

# School succeeded in bold venture:

## Learning by doing and playing

1-23-99

Visitors to Hetty Browne's one-teacher school found it hard to realize they were observing a school that met all the same state and county requirements as more traditional schools.

The building was constructed like a comfortable farmhouse, with a wrap-around veranda. The 28 students, ages 6 to 16, were scattered about, working alone or in small groups.

Some students were measuring and cutting garden stakes in the carpentry room; some were preparing the noon meal in the kitchen. A few were at

the chalkboard, while others worked in the garden outside. Mrs. Browne, the teacher, was on the porch listening to two children read.

There were no school desks. No child was assigned a grade level; one might read in a third-grade reader and work arithmetic out of a fifth-grade book, or vice versa. One worked at one's own pace unhampered by a rule of silence.

Tools for the child's learning were numerous: plows, hoes, books, pencils, paper, yardsticks, saws, globes, pots and pans. Curriculum materials were the plants, animals, soil and climate that made up the environment inside school and out. The children were being trained for their future roles as

farm men and women.

The experience was designed to force youngsters to make constant decisions about things that mattered to them. Problem-solving skills were challenged by realistic farm problems. The teacher asked questions; the child "discovered" the answers.

The year was 1911, and 79 percent of the South's rural schools had only one teacher. To deal with this problem, the Peabody Fund contributed \$600 to found an experimental school.

The S.C. Department of Education selected Winthrop College as the site. Clemson College cooperated by furnishing the blueprints for a variety of rural schools, chicken coops, garden layouts and out-

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houses.

Mrs. Hetty Browne, a member of Winthrop College's education faculty, considered most rural schools poor copies of city schools, with all of the "formality and dry bookishness of the city." It was understood from the beginning she would have a free hand.

Mrs. Browne's school succeeded, and soon surrounding school districts requested similar schools. Houses were attached to six of those schools so the teachers could live in the farm communities. Winthrop sent student teachers who would receive an A.B. degree in rural education, along with a lifetime license to teach when they graduated.

Mrs. Browne wrote of her exper-

iment in four prestigious journals. The wire services gave the school national publicity. Postcard views of the school were made for sale.

The garden was the center of all the school activity.

The children learned how soil was formed and how to recognize the types of soil. They learned the effects of moisture, and they recorded weather observations daily.

They estimated the amount of seed needed, ordered from catalogs and read agricultural books. They germinated seeds and learned botany.

They studied birds, moles, rabbits and all the garden insects, helpful and destructive. They wrote a book based on their observations and titled it "A Book of

Bugs."

The children planted vegetables in individual plots 7 feet by 35 feet. After harvesting, they studied how to prepare nutritious meals. The surplus was sold and the profits used for the benefit of the school. The students kept all the records.

The school wasn't all work. Mrs. Browne had strong feelings about the value of play. She even participated in the active games, including footraces.

Everything that happened in Mrs. Browne's Farm School revolved around the principle of "learning by doing."

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