

HETTY BROWNE'S FARM SCHOOL

By Louise Pettus

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

The building was constructed like a comfortable farmhouse with a wrap-around veranda. The 28 students, aged six 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 level; in fact, he might read in a third grade reader and work his arithmetic out of a fifth grade book, or vice-versa. He worked at his 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. His curriculum materials were the plants, animals, soil and climate that made up his environment inside school and without. The children were being trained for their future roles as farm men and women.

The experience was so designed that the youngster was forced to make constant decisions about things that mattered to him. His problem-solving skills were challenged by realistic farm problems. The teacher asked questions; the child "discovered" the answers.

It was the year 1911 and 79 percent of the rural schools of the South 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 outhouses.

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. To six of these schools were attached teacherages (so that the teacher lived in the farm community), and Winthrop sent student teachers who would receive an AB degree in rural education along with a lifetime license to teach when they graduated.

Mrs. Browne wrote up her experiment 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 is 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 studied botany.

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

The children planted vegetables in individual 7' x 35' plots. 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 participated in the active games which included footraces.

On bad weather days she helped the children 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 and baste to their vocabularies. As they sewed they spelled 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 Mr. Browne's school evolved around the principle of "learning by doing."