good jobs in the mill and mines that were running in the county at that time. A few went to college and made a name for themselves. My oldest brother, Bill, worked his way through Healds College in Stockton and became an accountant. He never accumulated a fortune but he had what would be called a successful life. He also died when he was 65. My youngest brother, Lawrence, also worked his way through college. After returning from France in World War 1, he worked to the top in the lumber business. At the time of his death from a heart attack in 1958, he had just retired as manager of two large mills in Calaveras County and was director of one of the largest lumber manufacturing companies in California. He also accumulated and left close to a one-half million dollar estate.

Girls were always in minority in Eureka School. You will understand why when I tell you about some of the families. Our family had four boys and two girls. The Lemm family had ten boys and no girls. Another family had six boys and one girl. The rest of the families were about evenly divided between boys and girls.

At that time the proper thing for a girl to do when she graduated from elementary school was to get married to the best man she could catch. Most of them that went through Eureka did very well for themselves. In its last years Eureka turned out several girls that went on to high school and college and became teachers.

One of the pleasant memories about school days was the games we played at school. There was tom-ball that we played with a hard rubber ball. One time we broke the side off the ball and didn't have another one so we took a knife and smoothed it down the best we could but it wasn't round when we finished. Anyway we used it. I was playing in the field. The boy at bat knocked the ball high in the air and it came right at me. I think it curved a little just before it got to me, because of it's being out of round. Anyway I didn't get my hands on it and it hit me square in the nose. I had heard of people saying they saw stars when they were hit in the face. I never believed it, but when that ball hit me it looked like the sparks from a present day electric welder. The sparks were not as bad though as the blood that shot out of my nose like water spurting out of a broken pipe. However, it takes more than that to keep a small boy from playing ball, so in a few days I was back at it. Teacher wouldn't let us play any more until we got a new ball.

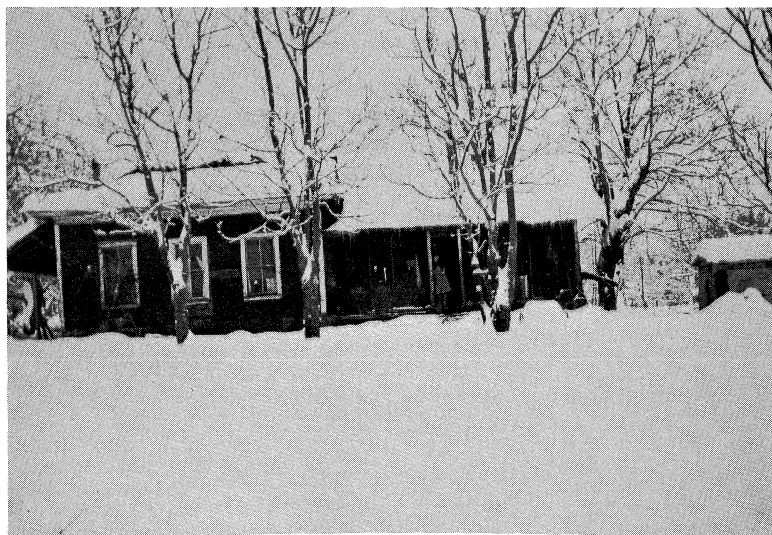
Then there was wrestling which was a lot of fun until somebody got mad, which they usually did. Then we would all be called in the building and would lose the rest of our recess or noon hour.

Another game we played a lot both at school and home was "Odd or Even." This was sort of a gambling game played with pine nuts. Pine nuts came from the burrs on digger pine trees and were not hard to gather when

the burrs opened up during the fall of the year. Among the rest of the junk boys carried in their pockets in those days, there were always some pine nuts. The way "Odd or Even," was played was that a boy would have some nuts in his closed hand. He would say "odd or even." If I guessed even I would get the nuts. If I guessed odd I would have to give him two nuts. If we wanted to play for large stakes, the boy holding the nuts would have, say twenty nuts in his hand. If I guessed 'even' I would get the twenty nuts, but if I guessed 'odd' I would have to give him twenty nuts. A number of boys could play on the guessing end. The boy holding the nuts paid or collected according to how they guessed. When a boy lost all the pine nuts he had, he had to get out and gather some more. It was a good game to play when it was raining and we had to stay inside. I don't remember of anyone becoming a gambler from playing it.

Of course there was always the spring run of playing marbles, hop scotch, spinning tops, and a few more. Then each spring we would have a regular field day to see who could run the fastest, jump the farthest, both standing and running, and also who could jump the highest.

During school days at Eureka, there was always the good time we had on Saturday and Sunday visiting neighbor kids or they visiting us. We lived on Cow Creek and when the weather began to get warm in spring and during summer vacation, most kids ended up at our place so we could go swimming. We would all start for the swimming hole and when we got about a hundred yards from the creek someone would holler, "The last one in the water is a 'negro' baby." (That's not the word we used though.) The race amounted to who could run the fastest and get that pair of bibbed overalls, the only clothes we wore, off first.



Wilsey home on Cow Creek, January 14, 1930. 26 inches of snow on the ground.