

10-1978

Memories of Old Chita School

Ruth D. Morris

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Tell us how this article helped you.

Recommended Citation

Morris, Ruth D. (1978) "Memories of Old Chita School," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 16: Iss. 2, Article 9.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol16/iss2/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SFA ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in East Texas Historical Journal by an authorized administrator of SFA ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu.

MEMORIES OF OLD CHITA SCHOOL

by *Ruth D. Morris*

Miss Gertrude Davis, that kindly spinster who had guided all the Dunaway children (Verna, Hubert, Vera, and Lloyd) through the 3R's, spoke to my mother on the front porch of our farm house in the community of Sebastopol, Texas. As she glanced at me she said, "Hattie, it's a shame to leave this one behind since her sister, who is just thirteen months older, will be starting to primer this fall. She'll be lonesome at home, so why don't you send her along with Frances?" Mama nodded in agreement and thus the plans were laid for my entry in Chita School.

Chita School was located about a mile off the main road, down a winding path that opened up on a white sandy hill deep in the heart of East Texas. It was a simple, white frame structure trimmed with green shutters. It contained three classrooms and a large gymnasium and/or auditorium. Bleachers lined one side of the gym, a stage was in the rear, and there was a basketball court in the center.

The Christmas before (1936) my brother, Lloyd, had taken Frances and me to visit the school. My eyes nearly bugged out when I saw Santa Claus and his reindeer mounted upon a huge sand table in the classroom that housed the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grades. What a lovely sight! School was going to be fun. I could hardly wait.

Toward the end of August, Mama and Daddy hitched the horses to the wagon, loaded us in, and off we went to the town of Trinity, seven miles from our home. We had had a good crop of cotton that year. After paying off the \$150.00 loan—borrowed to purchase seed and farm supplies—to Mr. Cauthern at the bank, a few dollars would remain; these precious dollars would be used to purchase school supplies, buy a few goodies, and get each of us something for the beginning of school, something unusual in our experience: a store-bought outfit. Daddy lit a big cigar which always tipped me off to expect an exciting time because he only smoked them on special occasions. We were warned to sit still with our backs straight up against the sides of the wagon: for once, when Lloyd had been much younger, one of the older kids had dropped him, and he barely escaped being crushed under the wheels. We rode for what seemed like an eternity, the wagon wheels turning slowly over the gravel road. Mama and Daddy sat on the wagon seat up front and talked over the successes and failures involved in farming and evaluated the crops of friends and neighbors as we passed each little farm. At last we saw in the distance smoke rising from the basket factory. Also, we could see the top of the huge water tower. We were almost there!

Once the horses were tied, Daddy disappeared; it was not the custom for husband and wife to hang around together in town. So off Mama went with us three kids tagging along—our eyes taking in the sights.

Our first stop was Mize's Ready to Wear. Since the winters were cold, we had to have a good sturdy pair of oxfords, and Mama decided Frances and I would be warmer in "union suits" and overalls. Lloyd got the same, plus a little brown felt hat with a feather that waved gracefully from the left side. When we finished there, we proceeded toward Mr. Bell's grocery store. Mr. Bell saw us coming and stepped out to the sidewalk to say "howdy." He looked down at us two chubby little girls and asked what made us so fat. We were used to this question and had been instructed by our Daddy to say, "Peas and Cornbread."

They had a good hearty laugh and offered to weigh us on their new cotton scales. We obliged. I don't remember how much we weighed, but, from all the laughing and exclaiming, it must have been a goodly amount. We said good-day to him, took Mama's hand, and walked on. As we neared Scarborough's Cafe, the aroma coming through their screen door set our mouths to watering; we begged Mama to take us inside. She took us in and seated us at the counter. We sure got a kick out of those bar stools—but not for long. Mama grabbed us by the arm, gave us a fierce pinch, made a terrible face at us which made us understand that twirling around and around wasn't the thing to do. Mama knew the waitress, Adele, and talked over old times with her while we enjoyed, for the first time, that great treat of the Western World, a genuine fifteen cent hamburger.

Daddy was busy talking with the men folk and had treated himself to a "chili" on the other side of town.

Mama had the keenest sense of what made kids happy, so, after we had finished our hamburger, our next stop was Cochran's Drug for a big vanilla ice cream cone.

At Perry Bros. Five and Dime we purchased our school supplies. We bought Big Chief tablets and the most marvelous pencil boxes which contained pencils, erasers, and a ruler.

