IV. When the Schoolbell Rang a Hundred Years Ago

In those days Santa Cruz was a relatively isolated, rural county. Outside news came into the county via stagecoach for a number of years. Mail and newspapers arrived daily; the stagecoach ran from Mission San Juan Bautista in San Benito County, through the hills and along the Pajaro River and down what is today Watsonville's main street. It continued along the present Freedom Boulevard, Soquel Drive, Soquel Avenue in Santa Cruz, and up Mission Street to rumble along the northern coastline into San Mateo County. Stops for teams of fresh horses were designated about every seven miles.

As can be imagined, public health standards as we know them today were almost nonexistent. Medical care was managed mainly by mothers who relied upon homespun remedies handed down from generation to generation. Midwives delivered babies. Doctors, when there were any, were often men who had read up on "medical science" and perhaps had some practical experience, but little or no formal medical education.
Infectious diseases often swept through entire communities, wiping out whole families of children. The smallpox epidemic of 1868 took many lives in Watsonville, and Santa Cruzans were so alarmed that they tore up the bridge at Aptos to stop communications with the southern end of the county. However, the smallpox soon made inroads in Santa Cruz, and all schools were then closed in an attempt to hinder the epidemic.

In 1878 a diphtheria epidemic swept through Santa Cruz County and took its toll. Infant mortality was high in those years, and if a child survived to reach school age, he was considered to be relatively out of danger from an early death.

Mothers of that era knew that certain household practices made for sanitation and good health. On wash day the family clothing and linens were boiled. Bedding was aired regularly. The lye they put into their homemade soap helped discourage germs on skin and in clothing. Lice were controlled with lamp oil shampoos. Honey and lemon juice or onion juice made a good cough syrup. Ginger tea was good for tonsillitis. A whole nutmeg with a hole in it was put on a string and hung around the neck as treatment for acne.

There was no way to preserve meat in those days except by putting it down in brine or lard, drying or curing it. Fruits were canned with sugar syrup.

Every home and schoolhouse had its "backyard convenience" or privy, into which lye was poured at intervals to keep the flies and odors down. Sewers were in the future.

In Santa Cruz a real estate promoter advertised lots for sale on Mission Hill: "Ideal for a home and the healthiest in the area" -- for a good reason. The editor of the Santa Cruz Sentinel was urging the citizens not to allow their raw sewage to run down the open trenches which were then used to drain it off. It was not until 1875 that Santa Cruz's sewage was piped underground.

Medicine wagons made the rounds of early-day towns, usually putting on a show of some kind to draw the crowds. A barker would then take over and, speaking loudly and holding up one bottle or jar
after another, would guarantee the cure of almost anything. Bottles and jars would be sold for $1 or $2 as fast as they could be handed out.

By 1878 the trustees of the five dozen public schools in Santa Cruz County were becoming increasingly concerned about communicable diseases. They cautioned:

In several instances parents who have had a child sick with diphtheria have sent their children to school as usual. No doubt this has been done thoughtlessly. Respect for the rights of others would prevent anyone from willingly exposing them to so great a danger. It is hoped this will not occur in the future. It perhaps would not be too much to ask physicians, in such cases, to use their influence in behalf of the general safety; and, if need be, to inform the principal as to what families should be excluded from the schools.

(It was not until nearly 60 years later, in 1937, that county schools were given the authority to employ school nurses, to be paid from the general funds.)

And what were those early schools like?

The average schoolhouse of the 1870s in Santa Cruz County was a one or two-room box-shaped wood building, simply laid out, often built of rough-sawn boards, covered with a coat of whitewash. Paint was expensive. Whitewash was cheap and easy to apply.

A stovepipe pierced one side wall or the shingled roof. The stove burned wood which was cheap and easy to come by from the sawmills which were located in almost every area of the county. There was usually a big boy among the students who could take on the job of cutting and carrying the firewood. Chopping wood was a skill acquired by practically every able-bodied male in the county.
at an early age. Homes, stores, offices, schools, churches—even the Santa Cruz County Courthouse—all were heated by wood-burning stoves.

In winter the teacher usually tried to get to school a half-hour early to build the fire and get the chill off the room. Stoves had to be emptied of their ashes, too. If there was no handyman among the students, all these tasks and more fell to the teacher. She—or he—swept the floors, dusted the desks and bookshelves, cleaned the windows, and kept the privies in a reasonable state of cleanliness. This last chore was helped along by throwing a shovelful of ashes or lime down the holes to discourage flies and kill the odor.

Small schoolhouses rarely had water piped into them. The drinking water arrived in a large bucket from a nearby spring or neighbor's well, and the bucket was replenished daily. It was placed in the cloakroom, if there was one, and a tin dipper was hung over the side of the bucket. A thirsty child dipped his drink, downed it, then replaced the tin dipper for the next customer. Germs were not discussed or even thought of—perhaps one of the reasons those aforementioned epidemics of smallpox and diphtheria went like wildfire through the school-age population.

