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"I Write What I See"

The Country School House

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Manitoba's "little red school houses" may have changed their color but they haven't changed character.

I left Winnipeg before eight one morning and spent the entire day visiting rural schools. The story of neglect was etched in every building, and the weather-stained shacks fairly sneered at the pupils: "We defy you to get an education."

All rural schools, of course, aren't monument of indolence and antiquated ideas. It just happened that in my one-day tour I visited eight of the shabbiest.

HERE'S WHAT I FOUND

At the first school, I mounted rickety steps, perhaps not dangerous because there were only a few, but certainly difficult to negotiate. Two slats were kicked out of the classroom door. It was 8:15 a.m. and no fire killed the penetrating cold. The floor was gritty with dirt, and scraps of paper were caught in boards and nestled in the corners. The drinking jar was dusty. The playground was deep with weeds.

Was this a thing of beauty, intended to inspire students to work well and to brighten their lives?

The next school was brighter inside. A citizen in the community told me she had had the room papered at her own expense because the trustees refused to act. It was clean and tidy. But when I investigated the basement to look at the furnace, I sank into mud. There would be no fire in that school until that basement swamp was drained.

There was no fire at the next school. And three little windows allowed a minimum of light to penetrate the gloom. The building needed painting years ago, and still does. But the yard was neat.

At the fourth school, pupils had assembled but were shivering. I lit the fire, and the youngsters huddled around to get warm. The stove was a relic of some early age, battered and broken. The little flames wriggled out of their prison and made shadows dance on the floor.

THE FIRST WARM SCHOOL I came to harbored a squadron of flies. They buzzed through the unscreened windows and the teacher told me only the chilly weather had brought them relief from mosquitoes.

The walls were a grimy brown and paint had peeled in long slivers. The ceiling was filthy.

The outdoor toilets were shattered beyond repair – or use.

An imposing yellow school loomed ahead. It had been painted recently, and the teacher and pupils took pride in it. The room was tidy, even though the playground weeds were knee-high. The boys were playing softball, using an improvised club for a bat.

The seventh school had been attended to this summer. The inside was painted white and the desks shone with yellow paint. It too, was buzzing with flies and the little stove in the centre issued an insufferable heat.

And finally, I visited a school recognizable as such only by the flag pole. It was a battered shack, measuring no more than 12 by 20 feet. Into it were crowded 25 eager students, somehow progressing despite the aura of despair.

I WONDERED how boys and girls could tolerate such oppressive environments, and what incentive they had to brighten their own homes.

But even more, I wondered how some of the teachers I met could make pupils zealous for knowledge.

I listened to one teacher handle a reading lesson. They took a single paragraph from a story, and shattered the meaning into definition of words. Little wonder that eyes became glazed with boredom.

And when eight grades are taught in one room, how do any but the most hardy refrain from eavesdropping on other classes? What a tangled mess of information those frail young minds have to cope with!

Libraries were meagre, and one permit teacher confessed to me how inadequate she felt because she couldn't get trustees to supply her with background material. She didn't know the subject herself and was at a loss to teach it.

IN MY ONE-DAY TOUR I caught a glimpse of the fruits Manitoba has reaped from decades of stupidity. Until teaching receives the prestige it requires and the salaries it is entitled to, great minds and strong characters will never be attracted to the profession.

Many Manitoba children are floundering in our schools, yet our orators vainly boast that on them will be built the democracy of the future. When the war releases young people for teaching and materials for building, I hope they will be lured to rural Manitoba.