

School days on Walnut Street in 1930s

by Catherine Wilson Jeffries

In my senior years it is amazing how clearly I can remember some things about my early education. The brightest images and sounds of my fellow classmates and teachers are stamped indelibly in memory, caught in time and culture.

Since my birthday comes on Halloween, it happened that I was five years old when I began first grade in the Joe P. Moore Building in Lumberton in September 1930. My daddy walked the route with me to be sure that I felt comfortable with this huge new responsibility.

We walked on Pine Street to Seventh Street from First Street where we lived in a large wooden yellow boarding house which had been run by Anna Thompson. We passed large bungalows with lived-on front porches and gingerbread trim. Family names went with those houses, such as K.M. Biggs, Furman Biggs Sr., Charles Nye, John Wishart, McMillan, Norment, Dovie Prevatte and Charles H. Durham on Sixth Street.

We turned the corner to see two huge old brick buildings and play areas. This complex took up a city block. Lumberton High and "Pirates Bold" took up another city block. It was new in 1924 and was next to the elementary and grammar school buildings. The First Baptist Church, my church, was just across the street and was already familiar to me because my mother took me there often.

My mother made me a book sack out of a piece of cloth left over from dressmaking. It had pink flowers on a background of white. I thought my mom was so smart because she made a long handle on it which fit over my neck and around my arms. That let the bag hang down my back, like a backpack, and left my hands free.

Elementary

1930: Miss Emma was a dear first-grade teacher. It was easy to learn from this gentle person. Learning to read stories opened up a whole new world

for me. After the "See Jack Run" series we read more difficult stories which presented moral concepts. These concepts paralleled the parables that I learned in the church across the street from teachers such as Mrs. Bennett, the Durhams, the Bakers, the Hedgepeths, the Britts, the Johnsons, and many other fine religious people. I remember those truths until this day, and they are a basis for my valuing process.

1931: Miss Penny was waiting for me in the second grade. My mother came to the class and told us the story of Pandemonius, which I have never heard since, except on a tape I made of her telling it to her great-grandson, Clint Harris.

Recess was great because there were so many things to do. Girls were jumping rope, single and double. I learned to go in "back doors" and to jump double ropes as I chanted a ditty: "Last night, the night before, a pickle and a lemon came knocking at my door. I went downstairs to let them in; they hit me over the head with a rolling pin! How many stars did I see?" One, two...as I jumped, I counted.

The playground, which seemed huge, held many attractions. Physical education teachers would frown

upon them today – swings, a merry-go-round, a bar for somersaults, swings with handles – but they were enjoyed to the fullest and yes, children did get hurt on them. There were a lot of skinned knees, too, because children would run and fall on the coal cinders that were spread across the yard to help it drain and not be muddy.

Where the ground was flat and clear, girls would draw patterns for hopscotch. The two patterns which I remember were a cross and a spiral like a nautilus. Children taught each other the games and attitudes of their culture.



Graded School



High School

1932: My family moved to the Angus W. McLean farm on Fayetteville Road. A big canal separated it from the Meadowbrook Cemetery. The Governor's farm boasted a huge red barn with white stripes. It was the beauty of the county. Today, businesses and a traffic light are where the barn and tobacco fields were. My father had to drive me to school and back.

Miss Bunch was on second floor for third grade. This meant that we had to learn to use the fire escape. The entrance to it was in Miss Bunch's room on that side of the building. There was one on the other side of the building, too.

The fire escape was a large metal tube that led from the second floor to the ground. During recess it was fun to play in the exit end of the tube. We would pull off our shoes, brace our feet against the sides of the tube, climb upward as far as we could manage then slide downward for fun. Fire drills were conducted periodically. Then we got to slide all the way from second floor.

On Halloween that year, my father came to Miss Bunch's room, and when I was called to the door, he told me that I could invite the whole class to come home with me to my Halloween birthday party. Mother had decorated with pumpkins and cornstalks, and there were live witches and fortune tellers.

Miss Bunch rewarded the girls who achieved certain grades; she would let them make a doll hammock. She took a piece of cardboard; slashed it on both ends; strung heavy twine across the board; and fastened the twine on two rings on the backside of the board. The girls would weave colorful twine over and under the base. Though I did not ever get to weave one, it made such an impression on me that I

remembered how Miss Bunch made the form. In 1957 when my own little girl, Jense, was 7 years old, I made a frame like Miss Bunch's and we made the doll hammock together.

