

Growing Up in Wenham in WWII Recollections of a Bygone Era

By Bob Hicks

School Days – Part 2 Let's Hear It for Our Teachers!

Following on the enlargement of the Center School in 1922, the then Superintendent of Schools, John D. Whittier, made the single most important move in the town's school history when he hired Miss Bessie Buker from her home in Lisbon Falls, Maine, to accept the position of Principal of Wenham's Center School. Miss Buker henceforth devoted her entire working life to creating and managing Wenham's high quality level of education.

After 35 years on the job, Miss Buker retired in 1957, several years after the new Buker School (so named in her honor, obviously) had been erected adjacent to the old Center School. Her name lives on in the annals of Wenham's school history and also in the memories of all of us who came under her care in our school days. I'll have more to say about Miss Buker in "School Days - Part 3", but right now I want to introduce those teachers who she had trained and guided in properly educating us during my first five years here in "grammar school," a bit of Grade 2 and all of Grades 3-6.

In my eight year sojourn through Center School I was guided towards my future by nine teachers, eight women (only two married) and a single (married) man. Only the Junior High girls' Domestic Arts (sewing and cooking) teacher missed me. In retrospect much later in my life I came to realize that they had collectively done a good job of it, sending us (12 in my class) off well prepared to move on to Beverly's High School and from there out into the world.

In late March of 1937 I arrived from Middleton to join Mrs Preston's second grade in a room shared also by her first grade. I do not have any memories of Mrs Preston, except that on one occasion she arranged to bus her two dozen or so students to her home in Beverly for a sort of backyard party. It was a nice thing for her to do, we thought. She had been teaching in Wenham since 1929 and later retired in 1941 after 12 years to devote more time to her family.

In the fall of 1937 I moved up to Miss Long's third and fourth grade room. Miss Long was something of a martinet and introduced me to a more serious level of schoolroom discipline than I had experienced in Mrs Preston's friendly feeling room. Those who did

not meet Miss Long's standards of classroom behavior or academic achievement often found themselves called up to her desk for humiliating tongue lashings. Never to be forgotten was a time that it backfired on her.

One of my classmates was a big for his age Irish kid with a temper, and after some exchange of remarks over some indiscretion he had indulged in he was ordered up front. His Irish temper was up and he never stopped when he got to her standing beside her desk but waded into her punching with both fists. The classroom was transfixed, never had we seen such a defiance of authority. Miss Long was a small woman in her 30s and he loomed up over her, but somehow she signaled a student up front to get school principal Miss Buker, who instantly appeared in the schoolroom door like an avenging angel.

A hush fell over the room like that amongst backyard songbirds when a hawk arrives overhead. I do not recall ever hearing what then transpired in Miss Buker's office, but it must have been something, judging from my own couple of such visits for much less serious transgressions in later years.

My own run-ins with Miss Long peaked early in third grade over my generally disheveled appearance. My mother sent me off to school attired neatly enough in shirt and tie, knickers and knee socks with tied shoes, but I seemed to have difficulty in keeping my shirttail in, my socks up and my shoelaces tied, particularly after morning recess. Miss Long did not approve of this and an ongoing exchange of notes went back and forth between her and my mother about it, with me being the messenger. My mother was a feisty gal of about Miss Long's age and didn't take kindly to such criticism. I was not privy to the contents of the notes and eventually some sort of truce was worked out. I was apparently never entirely cured of some disarray in attire for it has lingered on in my life over the following now 80 or so years.

Miss Long left at the end of my fourth grade year to marry Superintendent of Schools John D. Whittier. From

my mother's comments on this, shared amongst her friends, I gathered that Miss Long was regarded as having "made a nice catch." Finding husbands was apparently a goal for many of the young single teachers recruited from the wilderness of Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont by Superintendent Whittier.

In the fall of 1939 I moved upstairs to the fifth and sixth grades room of Miss Keyes. Miss Keyes was everything Miss Long was not, wonderfully soft spoken and considerate. These next two years were such a relief that we all dug in and did everything we could to please her in return.

One memorable experience we all shared with her came the day she brought to class a box full of ceramic miniatures ("Sebastian Miniatures" for any of you who might be collectors) made by her then boyfriend (later to become her husband), which she distributed to all of us as gifts. I still have the one I got to bring home to my mother, "Sampling the Stew," which ended up back with me after my mother passed away. Miss Keyes, who had been teaching in Wenham since 1933, resigned in 1941 to marry her artist, Prescott W. Baston, the year we moved on to Junior High and into Miss Bullis' seventh and eighth grades.

All of us had been dreading the move next door to Miss Bullis' room. We had been well advised by those who preceded us as to the terrors that awaited us. Miss Bullis loomed ahead as the T-Rex of the school, overwhelmingly feared for her acid tongue and after school punishment sessions for those who failed her in her driving determination to make something of this rabble we apparently appeared to be. If one was up to her demands for academic achievement it was hard, if one didn't measure up it was awful, daily dread over what might happen if one failed in any way.

Junior High brought us into a whole new world of teachers besides the feared Miss Bullis, with our only male teacher, Mr Burr (Manual Arts), our first young (and very attractive to we adolescent boys) teacher, Miss Tobey (ninth grade) and our two part time teachers Miss Cleaveland (Music) and Mrs Eaton (Drawing). We also would get to know Miss Buker a lot better as she added teaching tasks in the Junior High to her Principal's role.