

Winthrop School Improved Rural EDUCATION

By RON CHEPESIUK
And LOUISE PETTUS

Visitors to Hetty Browne's one-teacher school on the back campus of Winthrop College found it difficult to comprehend that they were observing a school that met all of the state and county requirements that a more traditional school had to meet.

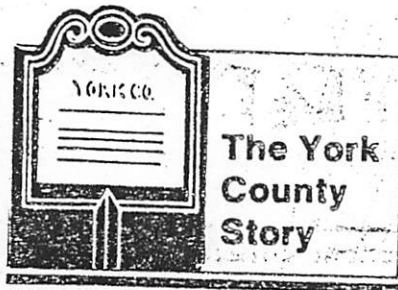
The building was constructed like a comfortable farmhouse with a wrap-around veranda. The 28 students, ages 6 to 16, were scattered about working singly or in small groups.

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 was on the porch listening to two children read.

There were no school desks to be seen. No child was assigned a grade; in fact, he or she might read in a third-grade reader and work out of a fifth-grade arithmetic book, or vice versa. They worked at their own pace unhampered by a rule of silence. The tools of the child's learning were plows, hoes, books, pencils, paper, yardsticks, saws, globes, pots and pans. The curriculum materials were the plants, animals, soil, climate, etc. that made up the environment in school and out. The children were being trained for their future roles as men and women.

The experience was designed so that the youngsters were forced to make constant decisions about things that mattered to them. Their problem-solving skills were challenged by realistic farm problems. The teacher asked questions, the child discovered the questions.

It was the year 1911 and 79% of the rural schools of the South



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had only one teacher. The Peabody fund contributed \$600 to initiate the school. The S.C. Department of Education selected Winthrop College as the site for the school. Clemson College cooperated by furnishing the blueprints for a variety of rural schools, chicken coops, garden layouts and out-houses.

Mrs. Browne thought that most country schools were only poor copies of city schools with all of the "formality and dry bookishness of the city." It was understood from the beginning that she would have a free hand. It was to be an "experimental" school, not a "model" school.

The school was successful and soon surrounding school districts requested such a school. Eventually, to six of these schools were attached teacherages (so that the teacher lived in the farm community.) Winthrop College sent student teachers to the schools. When the students graduated they received an A.B. degree in rural education along with a lifetime license

to teach.

Mrs. Browne wrote up her experiment in four prestigious journals. The wire services gave the school national publicity. Educators from across the nation visited the school to see it in operation. Postcard views were for sale.

The garden was the center for all of the school activity. The children learned how soil is formed, the effects of moisture and to recognize the types of soil. They recorded weather observations daily. They estimated the amount of seed needed, ordered from catalogues and read agricultural books. They germinated seeds and learned botany.

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

The vegetables were planted in individual 7-by-35-foot plots. After the students harvested their plots, they studied how to prepare nutritious meals. The surplus was sold for the benefit of the school. The students kept all of the records.

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

On bad weather days Mrs. Browne helped the children to measure and construct quieter games. For example, when they made beanbags using gingham scraps brought from home, she helped the children to add words such as square, gingham, thread, needle, straight, baste, etc. to their vocabulary. As they sewed they spelled the words.

The next day some counted the beans as others constructed words using the words. The following day a beanbag contest was held. Scores were kept and that was the day's arithmetic lesson. Everything that happened in Mrs. Browne's school evolved around the principle of "Learning by doing."

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