



## District 36\*

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The first six years of my education was in a one room school – District 36 – in Prairieville Township. The township is located more or less smack dab in the middle of Brown County. It is a plot of ground six miles square – 36 square miles; 23,040 acres; elevation 1,014'; population 346 (2000 census).

The school sat on a two acre plot of ground at the intersection of gravel country roads. The east-west road went straight to Sleepy Eye, about three miles to the east and the north-south road intersected U.S. highway 14 one mile to the south.

The school was about 200 yards north of the Chicago Northwestern railroad line. For me, that was a bonus because of my fascination with trains – an avid train watcher then and still, but a little less now with the disappearance of the cabooses years back.

Waving at conductors in cabooses was required. When we walked home from school, we paused, put our ear to the track to listen for the clicking of an oncoming train. If we heard the "clicking" we sat and waited to be able to wave.

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The long way home was south to highway 14, then right half a mile, and then north down our driveway to our house. About a mile and half all told.

Mother gave us strict orders to never accept rides. One day, under a threatening sky, Hans Petersen, a farmer living next to our place, came along and asked if we wanted a ride. We declined – and got wet.

When we told Mother that Hans Petersen offered a ride and we refused, she said, "You silly geese, you could have accepted a ride from him". Obviously her admonishment had exceptions!

All four of us kids went to country school. Maynard never made it. He died before he was old enough for school.

Bonito (Bonnie) was 5 years older than me, so I was in 1st grade when she was in 6th grade. By my arithmetic I would have been the only Meinert in District 36 when I was in the 2nd grade, assuming Bonito went to Lutheran School for her 7th and 8th grades of schooling. But Carolla (Carol), being two years younger than me, would have joined me when I was in the 3rd grade and three years later Dean would have showed up. The three of us were there in my 6th year.

The school was a building about 30'x40'. It had 6 big windows on the east side, none on the south side, only a couple on the west side (in the back, to light the library), and two on the north side – one in the boy's toilet and one in the girl's toilet.

The toilets were chemical. There was no electricity when I started there. It came while I was there but the only running water was that pumped from the well on the school grounds.

The entry was on the east side of the building, up 7 or 8 steps. To the right, once you entered, were stairs down to the basement.

The basement was the play area when it was rainy or cold. I remember playing marbles there. You drew a caulk ring on the floor about two feet in diameter. Then

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each kid (always boys; not a girls game; the girls played jacks or pick-up sticks) put a specified number of marbles in the ring, being careful to pick those you were willing to lose.

You lagged to determine who started.

The preferred shooter was a steelee or a big marble with enough mass to knock marbles out of the ring. Marbles knocked out were yours. The game was over when the ring was empty.

Marbles were a form of currency. You counted them and traded them. If someone had a marble you coveted, you offered two or three of yours for barter. One's worth was measured by the number of marbles you had.

School started in September before harvest was over. Harvest took priority. If you were needed at home you stayed home.

On the west side of the classroom sat a coal burning furnace enclosed in a large metal jacket about 5' in diameter (to keep from being burned by the inner jacket of the furnace).

When the weather was cold you had to fire in. The bigger boys had the job of fetching coal from the coal bin in the basement. The teacher tended the furnace. At the end of the day she "banked" the fire, basically by tossing in a healthy dose of coal and closing the damper to reduce the burn rate. The next morning she opened the damper, stoked the fire, and tossed in a new batch of coal.

The problem was weekends. The fire would not last through the weekend. You had to start from scratch on Mondays. It took several hours for the place to get comfortable.

There were four or five rows of desks facing south. The smallest desks were on the east side of the room. You were OK for train watching anywhere in the smallest desks, but your view could be cut off in the bigger desks if seated too close to the front.

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I was always watching for black smoke coming down the line from Sleepy Eye. The best was when the smoke was from a special train. "Specials" were usually long and had two engines. But even with two engines, the train could have trouble making the gentle grade past the school. Sometimes the engines sat at the road crossing blowing black smoke and spinning its drivers. There was no studying when that was going on. Even the teacher was drawn to the window.

The desks were fixed to wooden rails so they stayed in line; 3 or 4 to a set. The seats folded for entry and egress. Each desk had space below for storage of books and supplies. On the desk top was an ink well; a temptation for dipping if behind a girl with pigtails!

The thing with a one room school was that all grades were together. One teacher for all 8 grades – Inez Mertz. That meant, as a student, you were exposed to the teaching and recitations of students from all grades. When your grade was not being grilled you studied (and listened – or watched for trains).

I do not remember having any lessons to work on at home or needing help from Mother or Dad on assignments. Report cards were issued monthly, only 8 months in a school year then. My final grades for my 5th year (cannot find them for the 6th grade) were:

Geography	90
Reading	87
Language	91
Spelling	97
Writing	88
Arithmetic	90
History	90
Department	91
Days tardy	8

Spelling best at 97! Hard to believe.

The end of the school years were capped by picnics in late May. They started around noon with “lunch” – a contradiction with the spread offered.

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The softball game started to incubate around 2. It started with a few boys tossing a ball back and forth. Once a critical mass formed there came the awkward moment of choosing sides. Somehow two boys were "nominated" as "captains". Then someone tossed a bat to one of the captains and then the captains "hand walked" up the bat until there was nothing left to grab. The last one with bat to grab got to choose first.

The power hitters got picked first. I was not one of those. I was usually among the last picked; along with the girls.

I always ended up in the outfield, perhaps because I did not distinguish myself for defensive play. If you were in the outfield and Charlie Moldaschel came to bat, you backed up to the ditch next to the road and even then, likely as not, the ball would go sailing over your head into Riebel's grove. When that happened you got lots of "help". "Further back". "More to the right". "Too far". "More to the left". "Hurry, hurry!"

I do not remember the scores of any of the games. Suffice it to say they were not low scoring affairs. But who cares? Sure the winning team had boasting rights, but it was not polite to boast. My memory now is that they were all squeakers and flawlessly played!

But my most vivid memory of the picnics was of the ice cream after the ball game!

The ice cream was delivered around 10:30am in heavy canvas insulated containers. Ten gallons of chocolate. Ten gallons of vanilla.

Around 4 the scooping started. First for kids and then adults. People lined up on the north side of the school, in the shade. No hurry because there was plenty for seconds and thirds.

The saddest part of the day was getting home to a house that had been empty all day. Too early to go to bed and too late to get into anything new.

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It is sad that the sense of community that made school picnics possible is gone, long gone in urban America, and gone now also in rural America. I wonder if there was a District 36 picnic today if any one would come and if they did, would they know what to talk about?

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\*Modified from entry by the same name in *Essays and Stories from Klinkapunk*