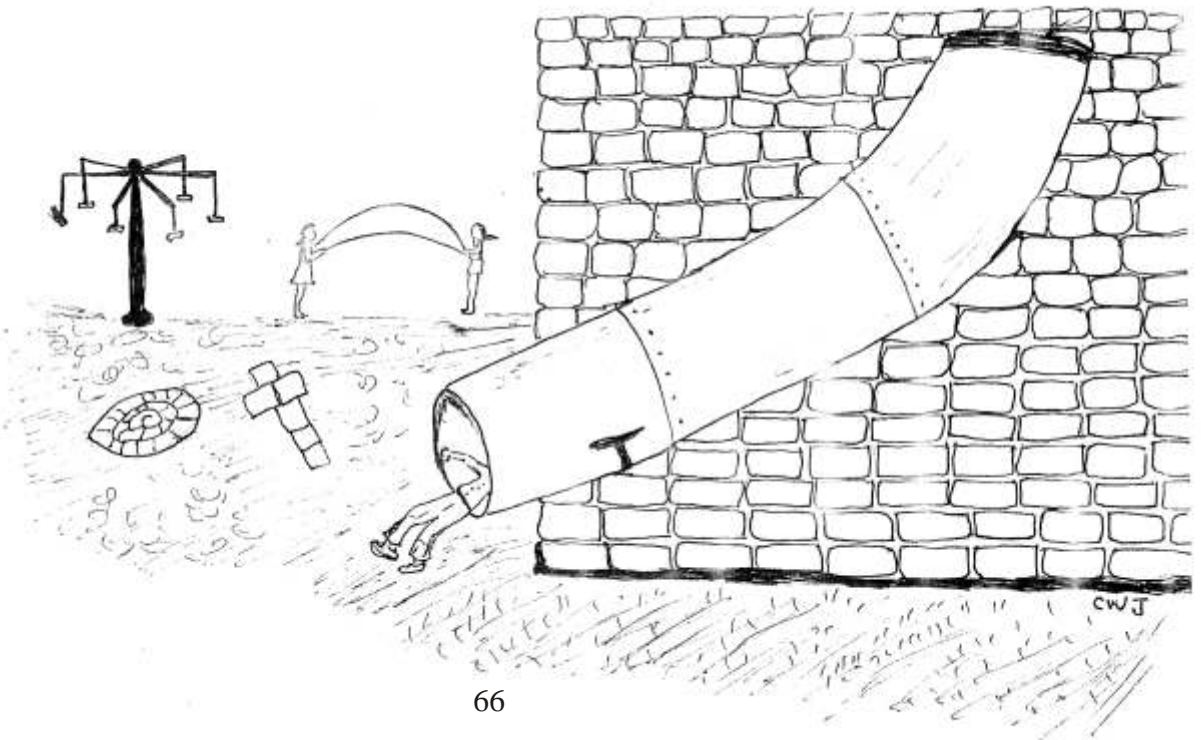
1933: On the other side of the second floor was Miss Dovie and the fourth grade. This was my first encounter with sternness outside of the family. I needed correcting by Miss Dovie, when I deceived her once. It was partly my fault, because I lied to her. I brought my cute baby sister to the class Christmas party. I put a gift (a tea set) for her under the tree so that she would have one to open when we opened ours. After gift opening, Miss Dovie got serious about going back to studying. My little sister made so much noise that she was disturbing the class. Miss Dovie told me to take my sister home during recess.

When we got downstairs, I took my baby sister to Miss Emma's room where my other sister was in the first grade and told her to keep our sister until time to go home but not to let Miss Dovie see her. My reasoning for this bright idea was that I did not want to miss any of the Christmas excitement and it would have taken too long to walk her home.

After recess Miss Dovie asked me if I had taken my sister home. "Yes, ma'am," I said, feeling terrible. We were back into our arithmetic lesson when we heard a commotion in the cloakroom. There was my spoiled sister saying, "I want my tea 'shet.'"

