

Elementary School Education in the 1940s

By Betty (Belknap) Stirling

I grew up in the Elmwood section of East Bridgewater. When I entered first grade at Elmwood school in September of 1942, there were four other elementary schools in E.B: The Allen school in East Bridgewater center, the Beaver school, the West school, and the Northville school. My classmates and I attended Elmwood school for five years. In 1942, there were six grades at Elmwood school. I was in the first grade in the back room with grades 2 and 3; and my brother Lou was in the sixth grade in the front room that housed grades 4 through 6. Helen Bosworth taught the grades in the back room and Isabelle Odabashian taught the upper grades in the front room.

I remember my very first day of school. My mother walked to school with me, for I was scared to death, not knowing what to expect. (I was one of the few kids who had not gone to kindergarten beforehand.) Mrs. Bosworth opened at the side door and welcomed us. She asked if I'd like milk during recess. I had a choice of white or chocolate, but I politely refused. Each morning the H. P. Hood company delivered two crates of milk (chocolate and white) in small glass bottles. I remember each bottle cost only 5 cents! Two students were picked to go into the hallway by the boys' door and take the caps off each bottle and insert a straw into each one. Students who ordered milk would pick up their bottle at recess time.

School began at 9 am. One teacher would appear at the door (girls' door on the left side of the building) and ring the bell. We'd line up, two-by-two, and enter the building in very orderly fashion. We'd be spoken to harshly (by Miss Odabashian) if we did not enter quietly and respectfully. We'd go to our respective rooms and hang up our coats and sit down. (In the back room (grades 1-3), students would hang their coats on hooks on the side of the room. In the front room (grades 4-6), there was a "cloak area" behind a partition at the back of the room, where students would hang up their coats on hooks and put their boots under the bench.) In the upper grades, we'd stand for the Pledge of Allegiance, sing a patriotic song, then sit quietly while the teacher read a passage from the Bible. Then we'd have "inspection." We'd spread our hands on our desks and the teacher would walk around the room and check each desk and make sure we had clean fingernails. We'd have to smile so she could see that we'd brushed our teeth. We also had to display a clean handkerchief on our desk. Then we'd begin our lessons. As the teacher taught one grade, the other two grades would sit and do their "busy work," which usually involved reading.

When it came time for recess, the teacher would say "Stand" and we'd all stand up beside our desks until she said "Pass." We'd file out in orderly fashion and enjoy morning recess, which lasted about 20 minutes. Usually the girls played together on the playground, while the boys played baseball in the field out back of the schoolyard. We girls played jump rope or marbles, or

we'd build little houses (just the floor layout using the dirt on the ground). When the boys did join us, we'd play Red Light, Giant Step, or Red Rover. Occasionally we'd play "Buck, Buck." The boys would come over to the girls' side and would have a contest to see which boy could hold the most girls on their backs while they had bent down with their heads touching the side of the school building. There were two lines; the boys would yell, "Buck, buck," and one girl at a time would run and jump onto their backs. Most boys collapsed when three girls jumped onto their backs. Afternoon recess consisted of similar games.

The morning session ended at 11:45 am. Those of us who lived close to the school walked home for lunch and returned to school by 1 pm. Pupils from the Westdale section of East Bridgewater brought their lunches and ate inside at their desks of their respective room. We were dismissed from school at 3 pm. There were no buses in those days, so the "walkers" from Westdale would wait for a parent or two to get to the school and walk them home. I remember Alice Craig waiting at the school every afternoon for her daughter, Carol (Craig) Owen, and other kids to walk back to Westdale with them. Those of us who lived nearby would just walk home by ourselves. Some of the boys in the upper grades rode their bikes to school. (As a side note, Carol is our only classmate who has always lived in East Bridgewater.)

When I was in first grade, our art teacher was Mrs. Owen. She came to the school on a monthly basis and taught us how to draw. The following year we had a new art teacher, Mrs. Hebbard, who hailed from Bridgewater. She continued to be our art teacher after we went to the high school building. When we were working on various art projects that required using paste, the teacher would put a ruler into a huge jar of paste and pull out a blob and plop it onto a sheet of arithmetic paper that we had laid out on our desktops. Those desks also had an ink well in the upper right-hand corner. We weren't allowed to use ink until the fourth grade. Periodically the teacher would fill those wells with black ink and we'd use stick pens to dip into the well when our writing required the use of ink.

Our music teacher in first grade was Bob Spencer. He occasionally entertained us with his violin or his musical saw. He also played classical music on his victrola, and that bored us to death. When he left at the end of first grade, Sarkis Kurkjian replaced him as music director. He also played the violin. The music teacher came to the school once a week. To this day I find myself humming some of the songs we learned in those green songbooks at Elmwood school. When Mr. Kurkjian left the school system in the late 1940's, Mr. Spencer returned as music director throughout the remainder of our schooling.

I remember learning to read in first grade. Mrs. Bosworth held up flash cards with the various letters on them and we responded in unison with the name of the letters shown on the cards. I remember the day when all of a sudden it clicked and I could form a word with those letters and actually pronounce the word! Our first reading book was about Peter and Peggy. "Dick and Jane" was introduced to elementary schools a little later on.

In the middle of the second grade, Mrs. Bosworth left to get married again, this time to Mr. Doty. We chipped in 5 cents each and presented her with a pair of white gloves on the day she left the school. We were so sad to see her leave. She was a wonderful, pleasant teacher. For the last half of our second grade, we had Mrs. Edna Whitmore from E.B.

