

Old School Ties

By Katie FitzRandolph

They are going to turn the old Charlotte Street School into a centre for the arts. Wow!

I spent eight years in that old brick pile: Miss Young, Miss Tapley, Miss Clark, Mrs. Cinch, Miss Rhymes, Miss Reynolds, Miss Chappelle and Mr. Sypher. At the time I thought most of them had been installed in their respective classrooms back when the school was first opened in 1884, but in retrospect I was probably wrong.

I've lost the janitor's name, but I suspected he, too, was original equipment. A nice man, always there with the Dustbane when one of the kids threw up, or didn't have the nerve to raise two fingers to ask to go to the lavatory.

Dustbane is a strong memory of Charlotte Street School. Do they even make it any more? It was an oily green pine-scented sawdusty powder, and it was sprinkled on the floors as part of the regular cleanup, and swept away by a wide pushbroom.

I remember water bubbling constantly from a chrome ball in the middle of a white porcelain basin in the wide front hall. To the right of the water fountain was a display case where the most interesting item was a huge dusty white ostrich egg - from whence and why, who knows? There were probably some mouldering trophies too, but the only thing I can remember is the egg.

Each of the classrooms, in addition to the blackboards and the portrait of the king (later the queen), had a map of the world, with a chocolate bar in each corner and the British Empire in red. Clearly commercialization in the classroom began long before recent controversies, and it wasn't promoting health food then, either.

Miss Young had bookshelves at the back and cupboards, and I think Miss Clark did too. Miss Tapley had a wind-up record player. As a rare treat she would set it up and carefully drop the needle on the record and sound came from the trumpet. All us little Nippers listening to our Master's Voice.

Each year, each class would be entered in the music festival as a choir. I was found out in Grade 1, when the class was divided into nightingales, robins, sparrows and crows. I carried my crow reputation to Grade 2, and by Grade 3 I was ordered not to sing in the choir - just to lip sync. And we still didn't win. Smythe Street usually did.

I remember getting the strap in Grade 3, indirectly for going to the dentist, and trace a sense of social justice to the humiliation and pain of standing in front of the class for eight on each hand.

Playgrounds, of course, were segregated, as were the doors you could use and the cloakrooms. The boys had the left playground and the large space behind the school; the girls had the right playground and the stretch over toward St. John Street where the Home and School Association built swings and teeter-totters one hot summer weekend. They were great teeter-totters and could give you terrific "bumps." Today they'd probably be banned as unsafe. I remember mothers taking over buckets of lemonade to keep the sweating fathers from collapsing while they sank postholes for the equipment.

On "our" side, the Grade 7 girls dominated the playground. They pushed the other kids out of the best hopscotch pattern (near the Grade 1 windows where the earth was black with the residue of decades of coal delivery) and generally did whatever they felt like. The rest of us kept out of their way. It was always the Grade 7s, every year.

The boys had a proper softball diamond back of the school, but the girls made do with an area toward the back of our side of the playground. Home plate was a flat stone, first base a large rock, second base a vague area near the edge to the boys' playground (there was no fence but we all knew the boundaries) and third base was a large elm tree. Any ball hit into the boys' playground was a home run, because it would take forever to get it back.

I vividly recall being the only child in the playground one February morning. The doors were locked and there was nobody about. Finally a neighbour leaned out of a second floor window and shouted down: "Go home little girl. There's no school today. The king has died." How did the others all know?

In Grades 7 and 8, one morning a week, we went to the high school for Home Ec. sewing the first term and cooking the second, but that's another story. The boys had shop.

For most of my time at Charlotte Street, Mr. Doak was principal, but when I got to Grade 8, it was Mr. Sypher. The principal was always male and always taught Grade 8. Mr Sypher established a class club with revolving officers and gave us a taste of running meetings. He also had us take turns leading the class in exercises, and required us to bring in something for current events.

There were regular school concerts in the auditorium, and we sold fudge to raise funds, after selling tickets to all our neighbours. Sometimes they showed movies, and there were special dark blinds that got pulled down and hinged wooden flaps at the sides of the windows to fold over and block out the light coming around the edges of the blinds. The stage had a Union Jack at the left and an upright piano on the right.

I remember excitement when a fistfight would break out in the boys' playground, prompting the principal to dash out and put an end to it. I think a bloody nose was about the worst injury ever inflicted.

While I was there, a basement room was converted to an art room, and that was good. This was better than "art" in Grade 3, where we were given a gummed reproduction of some famous painting - Gainsborough's *Blue Boy* was one - and told to take down the dictation that explained why this was a good piece of art. We had special books for these treasures that were doled out before "art" and collected immediately afterward. The new art room was a huge improvement. We got to do the painting.

Later, the other basement room was made into a library, with bookcases around the walls. In Grade 8, it was used a couple of times for class dances.

Appalling how few of these memories are academic. Of course there were Dick and Jane and Baby Sally with Spot and Puff. There were spellers and book reports and arithmetic, with its emphasis on “unitary method.” And along the way we parsed sentences and picked up a smattering of French, learned the provinces and their capitals and the states to the south and their capitals. We did maps of York County and its shires, New Brunswick and its boundary waters. We did New Brunswick history four years running because of some glitch in the curriculum. We must have picked up something along the way.

These are good echoes to play in the corners of a new Arts and Learning Centre, suitable ghosts to encourage and inspire, a solid base for a new future. Here’s to an exciting reincarnation for the old school. I look forward to stepping inside those walls again.

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