

The One Room Schoolhouse

By Rod Fraser



Berriedale School near Burk's Falls, Ontario

My time at 'Berriedale School' in the fall of 1953 was a wonderful experience — in a year that was otherwise a sad one for our family. My father was killed in an automobile accident — near Stratford, Ontario — in the late summer.

Once my father's funeral and burial was over, my mother packed up and made her way to the village

of Burk's Falls, where we initially lived with my grandparents six miles from town. There my brother and I hopped on a school bus each morning to attend *Berriedale School*, seven or eight miles from our home.

It didn't feel the least bit strange. My brother and I were well acquainted with our grandparents and their home on the Pickerel Lake Road. We were under the care of our mother. With all that had happened, I felt we were in safe hands and everything would be fine.

And indeed, it was. My childhood in Burk's Falls was a happy one for the most part. And as for *Berriedale School*, I still remember it fondly, some sixty-some years later.



Attending a one-room schoolhouse was normal for students in rural areas in decades' past. Not only did my brother and I have that experience (albeit for a short time) in the 1950s, but my great-grandfather also attended a similar school in Glengarry County one hundred years earlier. And so did others in Ontario over many decades — until they were phased out in favour of larger schools by the 1970s.

When I first arrived at *Berriedale School* in the

fall of 1953 — outfitted in a new shirt and jeans — I was in grade two and my brother was in the fifth grade. The grade one class was seated at the west side of the room. Then each class or grade in turn — from two to eight — were seated in adjoining rows, so that grade eight students occupied the east side of the room.

The teacher first spent time with the youngest children and got them quietly working on their own. Then each class from two to eight had their lessons taught and work was assigned for completion.

After my lesson was taught, I recall listening with great interest to the subjects being discussed by the older students. Then after a time, I would buckle down and start on the work in front of me.

A friend who is a graduate of all eight years in a one-room schoolhouse remarked it was easy to skip a grade in that environment. After listening to the lessons of the older students for three or four years, it was easy to convince the teacher you were a genius. Advancing a year was very common.



Berriedale School had eight large windows (four on each side) and a porch at the front to hold firewood and other supplies used to run the school.

Inside the building, a huge iron stove provided the heating for the long winter months and the windows offered natural light. Electricity was installed in the school in the late 1930s, so electric lighting was always available for those dreary days with overcast skies.

There was a cloak room at the entrance to the school which provided a row of pegs and some shelving for outdoor clothing and storage for lunches. Two outhouses at the back of the school provided the sanitary facilities.



One-room schoolhouse from the distant past.

A large playground (including a baseball diamond) was on the west side of the school and the east side hosted a copse of trees and a small creek. It was a very pretty school.

Today it is used from time-to-time as a community centre, but I expect it will be torn down and forgotten in the not-too-distant future. It appears there is no constituency (aside from a few concerned parents) for small local schools in this province. A case in point is a recent elementary school built in a town near us that holds over 1,000 students.

Those in favour of large schools argue it makes sense to bus a thousand young students to a central location each day, rather than have 35 to 40 teachers drive to smaller neighborhood schools.

I don't agree for all kinds of reasons.



I should make clear I'm not arguing for the return of the one-room schoolhouse, although I admire the job they did so well for so many years. Rather I'm an advocate for small local schools, particularly in rural areas.

I'm in favour of small class sizes or small schools when the closing of a school would harm the

economic and/or cultural life of a community. And I also accept that student enrolment in smaller communities may sometimes require larger schools.

But there is a limit and I expect many people would find an elementary school of 1,000 students to be an abomination. They look like factories and they act like factories. How can this be good for young people growing up?

When South Dumfries Township in Brant County closed Keg Lane School in 1966, a new school was built nearby. It was built on a scale to ensure that every child matters. It had four classrooms. The students from three smaller schools were combined at this larger new building.

Each of the four teachers hired at the new school were expected to teach a class consisting of two grade levels. This worked out just fine and is no different from split-grades at larger schools.

There was no principal required in West Dumfries School. A senior teacher took on these responsibilities, which were quite minor given the small student enrolment. In other cases, I suspect it would be practical for a principal to cover three or four smaller schools.

Surely the costs (per student) of running four classrooms in a rural community with minimal

busing and no principal are far less than building a new school for 1,000 students. The latter would easily involve hiring a principal and two vice-principals, not to mention additional administrative staff.



A few years ago, Thomas A. Lyson of Cornell University found in a study that “the social and economic welfare in rural communities is higher in places that have schools” than in those that lost their schools to consolidation.

It makes sense. When larger schools are built, rural students are bused to larger communities. Jobs are lost to the local economy. Soon small villages and hamlets are destitute. Purchasing power diminishes and businesses close.

Parents move closer to where the work is (and the schools are) and the local economy suffers more. It’s a cycle that has played out in Ontario in the last fifty years.



It is possible the recent Covid-induced fear of large indoor gatherings and public transportation may stop this trend toward large schools. I certainly hope

so. As Bill Kaufmann wrote in his recent column in *Spectator USA*,

"A school ... ought to embody and reinforce a sense of place. The thousand-plus-student widget factories of the pre-COVID USA belong in the Cold War garbage dump with loyalty oaths and the metric system...."

"... In the words of political scientist Frank Bryan, author of Real Democracy 'Keep it small. The basketball isn't as good, but everybody gets to play.'"

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