Miss Dovie looked daggers dripping with ice through me and said, "You told me that you took her home. You get right up now and take her all the way home." Which I did, and I think that I didn't tell many lies after that trip.

Drawn by the author from childhood memories: large metal tube fire escape, hopscotch patterns, merry-go-round, jumping rope.



Grammar school

1934: Fifth grade was in the second building called Grammar School. Mrs. Barker was my teacher, lovely and efficient. In the play area boys and girls mainly taunted and chased each other. It seemed that there was a constant war between them, much teasing.

There were no cafeterias. My mother fixed country ham biscuits for lunch. She could not go to town to buy sliced bread, nor did we have the money to buy it, even though it cost only a dime.

My friend was eating saltine crackers with pickle relish spread on them. I thought they were so elegant and I was ashamed of my ham biscuits, so I asked if she wanted to trade, which she did. The crackers were different from what I was accustomed to on the farm. But if you asked me to trade today, the answer would be "No."

1935: Sixth grade brought Mrs. Miller, a cute little blonde. She was tough, stern, dynamic; but today I thank her. I was sitting near the front in a second desk. She stopped lecturing, turned to look sternly at me and said, "You get up and go to the cloakroom." I was startled. No one had spoken like that to me since Miss Dovie.

I said, "Why? What did I do?" She said, "You know!" But I did not know.

Free time was spent playing some kind of ball; one old cat, roller bat, dodge ball, kick ball. I enjoyed all kinds of activity and used a lot of energy.

At home Mother taught us many kinds of active and quiet games. Helloo-ver is a family favorite ball game that persisted to her great-grandchildren and will continue with mine. Bird-in-the-cup is a quiet game that we played sitting on the front porch steps.

1936: Seventh grade brought a division in our class. In my child's mind, it seemed that the socially elite and brightest students went to Mrs. Barrington's room and the lesser students went to Mrs. Edwards' class.

At first I was wounded, but under Mrs. Edwards I began to shine. We loved and admired each other.

She motivated me to do tasks that I never realized I was capable of doing. I was at the top of my class. Her careful and patient attention toward me through English lessons paid off in English courses through high school and three college degrees.

High school

1937: Lumberton High consisted of grades eight through eleven. In 1941 I had the option of graduating or remaining for the new twelfth grade. I left for WCUNC at Greensboro at 16 years of age,

ill-prepared at science. At Christmas time in the middle of my sophomore year, I got married, and made my own chemistry.

I would continue my education after my son and daughter were in school.

By the end of the seventh grade I knew I wanted to be a health and physical education educator. My mother's teachings, church truths, and health lessons influenced my ideas about keeping the body and mind clean and pure to be of the best service to God and myself. I signed a pledge not to drink alcohol when some ladies came to class to talk to us about abstinence.

Special teachers

Coach George P. Powell. He was my inspiration and my mentor, a surrogate father figure. The only senior girl who played basketball for four years, I earned a letter and a star. Coach Powell taught us teamwork, fair play, to strive for improvement, and he promoted self-confidence in the players. He insisted that I participate in Play Days and other sports that I never would have tried. His quiet leadership set my determination to be a health and physical education teacher.

Coach Powell's wife, Mildred Aiken, was my Glee Club teacher. She asked me to be in an octet.

This experience, plus piano lessons under Miss Laura Norment and my mother's musical influence, enabled me to be a member of the 150-voice choir at WCUNC. Miss Aiken taught us to sing "God Bless America" and we sang it often in our performances, with great pride and enthusiasm.

Miss Lena Petree (Bullard) was another much loved teacher. Her special interest and caring followed me for years through contact with my mother.

Miss Ann Moss (Biggs) taught me French. I thought her beautiful and poised, and I wanted to be like her. She helped me to write letters in French to pen pal Rauol.

Miss Byrd and Mrs. Howell were exceptional English teachers. Other gifted teachers at Lumberton High back before World War II included Miss Hall, Miss Powell, and Coach Hatcher.

It is a special blessing that a town, as small as Lumberton was then, had so many caring teachers.

I hope that as a teacher I have been as good a link in the chain of passing knowledge, skills, values, and culture to my students as those wonderful teachers were more than half a century ago. They made a difference in the quality of life.