

ROCKY HILL

Rocky Hill, bordered by Cumberland Street and Methodist Rd, is a 3 ½ miles long area just beyond Cumberland Mills. A large section of ledges, once called Westbrook Ledges, is in its southwesterly corner near Pierce and Cumberland Streets and gives cause to the Hills rise of at least 240 feet and is, in all likelihood, the reason for its name.

Although the Rocky Hill area is only about a mile from Cumberland Mills, in the early days of Westbrook it was considered a rural area. It was, and mostly still is, an area of large homes and large wooded lots. In the late 1960s Shirley M. Leighton, Jr. (1898-1974), a Westbrook native and a retired NY educator, wrote the following article for an unknown newspaper. [The spelling and punctuation here is as it appeared in the original article.] It gives first-hand insight into the Rocky Hill neighborhood of the early 1900s.



The original Rocky Hill School-Erected in 1875 for \$1,075



"RURAL SCHOOL DAYS"

A PEN-PICTURE OF A RURAL SCHOOL IN MAINE, as recalled by a retired teacher of more than three-score-and-ten, may be a welcome change from today's reports of disgruntled taxpayers, striking teachers and rebellious pupils. Much has been written about the advantages and disadvantages of the rural school; but to me it seems that the former outweighed the latter. Not meaning to sound nostalgic, I can say that spending six of my grade-school years in a rural school was a great experience which, in part, I would like to share.

I WAS BORN in Cumberland Mills, a bustling little village which, along with its near neighbor, Westbrook, had long since outgrown the one-room school; therefore, my first two school years were spent in what passed for a modern grade school, equipped with running water, central heating and electricity. No gymnasium, of course, and no cafeteria. The first and

second grades shared one classroom and one teacher, but for the rest of the grades, each had its own room and its own teacher. In this atmosphere, I was made ready for what lay ahead.

Following the second grade, I became a creature of circumstances since my parents had chosen to move to a country place about a mile away known as **Rocky Hill**, where I was promptly enrolled in a rural school which was but a two-minute's walk up the road from our house. This little school, presided over by Miss Naughton, was to be my hall of learning until I completed ninth grade.

SINCE I HAD a background of only two years in the village school, I expected to enter the third grade at Rocky Hill; but, since I was the only third-grader that year, Miss Naughton decided that my training in the larger school surely had prepared me to cope with fourth-grade work. Thus, I skipped the third grade and never knew the difference.

Some rural schools had but one large room. Ours had two; one, a large classroom; the other, a smaller area was used as a recess and cloakroom. This latter was heated by a low wood-burning stove which took long pieces of wood and kept the room comfortably warm. Under the stove, wet rubbers, overshoes, and mittens could be placed to dry; and there were hooks on the wall for hanging coats and hats. A bench on one side accommodated the pail of drinking water and its accompaniment, the long-handled dipper. Since lunch was eaten in this room on cold days, there were settees for the pupils to sit on. On mild days lunch period and recess time were spent out-of-doors. I was always glad I lived nearby and did not have to carry a lunch to school; for, even then, mass eating in a school lunch room did not appeal to me. However, the accommodations were there for those who needed them.

THE CLASSROOM had seats for about twenty pupils. The first-graders sat in a row at the front and moved back a seat each year; so, by the time they reached ninth grade, they were in the back row. Seats at the front of the room were used by class groups when the teacher summoned them for recitation periods.

Miss Naughton's desk was perched on a low platform so she was in a position to oversee everything that went on. There were black slate blackboards behind her desk and on two sides of the room. Windows at the sides divide the blackboards and there were windows at the rear of the room.

IN ONE OF the front corners, an old table held a dictionary and a few books. The teacher's bell stood on this table also. This bell of brass with its wooden handle played an important part in the day's routine, announcing the opening of school both morning and noon marking the end of recess. It was used also for speeding up kids who were reluctantly poking along the road to school. If the wind was right, this bell could be heard a half-mile away.

In the same corner stood an old-style coat rack, used exclusively by the teacher for hanging her hat, coat and umbrella. The most important accessory in the room was a large American Flag which, on special occasions, was hoisted to the top of the flag-pole outside; but, most of the time, it was there before us in the classroom and we were taught to revere it. The other front corner was our music room. Here stood an old, upright piano, used only when the music teacher paid her weekly visit.

HEAT FOR THE classroom came from a huge, coal-burning stove which stood at the rear. Its stove pipe went up nearly to the ceiling and ran the entire length of the room to the chimney, an arrangement that really distributed the heat. I recall noting that this pipe was enough below the ceiling so there was no fire hazard. We never had fire drills, probably because escape was easy. Any child could crawl through a window at a moment's notice and jump the couple feet to the ground without danger.

Our desk tops were scratched in the traditional manner with the initials of former pupils and there were crude jack-knife carvings; but heaven help anyone caught defacing public property. Keeping the interiors of our desks in order was a part of our training upon which Miss Naughton placed great emphasis. At intervals, she made an inspection which brought to light all sorts of trash, including the forbidden bean snappers which were promptly confiscated. Other trash was relegated to the waste basket. Neatness and order were requisite.

OUTSIDE, at the rear of the school grounds, a sizable shed housed the year's supply of coal and wood as well as the "rest rooms." These were cared for daily by the janitor; and, once a year, a couple of men came with a horse-drawn dump cart, and did a clean-up job. No one regarded these primitive "rest rooms" as a health hazard.