At last Daddy joined us at Brookshire's Grocery where we bought some hog feed, paid for with money from a new loan from the bank. Mama was careful to match the pretty printed sacks; they would be used to make school dresses for spring.

Our day's shopping was over. We climbed back into the wagon for the long trip home. We laid down, dozed off and on, savoring the experiences of our day. Now and then we would count the buzzards soaring in the distant clouds high above us: one for sorrow, two for joy, etc. Finally, as we were almost home, we roused up and waved as we passed the Thompson Place to let them know we had been to town.

September came. Lloyd awoke bright and early. He came running into our bedroom shouting "Its the first day of school!" We laughed and romped on the feather bed and thought how nice it was that we would not be going to the field to "scrap the cotton."

We dressed in our new underwear, and Mama instructed us on how to lower the "trap door" when we needed to "be excused." We then pulled on the overalls and combed our hair. From the kitchen we heard Daddy call, "Breakfast, bring two chairs!" We had a long, rectangular, homemade table. On two sides were benches to hold the kids. The two chairs were for Mama and Daddy to sit at the ends. Mama had prepared her usual hearty breakfast for working men and growing kids. There were two or three pans of fluffy, brown biscuits, a platter full of bacon and eggs, syrup, butter, and plenty of fresh milk.

Off we went down the lane to the main road. We walked about three quarters of a mile to Mr. Jim Lawrence's store, located at the forks of the road. One road led to Carlisle and the other to Chita. We waited there for the school bus to come up from Carlisle to pick us up and take us on to Chita.

Some of the kids from Carlisle were rather rowdy. There was even a bully or two in the crowd. Grace Clark I remember in particular. But then, there were others who were sweet and kind. Willie Hayne Whitehead, who always wore an aviator's cap to keep his ears warm, was one of these. Carlisle was a bigger community than Sebastopol, so the best seats were taken on the bus when it stopped to pick us up.

Right away we found out Lloyd's new hat was a mistake. I was appalled when I saw the big boys sailing Lloyd's little hat, with the feather in the side, back and forth over his head with him half-laughing, half-crying, and trying desperately to retrieve it.

I don't know how, with all the laughing, shouting, and carrying on, but Alonzo, the bus driver, managed to keep his mind on his business and finally turned off the main road and headed toward the school house.

The primer class was seated at a long, low table at the front of the room. The second and third grades were seated at desks, lined up in rows, straight as an arrow, and screwed securely to the wooden floor. A big pot-bellied, wood-burning stove was to the right of the room. It proved to be a very essential item for the northerners blew in early that fall.

Miss Gertrude was a tall, skinny lady with short, wavy, brown hair. She smiled a lot and showed the wide spaces between her teeth. She wore rimless, square cut glasses. Everyone said she really knew how to deal with kids. She had her hands full that day with little Royal Loftin and me. Royal was young too, not quite five. He was extremely shy, and, as we began our lessons, he became more and more uneasy and cried for his Mama. He rubbed his sleeve across his snotty nose as he coughed and blubbered and snubbed so pitifully. Finally Miss Gertrude told Reba, his older sister, to take him home. He got to wait another whole year before starting to school. I was so caught up with my new surroundings and newly made friends that it was difficult for me to keep my mind on the lesson being presented. I was having a joyful time communicating with Bobbie Bowman, when, all of a sudden, Miss Gertrude took a ruler from her desk and cracked each of us a good lick on the calves of our legs. She got our attention all right, but I was never so humiliated in all my life. All morning long, Miss Gertrude kept speaking to Lloyd, who was seated in the third grade row. "Lloyd, see if you can make her stop crying, or I'm going to send her home." It must have worked because I got to stay in school.

What I really dreaded was telling Mama that I'd gotten a whipping. (For to me, one lick with a ruler from the teacher constituted a whipping.) If there was one lesson I should have learned at home it was, "Don't be any trouble to anybody," and "Speak when you are spoken to." Well, I chose to remain silent and keep my fingers crossed that the other kids wouldn't tell on me. But that was just too much to hope for. That evening, as we all sat around the supper table, Hubert had to come out with it. I don't know what sort of terrible punishment I expected from my parents, but, by the time my brothers and sisters had finished teasing me, I guess Mama and Daddy thought I'd had enough. They looked at me with that "I didn't think you'd do it" look and said I'd have to learn to behave in school.

