

# South School, Wolcott CONNECTICUT

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## **Lewis School**

### **Formerly South School**

South School in Wolcott, Connecticut was a 1½ story brick building that was old even in my time. I remember the wide cement stairs and the sturdy metal railings that lead up to the tall front door entrance. The door opened onto a long, wide hall that ran the length of the building to the metal, double backdoor exit. Seventh and eighth graders shared the room on the right side of the hall, fifth and sixth graders shared the room on the left. Each of these rooms had a full folding wall facing the hall. If both walls were opened there would be one large room.

Beyond the first two rooms, you went down four stairs to the lower level where the 1<sup>st</sup> through 4<sup>th</sup> grades had their own smaller, individual rooms. The girls' and boys' restrooms were on opposite sides of the hall and there were stairs leading to the furnace and the lunchroom in the basement.

I remember being excited about going to school. For most of us it was a big transition. Mothers had worked at building up our excitement so they could leave their children to the first-grade teacher without them causing a scene. There was

no Sesame Street, Big Bird, or Mr. Rogers to ease you into the concept of school, no TV for that matter. You had to face separation anxiety cold turkey.

As a bribe, most first graders got bright shiny pencil boxes. A little square cardboard box about the size of a cigar box. These pencil boxes came with two new pencils, an eraser, a six-inch ruler, a half circle protractor that no one knew what to do with, a small plastic pencil sharpener and several other assorted goodies. Most pencil boxes had a drawer that slid out to keep folded paper in. Pencil boxes were, by and large, useless but they were important. They were a sign that you had arrived, that you were finally going to school. You got to write your name and grade inside your box.

We all got new clothing to start the school year. I got a pair of sneakers, black U.S. Keds of the \$2.00 variety. That is about all that was available. Two new pairs of blue jeans, a few new shirts, new underwear and socks and I was good to go for the first two months of school. When it got cold in November, I would get corduroy pants, a long sleeve shirt or two and a coat or maybe last year's coat was still OK. Most other boys started off about the same way, unless you had an older brother, then you got one set of everything and your brother's hand-me-downs.

The big day finally arrived. I got up extra early in preparation for the event, ate breakfast and was ready to go almost an hour early. My mother was glad to see my enthusiasm and hoped it would last through the day. Mom walked the mile and a half to school with me, meeting other mothers and students along the way.

We, mothers, and students, all gathered in front of South School and waited for the bell to announce it was school time. When it did, we marched up the front stairs and down the hall, as our mothers steered us into our first-grade class. The desks, wooden affairs with open fronts to store your books, were arranged in rows and we took the first open seat we came to. I sat next to the large windows and could see Jacky Jay's house right next door. Jackie and I were good friends, and I had slept over at his house that summer.

When we were all seated, our teacher, Mrs. Curtain introduced herself and welcomed us and our mothers. She gave us a few rules to be followed. No talking in class, no chewing gum, raise your hands to speak. There would be a recess in two hours, and we could use the bathroom before we went outside to play. If you could not wait, raise your hand and when called on, ask to use the restroom.

She then had each of us stand, one at a time, and introduce ourselves to the class. There were fourteen children in my class and many of us knew one

another from Sunday school at Saint Peter and Paul's church, so school was not going to be scary at all. It was at this time she thanked the mothers for bringing their children to school today and invited them to leave. "Your children are in good hands. They will be safe here. School is over at three p.m. for those that intend to pick their children up. Mom tried to kiss me goodbye right there in front of everyone. How embarrassing.

Mrs. Curtain was a kind woman who worked hard to put us at ease. "Some of you," she said, "may have been nervous about coming to school but I want you to know that learning is fun. At the end of each week and month you will see changes in yourself that will make you feel good. I promise you that by the end of this school year you will all be able to read and read well, you will make new friends, and you will learn skills that you will use all your lives. Education is a journey, and I am glad you are here, starting your trip with me."

She was right. Learning was fun and we all did learn to read. We had progressed well beyond our first Dick and Jane books which were boring. "See spot (the dog) run. Run spot run," to our weekly readers, a scholastic news paper geared to your grade level. We had come a long way. We started on simple math, history, and music. Once a week we had music, Mrs. Curtain would break out and distribute the instruments. There was one tambourine, five triangles which you struck to make music, and the rest of us got rhythm sticks. Two, twelve-inch round sticks that you struck together to match the beat of children's songs played on a record player.