The school yard - our playground - covered one-half an acre and was fenced in. The fence was made of slats, cut square on top. It was great sport for us boys to see who could walk farthest on these slats without falling off. Falling off meant skinned knees but this was nothing to worry about. Safer was the game of Tally-ho which we all enjoyed. This called for choosing two leaders and forming two groups. One group gathered on one side of the building; the other, out of sight, stationed itself on the other side. The leader of one group would throw a ball over the roof. Whoever, on the other side, caught the ball, would sneak around either end of the schoolhouse and try to hit one of his opponents with the ball. The one hit had to join the other side, and the side with the most players at the end was hailed as the winner. Harmless fun, surely, but from it we learned a little about teamwork and good sportsmanship. No one was ever hurt playing Tally-ho; and I do not recall any broken windows. If there had been someone's father or uncle would repair them at no expense to the taxpayers.

THERE WERE OTHER outside activities. Winter brought fun with sliding, building snow forts, and fighting mock battles with snow balls. With all this, we kept out of mischief and learned to be good winners or losers without the benefit of a gymnasium or organized sports. Yes, once in a while, a brisk fight would erupt, but the teacher would fearlessly take the participants by the scruff of their necks and hustle them into the classroom and put them to work writing "I'm sorry" one hundred times.

When I had reached the end of seventh grade, the boy who held the important job of janitor finished his ninth grade. Like many boys in those days, his school days were over and he was going to work in the mill. Since a new janitor would be needed, he suggested that I take over his job. This idea appealed to the teacher who considered me reliable and to me who regarded it as some mark of honor. My parents had no objections to any kind of honorable work; so I was given the job which I held for two years, my last two at Rocky Hill School. I cannot recall what my pay amounted to; not much I'm sure; but a little pocket money went a long way then; and holding this distinguishing job did a lot for my ego. I became a privileged character.

AS JANITOR, my biggest job was the care of the stoves as long as heat was needed; this was most of the school year. The fire in the classroom stove was never supposed to go out; so I would leave the fire checked at the end of the school day and go home and do my chores there and eat my supper. At nine o'clock, I would take our kerosene lantern from its hook in the shed and return to the schoolhouse and get the stove ready for the night. I knew how to do this both from home experience and from observing the methods used by the previous janitor. While waiting for the fire to build up, I would sit at my desk and, by lantern light, do my homework and reading. Usually the process from shaking down the ashes to the time of closing dampers and draft took more than an hour. Finally, hoping the fire would hold, I would pick up my lantern, lock up the school, and go home and to bed.

By seven in the morning, I would be back to get the stoves going so the classroom would be warm for Miss Naughton's arrival. Each day, I had to start a wood fire in the recess-room stove and bring in a supply of coal and wood for the day. Then, I dusted the desks with a feather duster, emptied waste baskets, and pounded the dust out of blackboard erasers. At all times, there had to be a pail of fresh water on the bench in the recess-room; therefore, both morning and noon, I would take the pail down the hill to the well which was on my grandfather's property and fill it by hooking the bail onto the end of a long pole. This was no great chore except in winter when the flat stone that topped the well was coated with ice; The square hole which long ago had been cut through this flat stone was large enough for a grown man to fall through. However, by using good judgment, I never fell in. My grandfather's well never went completely dry because it was spring fed; therefore it provided a dependable supply of water for the school. It never occurred to my grandfather to charge the school or anyone else for taking water from his well.

FROM THE START, I was troubled about the method of dispensing drinking water at the school. Much as I liked a drink of water from a tin dipper, I never drank from the common dipper at school. As janitor, I often took the dipper home for my mother to wash and scald. I doubt that my efforts to protect the health of the school population were ever noticed or appreciated.

Many jobs fell to the janitor in a rural school. Blackboards had to be washed, floors swept, and the old wall clock had to be wound. Paths had to be shoveled in winter. Looking back, I realize that the janitorial job placed a lot of responsibility on a young boy; but I enjoyed it and never felt overworked. It never occurred to me that it was a big assignment. From it, I learned a lot about school maintenance which contributed to my understanding of the duties involved so that, during my teaching years, I held the custodial staff in high regard.

MY GREAT compensation as janitor was that I had privileges. I could leave the classroom at any time to attend to my chores. I did not abuse my privilege, I'm sure; but I recall enjoying my freedom. The teacher never found any fault with my work because she knew my aim was to please her; besides, I was dependable. I cannot remember ever taking a day off for any reason. When I completed my ninth grade, I was sorry to leave my job in the little school and I hoped my successor would take his responsibilities as seriously as I had; for the smooth operation of the school depended upon a good janitor.

Throughout my career as a teacher, I often tried to evaluate the education which I received in the rural school. Besides learning good sportsmanship, the basic rules of good citizenship, and the three R's in good measure, I was inspired there with the desire for higher learning. In a school whose library consisted of a few worn volumes, I discovered the joy of reading. And, aside from the class sessions when we had to prove that we knew our history, geography, arithmetic and English, we had ample time to read and study while other classes were reciting. I liked to listen to these recitations and I see the value of this. I could listen to what the grade below was doing and get a free review of anything I had forgotten; likewise, when a class ahead of me was in session, I got a preview of what was to come. This may explain why I recall no problems of adjustment from grade to grade.

IN OUR RURAL school, which was certainly run in a way which placed no burden on the taxpayers, there was no graduation or other ceremony to mark a student's completion of his grammar grades. With a promotion card in hand and a pat on the back from our valiant teacher, each of us bravely and thoughtfully took his path down the hill wondering where it would lead and what the outside world had in store for us.



A Rocky Hill class of unknown date