Later in the year, Miss Gertrude thought it would be a good thing for us to learn where the farmer's products went. So she loaded all six or seven of the kids who made up the primer class into her old plymouth sedan, and off we drove in the direction of Trinity. We went straight to Brookshire's Grocery Store where we wandered through the isles and surveyed the canned goods, meat department, milk products, and then over to the produce department. Innocently, I asked why they had all those weeds for sale. Miss Gertrude bent down and whispered to me that those were carrot tops. I felt kinda dumb making such a blunder, but, since my parents did not grow carrots in our garden, I had never seen them before. We enjoyed our learning experience that day and not until much later did I realize the full meaning of our field trip.

Back at school our studies continued. We studied things like Roman Numerals which were so hard for me to grasp. We learned how to make change

with a big cup of coins the teacher provided. Once we even ground up some peanuts and made our own peanut butter.

The season changed and winter fell. I was prone to tonsillitis, and invariably I came down with an awful earache preceeding an attack. Miss Gertrude would take some warm ashes from the potbellied stove, wrap them in a clean cloth and have me place the ashes next to my ear. That was a neat trick for it always eased the pain until I could get home. She was such a wise teacher, I thought. Someday I hoped I'd be a little like her.

Christmastime at school was very outstanding. Some men of the community cut a huge, green cedar tree and brought it into the gym to be decorated. Some ladies came and spent the morning putting on beautiful, bright ornaments and shiny tinsel. When they finished it was a sight to behold. We drew names in our classes for a gift exchange. Everyone was sure to get a present. The last day before Christmas vacation we gathered in the gym. The mood was light and festive. Everyone was happy, laughing, and talking. We sang a few carols. Then all of a sudden Santa Claus came bursting through the back door. He laughed and bounced around and made like he was brushing snow off his suit. Said he's just come from the North Pole. He got right to work and started pulling presents off the tree. He called my name, and I raced eagerly, smiling from ear to ear, to the front to claim my present. I got a pretty little china doll. I called it my Martha Washington doll. The person who had drawn my name couldn't have pleased me more. I gave it a special place on my dresser and cherished it for years to come. And that wasn't all—my name was called a second time. There in a small package, marked simply "from Santa," was a set of jacks. How very special I felt to be a part of this memorable day.

Spring came eventually. We had a hard time keeping our minds on our studies. At recess we sometimes wandered through the woods looking for violets. Taking in the glory of God's handiwork—careful not to turn over a log and arouse a sleeping snake. The air was clean. The sunlight shining down through the branches of the huge oaks and pines warmed our souls. Some of the older kids became a little restless. I heard rumors about their plans to play hooky on April Fool's Day—something about climbing the great, tall, fire tower out in back of the school. They were quite sure no teacher would risk climbing up to retrieve them. I don't know if this ever took place, but I feared for them should they be found out.

Time passed quickly at Chita School, and I was promoted to second grade. Miss Gertrude Davis wouldn't be back next year. We were to be taught by Miss Ailene Prentiss. She was a bitter dose for me, and I was constantly in trouble with her. For one thing, we were instructed to raise our hand when we needed to be excused. The toilets were located some distance behind the school. Some of the kids had been excused from the room and had stayed away for quite some time exploring nature on the way. Indeed, I had been guilty of this on previous occasions. There were butterflies, grasshoppers, bessie bugs, and a huge red ant hill along the sandy path, bordered by big, tall, long-leaved pines, which led to the toilets. It was fun to be excused. But one day I raised my hand, and it wasn't a false alarm. I really did need to "be excused." Miss Prentiss ignored my signal. I knew what she was thinking. I wasn't kidding. The third grade was reciting at the front of the room. I waited what seemed like the absolute limit. Then I tried again, this time waving a little more desperately than the first. She spied my hand and shook her head "No." What was I going to do? I hated myself for losing her trust. I sat there in my seat writing and re-writing my ABC's wondering if I could hold out until the bell rang. Finally, I decided I must make her understand how deadly earnest I was, so I stood up and walked almost cross-legged to the front of the room and stood before her desk. Just as I was about to implore her to let me

go, I felt something warm and wet trinkel down my legs. The time had come! This was it! Right there, before the whole room, I wet my pants. A great hush fell over the class as they all stared at me. I was ruined forever. For the remainder of the day Miss Prentiss was nice to me. She apologized over and over again but nothing could take away the shame I felt.