Ordinary paper was an expensive item at times and difficult to obtain and certainly was not for common usage. Fools' cap was precious—used sparingly by the teacher and doled out to the students grudgingly, a sheet at a time, for very special purposes. Each child had a slate on which he worked sums and wrote words and sentences with chalk. A soft rag served to erase the slate. It worked better when slightly damp and for that purpose might be occasionally dipped into the drinking water bucket.

If the school boasted a cloakroom, the hooks for hats and coats lined its walls. If there was no cloakroom, the hooks were on the main room walls, near the door, where students could shed and hang their outer garments as they entered. Everybody wore hats in those days, summer and winter, so the hooks were in use even during warm weather when coats weren't being worn.

There were not always desks in those box-like schoolhouses. The poorer districts had benches on which the students sat, all
facing the teacher. Teachers—particularly the men teachers—sometimes kept order by force.

In her old age, Margaret Martin of Glenwood, who grew up in the Corralitos area, still shudders when she tells of one particularly strict teacher. "Old Brady" he was called by all the pupils behind his back—"Sir" to his face. Brady had a stout stick which he used with relish upon the backsides of students who strayed from the straight and narrow as he prescribed it. Brady whacked with a vengeance, marking the path of education with black and blue bruises.

"Did he whip the girls too?" Mrs. Martin was asked.

"He had the girls hold out their hands and he whipped them that way. It didn't happen very often because we were all terrified of him. Even the biggest boys were afraid of Old Brady," she recalled.

Spelling was taught to a great degree by rote, of course, followed by a spelling bee during which pupils stood up in front of the class taking turns spelling words pronounced by the teacher. As long as a pupil spelled his cords correctly, he was allowed to stand. If he misspelled a word he had to sit down. It was quite an honor to be "last one up" and win the bee. Competition was keen and was not looked upon as an undesirable state of affairs.

Leo Kincannon of Santa Cruz, who is 84 this year (1978), recalls an early spelling bee at Gault School in Santa Cruz:

"I wasn't always the top speller in the class," he says, laughing, "but I remember one time when I was. I won out over Stanford Smith and the teacher wasn't very happy about it because his parents were sitting there listening." Stanford Smith went on to become a prominent Santa Cruz attorney.

What of the curricula in those days? The mainstay, of course, was McGuffey's Reader. That little brown book was the "Bible" of grades one through six. Then pupils went on to Appleton's Reader. Language studies were taken first from Swinton, then from Reed and Kelloggs' books.
Arithmetic was just "numbers" up to grade three, then went into Robinson's or Milnes' books. Fractions came along in the latter half of grade three. The multiplication tables were sometimes learned to the tune of "Yankee Doodle," and more often, by reciting aloud in unison. Spencerian handwriting with its curves and loops was considered the only proper way to write. Inkwells were not introduced until grades three or four. Monteith's Geography was widely used in grade four and history was learned from books by Swinton, then Barnes.

Grade eight brought a course in etymology, or word analysis, during which students dug into Latin, Greek, and Anglo-Saxon to discover prefixes and derivatives. It was a course dreaded by many students who found it difficult to pass, according to the late Ernest Otto, who wrote his memories of school days in Santa Cruz.

The curricula in those days leaned heavily on the basic three Rs, and music and art were regarded more in the nature of treats or rewards, or even as "frills" by some parents. Otto, who was born in Santa Cruz in 1871, recalled music at Mission Hill School in one of his columns written for the Santa Cruz Sentinel:

"At Mission Hill, if the teacher was able to sing, the morning and afternoon classes always were opened with singing, and sometimes as a reward for good behavior, we were allowed to sing for the last fifteen minutes of school time. Some of the books we used were titled 'Silver Carol,' 'Golden Robin,' and 'Golden Wreath,'"

Otto explained that only the teacher had a copy of the songbook. She wrote the words on the blackboard for the children to memorize.

His memories continue: "And we sang such favorites as 'Go, Birdie, Tell Winnie I'm Waiting,' 'The Miser Lives for Gold Alone,' and 'Tell Me Birdie, What You Say!' We also sang the multiplication tables and the 'O, Did You Ever Hear the Geography Song?' In the higher grades of grammar we stopped singing and tackled McGuffey's Reader..."

Another reward Otto speaks of was for the teacher to read to the class when it had been on particularly good behavior. Selections
were usually from such books as Grimm's Fairy Tales, Swiss Family Robinson, Tom Sawyer, Gulliver's Travels, and Robinson Crusoe.

Misbehavior, according to Otto, earned a "demerit," which meant staying after school to write 50 or 100 lines, or perhaps a going-over with the strap or ruler.

"This was not the country of the hickory stick, but of the ruler, the strap, a rattan or possibly a rawhide," he wrote. "Not every teacher used the stick, of course, but there were those teachers who thoroughly believed in the old adage, 'Spare the rod and spoil the child.'"

However, some of the students retaliated and were tough on teachers, according to Otto. When one teacher started to apply the rawhide, the student took out his pocketknife and cut the strap to pieces. Then he threw the pieces out the window. Once at Bay View School the teacher got thrown out the window, and there were several cases Otto mentions when the principal would get a black eye from his resentful charges.

