

Chapter 13.

Public School Teacher

I like teaching. I admit that I'm not best suited for the public school classroom but I still liked being in a position to explore the world with young people when I began my public school teaching career at Micaville High School in Yancey County, North Carolina the fall of 1956. I had already taught college level classes for three years at Warren Wilson Junior College. Public school teaching, I found, presented certain challenges. Would I be up to them?

I quickly learned that there are some students in public schools who don't want to be in school. That had not been true at Warren Wilson. In public schools, however, there all levels of motivation, academic readiness, family support, and individual intellectual aptitudes.

Gerald (not his real name) was one of my first challenges. He was brighter than most of the students in my 9th grade mathematics class, was well-mannered, strongly built, and from Colbert's Creek, a Class IV¹ section of Yancey county. His mentors were his father, uncles, and other men in the community who were respected for their expertise in felling trees, pulling galax, hunting fox and bear, or finding ginseng to dig and sell. Book l'arning was no match for woods savvy among the survival skills required by such a life. Yancey County is bisected by the Black Mountain Range and has isolated communities scattered in high mountain Appalachian valleys. Gerald's mind responded to the mental challenges of our mathematical puzzles and he did well on tests, but I learned that he was planning to drop out of school.

He told me, "I'm sixteen now and there are things I would like to be doing at home. My parents could use my help and I find it hard to concentrate when I could be out doing things." I discussed the matter with him and told him that a whole new world would open to a bright young

¹ John Stephenson, in his book *Shiloh*, divides the area into four levels of society and characterizes them; Level IV people live farthest from the main roads, have the lowest income, least education, and are more independent.

man like him if he completed high school. His family and his independence meant more to him than any such promises about a world he knew little about. Upon attaining age 16, North Carolina youth were permitted by law to quit school.

I felt a sense of loss when Gerald did drop out. But I also had to question myself about making judgments concerning what was rightfully his choice. I met him after school one fine spring day with two of his comrades as I was going home after a full day of one class after another. The boys were out hunting and looked so relaxed and confident. They raised other questions in my mind, but this time about my own choices. I was burning the candle at both ends— milking my cows and teaching school. There was no time in my life to go out hunting; no time to enjoy a beautiful day. I had my hands full trying to keep my students interested in school and certain ones from taking out their personal frustrations in life on the rest of us. Yes, I had to admit that I envied Gerald. He perhaps had a natural wisdom which I lacked.

Keeping students interested required creativity. During my first year of public school teaching at Micaville, I taught a 10th grade biology class. We had no laboratory, just a classroom which was shared by other teachers during the day. There was no chance for normal biology projects. I thought it might be fun to produce biology programs for the local radio. The class agreed. We took chapters from Paul DeKruif's Microbe Hunters and wrote radio scripts. There were chapters on Leeuwenhoek: First of the Microbe Hunters, Spallanzani: Microbes Must Have Parents, Pasteur: Microbes Are A Menace!, Koch: The Death Fighter, Walter Reed: In the Interest of Science-and for Humanity, Paul Ehrlich: The Magic Bullet, and others. The students each wrote a radio script for one of these fourteen true stories about these great pioneers who first dared to explore the unknown world of disease. I then consolidated the scripts into a class version. We assigned parts, invented sound effects, rehearsed, and finally recorded the production on my wire recorder.

You don't know what a wire recorder is? It preceded the tape recorder which preceded the cassette recorder which preceded the Compact Disc and DVD. The wire recorder provided

the first opportunity for the rank and file to record themselves. It was fabulous for the students to hear their own voice as other people heard them. Recording was made magnetically just like on a tape recorder except that very fine piano wire was used in place of tape. When the wire broke, it was quite a mess. Broken ends could be tied together with a tiny square knot if the mess could be untagled. Perhaps we shared one or two episodes on the local radio.

Discipline in the classroom also required creativity. The students knew that I was a soft teacher and would bend over backwards to be fair– not the best attribute for a public school teacher. The 9th grade was especially noisy and disorderly which made it difficult at times to focus on the lesson. Most of the students wanted a more orderly class.