In the spring, Mrs. Curtain decided it was time for us to do something for our mothers, who worked so hard to get us off to school each day. She decided on a Tea. We made invitations in the shape of a little teapot. Mrs. Curtain wrote: "You are cordially invited to attend a Mother's Tea, sponsored by the first grade of South School, at 2 P.M. on May 2, 1946," in each of our invitations and we printed our names in them and took them home.

When our mothers arrived on the day of our event they were ushered down to our lunchroom and seated at our tables. Each table had a tablecloth and a small flower arrangement on it. We served them tea and homemade cookies that Mrs. Curtain had baked and as a class, we sang some well rehearsed songs for them. Mrs. Curtain chatted with the mothers at each table and talked about how well their children were doing, what they were learning and what the mothers could do at home to help. It was a big deal for all of us and for our moms.

The school year was ended with a picnic on the school ground and our mothers were invited to attend again. We were happy to start our summer vacation but sad to be losing Mrs. Curtain as we moved on to second grade. She was a wonderful teacher.

We were back to school again in September. Our new classroom had been painted over the summer break and smelled fresh and clean. We were on the opposite side of the building which seemed strange. I had enjoyed looking out the window and seeing Jacky Jay's dog Barney as he played in the yard.

As second graders, we were allowed to cross the street to visit a candy store run by the Gibbons sisters, in the back of their basement. You followed the sidewalk down the side of their house, turned the corner and entered through the back door. They sold soda and candy bars, but their specialty was the penny candy that we had all become fond of. Mary Jane's, Kits, penny taffy pops on a stick, single pieces of black or cherry liquorish and miniature wax bottles filled with sweet liquid. You bit off the top, drank the liquid, then chewed the wax until your jaws got tired. They also had jaw breakers that changed colors as each layer of candy was dissolved. We all got sticky fingers taking that ball of candy out of our mouths to see what color it was.

Winter was especially cold that year. My grandmother told mom I needed a hat, or I would be getting earaches from walking to school in the cold. On one of our Thursday night shopping trips, into Waterbury, mom took me into W.T. Grants where I found a replica of a WWII bomber pilot's helmet. It was imitation leather and wool lined. The sides of the hat came down over your ears and there was a military type of strap that tightened under your chin. It was a functional piece of equipment for the military but looked dorky on a kid. Nevertheless, I loved it. I was the only kid in the school to have one like it.

Mrs. Kibble was a good teacher, but she was not as kind as Mrs. Curtain had been. She had us read aloud to the class which was embarrassing. If you made a mistake, you could count on the class at least snickering if not laughing. Mrs. Kibble would quiet them and have you go on. We started spelling this year. We had to copy ten words from the chalkboard and study them at home over the week. We then had a spelling test on Fridays; it was enough to ruin your weekend.

The town of Wolcott started a health program when I was in second grade. Once a month our class got on a school bus and went into the city of Waterbury to visit a dentist. We had our teeth cleaned on the first visit and if any cavities were

found, we were scheduled to go back the following month. Mom and dad thought it was a fantastic program but most of us going were not all that happy about it.

Recess became more important in the spring of second grade. Marbles became very popular, and all the boys got into competition while the girls played jump rope or hopscotch. We played marbles in two ways. Individual competition, one kid folded his hand into a half fist, place a marble in that hand and shot it forward with a quick flick of his thumb. His opponent did the same, aiming his shot so that his marble hit the first one. If it did, he won that marble. In group competition, we drew a circle about three feet around. Each of the competitors placed two marbles in the center of the circle. We then took turns shooting a marble, designated as our shooter, at the marbles in the center of the circle. The object was to knock marbles out of the circle. Any marble you drove out of the circle was yours to keep. You got your shooter back after each shot you took. We played marbles at lunch and sometimes after school.

Math became more important. Mrs. Kibble insisted we memorize addition factors so we could add quickly without counting on our fingers. She showed us how to make math tables to help our memorization. Before the year was out, she had us adding two numbers plus two numbers and then on to carrying so we could add larger numbers. When we had well mastered adding columns of numbers, she moved us on to subtraction. She explained that subtraction was just addition in reverse and since we had our math factors memorized, it would be easy for us. It was not. It took a while for me to understand the concept of borrowing. I mean how could you subtract seven from four? Mrs. Kibble persisted and even I mastered the process but not without some help from my mother working with me at home.

School closed for the summer. We had a lot of free time on our hands and could pretty much do what ever we chose. On Wednesdays of each week, the Red Cross provided free swimming lessons at Hitchcock Lake. Mrs. Croft was our instructor. She taught us how to perform the various swimming strokes as she stood on the dock. I don't think I ever saw that good woman get in the water. I am sure she had no idea why we were shivering. Eight thirty on a June morning in Connecticut is not a good time to swim. I got a bicycle that year and was able to ride to school in the fall.