Mrs. Corcoran was the school nurse when we were in first grade. Dr. Frasier was the school dentist. Mrs. Corcoran and Dr. Frasier would make yearly visits to examine each student. There was a makeshift privacy area in the corner of the room, where we got weighed, had our height measured, and our teeth and hair inspected. The teacher put the results of these tests on the back of our bimonthly report cards. When we were in the upper grades, the nurse (Miss Evans) would come and examine us. In the entryway by the girls' door, where the sink and bubbler were, she'd have each student step into a basin of water, then step onto a couple sheets of paper towels to see if anyone had bad arches. When we were in fourth grade, she would transport us in her car (about 6 students at a time) to the Allen school in E.B. center, where we would get shots. How we dreaded those trips. Not sure what the shots were for, but off we went in her car. No seat belts or anything! A couple girls sat in the front seat with Miss Evans and the rest of us piled into the back seat. While waiting in line for our shot, some girls would faint and others would get sick to their stomachs. I did neither, but I recall being very nervous and was very happy to get back into her car for the return trip to Elmwood school. The Allen school burned down on July 3, 1946, so that ended those trips for shots.

The Rinehart writing system representative visited the school on a monthly basis. We students would display three papers (one math, two writing) on our desks, and the female rep. would walk around and stamp the papers with Good, Excellent, or Fair. If the entire room got an abundance of "Excellents" stamped on our papers, she'd put a Gold Seal on the certificate in the front of the room and we got dismissed early from school on that day! Of course we all worked hard to get that Excellent stamp on our papers!

When we were in third grade, a telephone was installed in the entryway by the girls' entrance. It was one of those upright candlestick type phones. The phone number was two-ring-two. The teacher in the front room (my room at the time) would pick a student to answer the phone when it rang. The caller was usually Dr. John Gotschall, superintendent of the East Bridgewater schools until September of 1952.

I recall one time when in third or fourth grade the circus came to town (East Bridgewater), so we all walked to E.B. center to watch the circus. We were accompanied by the two teachers, Miss McCarthy, who was the teacher in the back room (grades 1 and 2) and Miss Ballentine, who taught grades 3-5 in the front room at that time. We were so tired after that mile walk that we dreaded the walk back to Elmwood school.

Holidays were especially fun at Elmwood school. Christmas was a very exciting time. Of course we decorated the two rooms to the hilt. We sang Christmas Carols during the month of December. We put on plays in the front room. Winslow Sherman, the janitor, would put together a makeshift stage for us to use to perform our various skits and songs. This was located on the right-hand side of the room, where there was a piano that was seldom used. Every Christmas, Mr. Sherman would put up a fresh Christmas tree, which we enjoyed decorating. Our mothers would come to the school and witness the various performances on stage. At other times our mothers would come to watch us stand up in the front of the room and recite poems we had memorized. I hated to stand up in front and recite my poem, so usually dissolved in a fit of giggles and was asked to sit down. Other students performed very well.

We also celebrated other holidays like Halloween and Thanksgiving, decorating the room appropriately. In February the teacher put a large box up front for us to put valentines in until the big day, when she would pass out the valentines to the students. Following that, we'd enjoy "brick" ice cream and cookies. Also in February we celebrated the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln and George Washington. On the side blackboard the teacher would write information about each President and we'd copy it down on lined paper. Of course we always tried to fool the teachers on April Fool's Day. It usually didn't work, but they were good sports and played along with our pranks. On May Day we would leave a May basket full of goodies on the girls' steps, knock on the door, then run and hide until the teacher opened the door and acted surprised at her basket. We kids had appropriately decorated it with various shades of crepe paper. On top of the basket was a bunch of freshly picked flowers from someone's garden.

Winnie Sherman, as we called him, had other duties at the school. Every morning he would arrive before the teachers and get the wood stove going in the corner of each respective room. He would take care of cleaning the rooms each afternoon after we students had left. One time I stayed after school with Lois (Glover) Clark, who lived right across the street from the school. I asked Winnie if I could ride his bike around the school yard and he said "Yes." What a thrill to ride a man's bicycle around the playground! Then he let us go into the boys' "basement" to gain access to the attic (via ladder), where old equipment was stored. What a surprise to see old-fashioned desks, two hitched together. I suddenly realized that my father must have sat at one of those desks back in the early 1900s, since he moved to Elmwood at age 3 in 1903. Parents of other Elmwood school students had also used those desks. Louise Glover of Elmwood fame was one of those parents. Louise's daughter, Lois, was in my class throughout our schooling.

In 1943, the sixth grade "graduated" to the high school building, and from then on, there were only 5 grades at Elmwood school and at all the other elementary schools in E.B., until the Central school opened in the fall of 1950. When I entered grade 3, Miss Margaret McCarthy taught grades 1 and 2 in the back room and Miss Mabel Ballentine taught grades 3-5 in the front room at Elmwood school. Miss Ballentine left at the end of 4th grade to teach school in

Rockville, Connecticut. She was replaced by Clara Pallatroni of Bridgewater. We liked her very much. She was very tolerant of our behavior. Our class left Elmwood school in June of 1947 and continued our education at the high school building across from the Washburn library near East Bridgewater center. All the fifth graders at the other elementary schools also entered the high school building in the fall of 1947 and instead of 12-14 in our sixth grade, there were more than 60! We were happy to meet new friends, some of whom still keep in touch to this day. We graduated 50 strong on Wednesday evening, June 9, 1954. As of this writing, there are 17 of us left in the Class of 1954. We celebrate a reunion every five years. Our 70th reunion is coming up in 2024!