I turned the class into a club and we learned Roberts Rules of Order. No one was to speak without being recognized and given the floor. Motions were made, seconded and voted on to establish rules of behavior. We elected officers and organized a rotating roster of “policemen.” The only stipulation I insisted on, in my position as teacher, was that I would be the one to deal out the punishment.

Our class was a model class for a couple of weeks. But then one day, three boys (what can one expect from 15 year old men/boys confined to a classroom) were talking without having raised their hands and were reported to me for punishment. I had already determined that when it came to punishment I would not be soft because the whole system would lose the students’ respect and I would soon spend all of my time doefully doling out punishment. That was not a situation I was willing to allow. I had a varnished oak slat from a chair back at the ready.

The three boys, to their credit, lined up for punishment without argument nor complaint. Philip Grindstaff (that is his real name and he was a fine young man from Blue Rock Road) was first in line. He bent over to receive the paddling, three strikes he was told.

I knew how to flick the wrist and let the slat rebound so that it would sting and not bruise. The smart from the first strike caught Philip by surprise and he went from a forward bend to straight up. With the second strike (he took his punishment like a man) his back sprung into an arc so as to remove his buttocks as far as possible from the paddle. With the third smack he was headed for his seat. Punishment for the next two boys was heightened in that they were cringing before they were struck.

We had no more trouble for a few days. Then the system began to fall apart. There were arguments among the police about whether someone had broken a rule or not. Strict adherence to the rules inhibited spontaneity. Students began to let their grudges motivate their police work. We finally had to abandon the club method of government and go back to putting the teacher in control. But at least the students had some understanding of how difficult it is to live together harmoniously and were more supportive of me as a teacher. I think they liked me, too.

One day, after the 9th grade math class were settled in their seats, I began to explain our mathematical operation for the day's lesson. When I turned to write to figures on the blackboard, 104 paper airplanes came hurtling at me. They had folded the planes in study hall without the supervising teacher being aware of it, had counted them, and launched them in a surprise attack at a strategic time when my back was turned. I thought it was great fun and was amazed that they showed budding abilities as strategic planners.

Micaville High School was built about 1936 of local stone by the WPA. The stone was black granite or gneiss. School was called off one bitterly cold day because a toilet in the boy's bathroom had been overflowing all night. There were no drains in the cement floor and the toilet water had run down the hall to the front door, seeped under the door, and was frozen on the front steps.

In 1954, a new high school was built and students from the entire county were bussed over the winding mountain roads to Burnsville, the county seat. Micaville School continued to

operate but only for grades 1-8. I stayed at Micaville and was given one of two sections of the 7th grade. I kept the same students for the entire day in a frame building built up on stilts and with our own pot bellied stove. I liked it that way and got to be very good friends with many of my students during the years teaching 7th graders. I taught everything from English to health. It was health that got me into trouble.

I noticed in material circulated by the state that there was a film on menstruation being circulated for free by Walt Disney. I talked it over with Sara Silver, the other 7th grade teacher, who was a local woman and had years of teaching experience. We were good friends and had similar views about education. We decided to make it a joint project.



John with about a third of his 7th grade class at Micaville in the spring of 1958. Dennis Howell is the boy in the middle.

Students in the 7th grade are entering puberty. Teasing about gender and who likes whom had begun to be an issue in our classes and more particularly on the playground. There was tension between the boys and girls as they began to define their roles in life. We thought it would be healthiest to bring the issue out into the open and *The Story of Menstruation* would help.

We told the students about our plan and asked them to get permission to see the movie from their parents. Then we discussed whether boys and girls should see it separately or together. They decided to see it together. Dennis Howell (real name) provided unusual wisdom for someone so young in these matters. He said, “We’ll be spending most of our life with someone of the opposite sex.” Dennis was a leader among his classmates and his insight

convinced the class that we should all see it together. Sara's class agreed. Only about three students did not get permission and were given a study period in Sara's room while the rest of us watched the film.