Third grade was a new experience. In fact, every grade was a new experience. you might start the school year reviewing some of previous year, but you would move on quickly to new material. Mrs. Summers was our new teacher; she was young and very pretty. Early in the school year she got sick, and we had a

substitute teacher for a few days, a Mrs. Sillman. She had us bow our heads to recite the Lord's prayer, as we always did, but when the prayer was finished, she went on praying, "for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever, amen." Some of the kids in class said those words as well. I had never heard that ending to the prayer. I told my grandmother, and she said the kids that used the longer ending were protestant children, but it was all right, we all prayed to the same god. I never knew we had Protestants in our school.

Each morning, we said the Lord's Prayer at the start of the day, then the Pledge of Allegiance and finally we sang the first two verses of America the Beautiful. A student was always chosen to start the song. One day I got chosen. I am a monotone, and I always sang softly so no one would know that I could not recognize or carry a tune. I just stood there for a few moments before Mrs. Summers asked if there was something wrong. Of course there was something wrong, I could not sing. Mrs. Summers said that was silly, everyone could sing but I proved her wrong, much to my embarrassment. Fortunately, the rest of the class quickly joined my feeble beginning and there was no laughing.

It was in the third grade that we started using ink rather than just pencils. Mrs. Summers filled the ink wells in our desks half full of ink then she distributed ink pens. They were solid, pencil shaped piece of wood with a tapered handle and a writing nib inserted in the circle on the nose of the pen. The pen had a circle of cork for protections where you held it. We were cautioned not to dip our pens too deep into the ink and make a mess, but many of us did. Fortunately, the ink was washable because most of us had some on our shirts or blouses.

One day we got into a discussion on the responsibilities of owning a pet. I raised my hand and told Mrs. Summers that my uncle was a professional dog trainer. Most of the kids in class indicated that they had a dog, so she suggested that I invite my uncle to come into school and address the class. Uncle Franny agreed and the following week he came to school with a little beagle pup he acquired a few weeks earlier. He set Buster, the puppy; down on Mrs. Summers' desk then explained how to go about training a pup. He had the dog sit and then lie down. He also placed Buster on the floor and had the pup stay and come to him on command.

The kids thought the demonstration was great. Uncle Franny told them the secret was in the reward system. "Reward your dog with a treat when it does what you want it to. Repeat your training sessions often but keep them short." On the walk home, Uncle Franny told me he was amazed at how well Buster had

behaved. He had that puppy for two weeks and had yet to get that puppy to do much of anything.

In third grade we tackled written math problems. I sometimes found it difficult to identify what the math factors were and what I should do about them. More practice with mother and Aunt Nancy helped. Before the year was finished, most of us got fountain pens. They were great. You did not have to keep dipping your pen in the ink well and chance dripping ink on your desk or paper. Fountain pens had a little balloon inside the handle. You simply held the nib under the ink and moved a tiny lever to collapse the balloon. The balloon would draw in the ink as it expanded when you released the lever. Very neat and clean.

Fourth grade was the beginning of our real education. Everything else had been preparatory. That year we moved into multiplication. We all worked to memorize the multiplication tables up to the ten times table. Arnold Hurl, a kid we called "the brain," memorize the times tables up to fifteen times and took a delight in demonstrating his accomplishments for us.

Fourth grade moved us into fractions which came easy. Maybe it was the way our teacher, Mrs. Teaberry explained it. I mean we were all familiar with half dollars, quarters, dimes nickels and pennies. The fact that you could cut a pie into six or eight pieces seemed reasonable. Everything that was not a whole was a fraction. I even got on to adding and subtracting fractions. Unfortunately, learning decimals put me back behind the power curve again.

Over the spring break we got new, modern desks in all our classrooms. They were single units with the chair connected to the desk. The whole top of the desk lifted, so you could store your books, Lunch, and what have you in the desk, very nice.

Early in the spring of 1951 we had a special event at school. We had a special lunch and the fourth through eighth graders got to listen to General MacArthur's retirement speech on the radio. Mrs. Teabury had explained who the General was and why he was important to us. He must have been a wonderful general and a great man.

We moved from printing to long hand that year. Penmanship became a subject of its own and we practiced for hours. Ball point pens appeared on the market and soon we all had one of these new pens. They wrote well and were not messy at all, but the ink could smear on your paper if you were not careful.

