

# Early Teaching Experiences

## About 1870

By Woodbridge N. Ferris 1853 - 1928

November eighth, at the age of sixteen, I attended my first teachers' institute at Waverly, New York. Dr. John French was in charge. New York state recognized his wonderful educational ability by utilizing his services in teachers' institutes for many years.

Near the close of the second week the country-school commissioner, A. J. Lange, conducted an examination for candidates who wished to teach. After taking the examination, I received my certificate. This precious document is in my possession at this writing. Too bad, too bad to turn a boy of sixteen loose upon an unsuspecting public.

On Monday, November fifteenth I began teaching a country school six or seven miles from Candor, New York. This district was called by various names: Honey Pot, Fairfield, and the Knapp district. The first two names are misnomers. I prefer the name, the Knapp district. The School officers ought not to be blamed for securing my services. A week or two previous to the opening of the school I called on them begging to be hired. Being diplomatic they said they would send "word" to us in a few days. I managed to escape receiving it since I felt that I could anticipate its significance.

On the Monday morning already mentioned, Mr. Knapp, one of the officers said, "Didn't you receive our word?"

I said, "No."

"We have been unfortunate in hiring teachers. Last winter our teachers were failures and we felt that for this winter we must exercise more care in hiring. You are without experience and besides, you are too young."

I said, "Have you employed a teacher?"

He said, "No."

"Then I will make you a proposition: I am here. I will teach one week. If I fail I will charge you nothing. If in your opinion I succeed, I will teach your school four months for twenty-eight dollars a month and "board round."

On the first day I looked into thirteen faces. Paralyzed with fear I inaudibly asked God to perform a miracle transport me to my father's house.

In opening the school I made the greatest speech of my life. Here it is: "I have come here to help you, boys and girls, if you will let me."

The first or second night I walked with three of my pupils, the Stinnard boys, to their home one and a half miles from the school house. After the evening meal the mother said, "Boys, you and the teacher can take this candle, go to the table in the corner and work by yourselves." The boys solved a few arithmetic problems. Later we cracked nuts, ate apples and told stories.

The next morning on our way to school, the shortest of the Stinnard boys, six feet three, said, "Teacher, if Mike Robbins makes you any trouble, raise your hand and extend your index finger and we will throw him out."

Mike Robbins was a notorious character both in and out of school. In due time I went to his home. I was able to interest him in magic, never in arithmetic or any school study.

The school grew in numbers until I had enrolled thirty-one. In boarding round I slighted no family, even if the family had no children. How I managed to stumble on this democratic notion, I cannot tell.

I really think that the pupils made satisfactory progress. I am sure that my very limited scholarship hindered me from imparting much information. I attribute my success to the spirit of helpfulness inaugurated the first day and continued to the last day.

Boarding round was a unique experience for me. I improved my opportunity to study human nature. Through this experience I solved many of the problems of school management. This social standard of this community was decidedly low. I hope that I made some little contribution towards its betterment.

During my four months of rural school experience I was afflicted with homesickness. I visited my home fifteen or sixteen miles distant once in two weeks. A family by the name of Blinn allowed me the use of a large, powerful saddle horse. Even in stinging winter weather I would take this ride. When I arrived home, agonized by the thoughts of departure, I counted the hours preceding my return. My father and mother never could appreciate my feelings.

During the winter in this district a religious revival was conducted in a church just across the road from the school house. Excitement ran high as the old-time doctrines of hell-fire were preached by an over-zealous, ignorant revivalist. This may seem a harsh and unfeeling way in which to describe this event. Night after night the preacher urged the young people to "come forward." These young converts were continually asked to stand up and give their testimony. Because I was the teacher in this district I was requested to come forward. I foolishly yielded to these pleadings and night after night gave a purely fictitious account of my experience. I was not consciously practicing a serious form of deception. This revival was typical of revivals in general.

A few weeks following the meetings a donation was given for the benefit of the minister. His salary was always embarrassingly small, consequently a special opportunity was offered whereby not only members of the church but outsiders could make a contribution. A feast was spread, usually at the home of a prominent citizen. No fixed price per plate was set. The contributions were in a variety of forms, some clothing, some bread-stuffs, some vegetables and a little real money. No dancing was permitted. This would have been sacrilegious. All kinds of kissing games prevailed. In these games I observed that the minister secured the lion's share.

While I am bitterly opposed to the modern dance, yet I do not hesitate to give the old time dance a higher value than the kissing bees. I do not know that very much can be said in favor of either form of amusement.

Whether the old-time minister's donation still prevails anywhere in the United States I do not know. I do know that ministers in rural churches receive inadequate salaries.