One teacher was actually tried by a large male student who was as big—and much tougher—than the teacher was. Another dignified male teacher, about to apply discipline with a stout cane to the posterior of a male student, never got to land the first blow. Instead, the surprised teacher found himself nursing a painful eye which swelled up and turned several interesting colors, including black.

The current (1977) flap in the State of California regarding the setting aside of areas for student smoking, is really not exactly new, according to Otto's columns: "A crowd of older students would sit along the fence outside, smoke and do just as they pleased, for no teacher dared to touch one of the gang," he wrote. "But in those days of stern and fair discipline, no pupil would run home crying to his parents of his punishment at school—that would mean an additional walloping."

Once in a while there was a teacher who used the high, pointed dunce cap on students who did not know their lessons. And
occasionally a teacher might wash out a boy's mouth with soap as punishment for using profanity.

In contrast, "Awards of Merit" were given for perfect recitations. And when boys were appointed to serve as "firemen of the room," it was considered an honor although it meant work—keeping the stove woodbox filled. Another honor was the appointment to serve as monitor when the teacher left the room. The monitors often lost control of things, it has been reported, and teachers returned to find erasers flying through the air and spitballs stuck to the ceiling.

If a class was lucky enough to have a teacher who was interested in natural history, there might be field trips to the seashore and forests to hunt for shells and flowers, insects, and rocks.

Many schools had bells, large bells that were rung to mark the day's events. The bell rang in the morning to signal the start of classes, and again at 10:45 a.m. for recess, at noon for the lunch hour, and at 1:00 p.m. to mark the start of afternoon classes. Roll call was always taken in the morning and again after lunch.

As for academics, in Santa Cruz High School the last five months of the senior year were spent in a review of all grammar school subjects. This was done, according to Ernest Otto, to allow senior pupils to prepare for the teachers' examinations which were conducted twice a year.

Many aspiring teachers did not go on to teachers' colleges or "normal schools" as they were then called. Instead, they graduated from high school, then took a special examination given by the county school superintendent to those wishing to enter the teaching profession. A passing grade earned them a certificate and enabled them to start teaching.

"Most of the teachers in school had been selected from those who held county certificates, for it was unusual for a high school graduate to enter normal school or college," Otto wrote.
In those years of the 1870s men teachers were paid an average of $90 a month, and women teachers earned an average of $58.75 a month. Teachers were not allowed to specialize, but sat at their desks all day, listening to recitations from 50 or more students.

At Mission Hill School each teacher had two grades of up to 60 pupils. The educators put in long days, often staying late after hours to help backward pupils, and they spent long hours at home preparing lessons.

Examination week was serious business. Each pupil was required to write the following at the bottom of his or her examination paper: "In writing this paper I have received no aid from any book or paper or any other source beyond my own knowledge of the subject." The weekly Sentinel newspaper published the names of those who graduated and those who got promoted. No one got promoted unless his or her grades averaged better than 80 per cent. Report cards were marked in every subject with percentages.

As for the teacher in the country schools, they often taught all eight elementary grades in one room, swept the floor, dusted, built the fires in the wood stove, kept the outhouses clean, and considered themselves fortunate if they earned more than $50 a month. Women teachers outnumbered men five to one in Santa Cruz County's early days of public education, mainly because women were willing to work for less and school budgets were tight.

Once a year a teacher might get to attend the "Teachers' Institute," which was conducted in Santa Cruz by the county superintendent of schools, whose mandated duty was to "upgrade the quality of education" within the county—a mandate which exists to this day. In 1863 a statute was passed which required the county superintendent to regulate, preside over, and conduct all county teachers' institutes. They were usually scheduled for the fall season, lasted three days, and were designed to keep teachers up-to-date on new teaching techniques and methods. These "institutes" were the forerunners of today's numerous "inservice" training sessions and workshops for teachers provided by the county's Office of Education.
The early Branciforte School looked like this—a square box with a fancy bell tower on top. School bells rang the day’s schedule: from opening in the morning, recess, lunch time, end of lunch, closing. Branciforte School probably established in 1860.

Branciforte schoolhouse in 1893. The building just grew and grew, as did so many of the early box-like schoolhouses did, by adding rooms and wings here and there.
Young ladies wore frilly white gowns and young men appeared in suits and ties for graduation back in 1895 at Santa Cruz High School. They proudly hold their diplomas.

How many of these can you identify? These are Mission Hill eighth graders who later graduated from Santa Cruz High in 1914. Among them are Haswell Leask, Edward Rountree, Ralph Greer, George Dolan, Marjorie Drillard, Grace Stewart, Josephine Girardi, Rose Hauselt, Hazel Baxter, Lois Nelson, Daisy Winterhalder, Frances McCaskill, and Marguerite Smith.
Bay View School, the rebel of the "Four Corners" area, looked like this. Photo taken in the 1890s.

Railroad School had a problem when the Southern Pacific Railroad after which it was named decided to run elsewhere--but it kept the name. It was established in 1868. The main part of this building was erected in 1900, with portion to right of bell tower added in later years. Photo probably taken in early 1940s. Ceased in 1946, when annexed to Salsipuedes.