Fifth grade introduced science as a new subject of study. It was interesting and there were a lot of simple experiments that you could do on your own. That

winter we all produced static electricity by scraping our feet as we walked across the rugs in our homes, then placed our fingers close to the radiator to discharge it with a spark and a crack of sound. We strung string between the bottoms of two tin cans and attempted to hear one another speak into the can as we held it over our ear. It worked reasonably well at short distances. Our parents were encouraged to purchase a crystal radio kit for us to assemble. It only cost a dollar, and the assembled radios could pick up local stations.

I asked my dad to get me a twelve-volt battery for science experiments. A few days later he brought home a box of six, 12-volt lightly used batteries, from work, along with a lot of spaghetti wire and some small flashlight bulbs. I played with that stuff at home for hours on end. A few days later, dad brought home some relays, buzzers, and circuit breakers that I had a great time with. I was beginning to feel like an inventor

Our sixth-grade teacher was a man, a Mr. Dithers. It was not unheard of to have a male teacher, but they usually taught high school, not grammar school, and certainly not fifth grade. He was a great teacher. He took a personal interest in all of us. If you were having trouble in any area, he would ask you to stay after school for a few minutes to help him, but he then helped you. He brought structure to our playground after lunch. Where we had been on our own, Mr. Dithers organized sports; volleyball, kick ball, races, jump rope competition for boys and girls and team quits. That winter he even organized a snowball fight. Before that you could get in trouble for throwing a snowball.

Mr. Dithers could play the piano wonderfully well. Every Wednesday afternoon he would play the music of a famous composer. We eventually got to the point that we could recognize the music of Mozart, Liszt, Beethoven and more. I especially liked Clair de Lune by Claude Debussy.

On Fridays Mr. Dithers would read one of the classics, a chapter at a time. He read, *The Odyssey* by Homer, *Ivanhoe* by Sir Walter Scott, *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. Her father was a resident of Wolcott. I am sure that it was Mr. Dithers who made enthusiastic readers of us all. He just had a way of making me want to go read something and not worry about how thick the book was before I got started!

Late one morning Molly, Jacky Jay's mule got loose and ran down Sheldon Avenue toward Meridan Road. Mr. Dithers led the seventh and eighth grade boys on a capture mission. It took almost an hour for them to get Molly cornered so Mr.



Dithers could lasso her with Sandra Winkler's jump-rope and lead her back to her stall. It was exciting to watch.

Mr. Dithers arranged a class trip for us to the Peabody Museum at Yale University. What a great day that was. We had been studying dinosaurs in our science class and that was interesting, but to see the bones of real dinosaurs up close was unbelievable. What magnificent animals they must have been!

In the early spring, Mr. Dithers asked me to stay after school to help him with a project. All he did was ask me questions about the subjects we had been learning in class. At two thirty the following day, he wrote something on the chalk board and asked me to read it. He cautioned my classmates about helping me. Try as I might, I could not see it well enough to make it out. There were a few giggles in class so I knew it must be something stupid, a joke perhaps. Just before the bell rang to dismiss us for the day, Mr. Dithers called me up to his desk and gave me a note for my parents. The note told them that I needed eyeglasses desperately. From the front of the room, I could read his message on the board: "John, you can go home now."

You may have noticed the size of the school windows in the picture on page one. On a very warm day in June Mr. Dithers got a long wooden pole with a hook on the end. After several tries, He was able to insert that hook into a ring on the top center of one window and pull it toward him. The window opened wide, much to the amazement to all of us. We students and previous teachers never realized our windows were openable.

As the school year was ending, we were informed that the building of a new school on Todd Road would be completed over the summer and that we would be attending Frisbie Grammar School next year. Most of us were upset. South School was our school, and we did not want a new school, but our voices did not go very far. We had a nice field day at the Lake Quassapog Amusement Park to close out the year. We rode the rides, swam, and in general, had a good time. It started the summer vacation off right.

I have attended several schools but none quite like South School. No matter the age or condition of the schools I have gone to, I never again encountered the quality of education I got at the old South School.

Our school had a positive atmosphere about it and the teachers were free to teach. It is gone now, torn down as a hazard. All that remains is a barren, stoney lot where it once stood. It is too bad the town couldn't have found another use for that building before it was razed.

**Note:** South School was built as a two-room school on Sheldon Avenue, in Wolcott, Connecticut in 1922. In 1930, two additional rooms were added to the building. In 1949 the school was completely renovated and renamed the Addin Lewis School. As the town of Wolcott grew, new schools reduced the need for the old South School, and it was converted to a manufacturing facility and used in that capacity until it was demolished.

John