All through the school year, I sensed her extreme dislike for me. She seemed to favor my pretty, fair-haired sister, Frances, and gave her such prestigious jobs as adjusting the window shades and dusting the erasers. Once Miss Prentiss drew a dog house on the blackboard and selected certain individuals to take down names of the ones who talked while she was busy with the other grades. If a student's name was placed in the doghouse three times, he would get a whipping in front of the class. Being young and having a short attention span, I guess I must have forgotten and whispered to my neighbor. My sister took my name once, my cousin, Dorothy, took it twice. This sealed my fate. The whippings took place right before going home in the afternoon, so I had all day to dread it. There were three of us to be used as an example that day. Thurmon Thompson was a big, tall, gangly kid. His interest in learning was not too keen. He usually came to school in the fall and winter only; his Daddy would take him out in the spring to plow the fields and plant the crops. He was the first one to get his whipping, and he smiled all through it. Being so big and hardened to this type of punishment, I am sure he didn't feel the licks. Next to be summoned was Berniece, Thurmon's younger sister. She had been contemplating her sentence and had wrapped herself securely in her big, heavy coat. It didn't work. She was ordered to remove her coat and leave it at her desk. At last my time came. Since I had on overalls, I thought it wouldn't be too bad. My pants legs would cushion the blows. But that's where I was wrong. Miss Prentiss reached down and took hold of my pants legs, pulled them as tight as a G-string and really let me have it! The hurt I felt on my legs combined with that of my pride was very debasing. If she was trying to "break my spirit," she almost succeeded. I felt about as big as a worm!

When Miss Gertrude returned my 3rd year at Chita, she brought with her a new name. The manager of the produce department at Brookshire's Grocery was now her husband.

It soon became apparent I needed some help with my reading. I was stumped on "Brer Rabbit" and "The Tar Baby" stories. When I was called on to read before the class I stammered and faltered. I became very embarrassed when the other kids would prompt me. Miss Gertrude (as we continued to call her) asked the class how many thought I should be sent back to the second grade row. Everyone raised their hand except my sister, Frances. For this humiliating vote of confidence I really let loose with racking sobs. I pleaded with her to let me stay and promised to put forth great effort to improve my reading. I kept my promise. With my mother's loving and patient help after supper every night I finally caught up with my fellow classmates.

While classes were going on one spring day, we heard a terrible commotion coming from the gym. When the teachers went to investigate, they discovered someone had left a rear door open and some friendly pigs had followed the scents which led them to the cupboard where the whole school stored their lunches. All the newspapers that held our lunches of cold biscuits with scrambled eggs, or biscuits with mashed beans and onions, were scattered all over the gym. As the pigs were herded out the back door, our teachers sized up the damage and came back to report to us. There would be no lunches that day. I remember Mr. Key, the principal, offering some of us younger ones his lunch. He had sandwiches made of white light bread and lunch meat, potato chips, cookies, and an orange.

That was the first time I became aware that there was something other than biscuits with eggs, or beans, and sometimes chocolate tarts, for lunches. Of course, we had fruit trees on our farm. We raised peaches, pears, and plums, but they were mainly for the purpose of preserving and canning. Apples and oranges appeared at our house only at Christmastime. So even though I was deathly afraid of Mr. Key, I thought he was most generous in sharing his lunch with us.

Now I will tell you the reason I was afraid of Mr. Key. One day Leonard Parker forgot to say "sir" to him. He took Leonard in his room at noon, and, using a rung from an old chair, beat him over and over again. The whole school was horrified, and I remember some of the bigger boys ganged up to one side. They were talking about bursting in the room to rescue Leonard. But being half scared they too would be the recipient of Mr. Key's wrath, they waited too long. He was finished. Leonard was black and blue. Later we heard that Mr. Parker had reported our principal to the school board. I do not recall the outcome of this report, but I think we had a new principal the next year.

I felt very grown-up when I moved across the hall to the fourth grade. All during the year there were rumors about Groveton Independent School District consolidating the small schools in the area. We had several distinguished visitors from town. They would come into our room, look around, talk in low voices with our teacher, and disappear as mysteriously as they had come.

Finally at the end of 4th grade we got the news. All the students from Chita would be bussed sixteen miles to Groveton. Our beautiful, little, country school set back among the tall pines and all of nature's glory would be no more. We all skipped a grade because a 12th grade was being added to the curriculum.

So it was with a tender feeling of sadness, mixed with joyful anticipation, that I bade farewell to all my loving memories of Chita School and entered the 6th grade and a new world at the age of nine-years-old. It was the end of the wood-burning stove in the classroom, Christmastime in the gym, and picnic lunches on warm days in the woods. It was the end of leisurely walks to the rest room and of field trips into town in the teacher's car. It was the end of a world I used to know. Some called it progress. Perhaps it was. But, now and then, when I'm in a nostalgic mood, I'm not so sure.