The movie made use of animation to tastefully go through the biological process of menstruation. The students were impressed and appreciated being given this vital information. Relations between the boys and girls improved dramatically afterwards and the boys began treating the girls with real respect. The taunting stopped. I was proud of our delightful little gentlemen and our blossoming young women.

There must have been a few parents who became alarmed after the movie was shown. A father of one of the boy-crazy girls (I won't divulge her name but she is in the photo) said, "My daughter already knows more than she should." I was called in to meet with the school board. They couldn't do anything to me because Sara and I had collaborated, we had gotten permission from the principal, and we had permission from the parents. The chairman of the school board, however, extracted a promise from me not to ever show the film again.

Perhaps the chairman had a grudge against me although I think it more likely that it was his wife who questioned my abilities. Their son was in my class. Benny (not his real name) was 14 years old and had been sent to private schools after he had failed in public school (most 7th graders are 11 or 12). His I.Q. was 70 and he was illiterate. He was a nice enough kid and had been given lots of advantages. I put him on a 1st grade reading workbook and had gotten him into 2nd grade reading in about 5 months. Benny liked me and bought me a flashlight as a Christmas present.

His mother was pleased, I'm sure. But she was always pushing the poor lad beyond his capabilities and this made him feel like a failure even though she loved him dearly. She brought him to school in her expensive car and picked him up. The other parents did not have such a luxury of time or a personal vehicle. This made Benny different from the other children. At

recess, he hung around the corners of our building by himself and didn't enter into games. One day his mother brought me a new ball and bat and asked me to make the other students play with Benny; she had given him a new ball glove.

Somewhere around March, one of my students threw up on the bus on the way home. The preliminary diagnosis by the family doctor was spinal meningitis. The soiled bus delivered students back to the school the next day before health officials descended and quarantined all the students who had been on the bus and all of the students in my room. After lunch, the principal (who shall also remain nameless) came to me with a bottle of Lysol. "I want you to get some of your students to disinfect the bus before school is out," he said. "They have already been exposed." I was angry with him. "Where is the janitor," I thought, and "I would take it better if you just asked ME to clean it up, but NOT my students." He could have offered to sit in my classroom while I cleaned the vomit up. And why hadn't it been cleaned up before the morning run?

I don't shy away from tough work and knew that the most important thing was to get that bus cleaned up before school let out. I explained the situation to my class and asked for a couple of volunteers for this nasty and dangerous job. Ronnie and Lonnie (the twins real names) volunteered, and so did Benny! We did a thorough job of it and used the entire bottle of Lysol during afternoon recess. When we all reassembled, in my room I announced that these three heroes had earned an A in citizenship for the term regardless of what they did on tests or homework.

When Benny was picked up after school and told his mother what had happened, she made a beeline for the doctor's office. It was packed with other parents. Benny's mother, I'm told, took the opportunity to roundly and repetitively berate me for exposing her darling boy to such a hazard. I had made Benny a hero but she turned me into a villain. Benny digressed after

that episode, refused to work for me, and during recess a few days later stuffed orange peels into my radiator fins.

I resigned at the end of the school year to give all of my energies to the dairy. The superintendent's son-in-law replaced me. He had not yet finished college. The superintendent's wife, a qualified teacher, taught in the elementary school. Their son, who had failed several attempts to graduate from college was also put on the faculty while their daughter was kept busy substitute teaching. Yancey County politicians used the school system for patronage; schools offered some of the best paying jobs in this economically challenged region.

In spite of the system, I look back on those days in the classroom with warm feelings and a great deal of satisfaction. When we left Celo in 1960, I took a job teaching 7th grade for one year in Swannanoa, North Carolina before going back to school myself for graduate studies.



John and his Swannanoa 7th grade English class in 1961 wrote and produced a play, Romeo and Julie, set in Appalachia. Romeo, played by David Fawcett, pulls a turkey bone in a contest with Hoyt for the affections of Julie, not pictured. We gathered appropriate props, made scenery (note the stone wall and rail fence, and put the play on for the entire student body at Swannanoa School in Buncombe County North Carolina.