

Growing Up in Wenham in WWII Recollections of a Bygone Era

By Bob Hicks

School Days – Part 4 Miss Bessie Buker

The legacy of Miss Bessie Buker lives on in Wenham in the form of the school building adjacent to the old Center School dedicated to her in 1952, a concrete recognition of what she achieved in her 35 years as Principal of the Center School from 1922 through 1957, setting a standard of academic excellence which endures today in our much enlarged and more complex school system. She also vividly lives on in the memories of some of us who came under her influence.

I mentioned previously how persuading the 29-year-old teacher from Lisbon Falls, Maine, to come to Wenham to assume the Principal's role in the just enlarged Center School was Superintendent John D. Whittier's master stroke of his career serving the town. Over the following 35 years an average of about 15 new pupils arrived each year to benefit from her guidance, that's maybe about 500 of us who went on in life from this small town with attitudes and knowledge that would be of great benefit should we choose to put them to use.

A guiding principle of her role was to educate her students to be good citizens, not just to acquire a good education. Proper social behavior intended to make us responsible adults was inculcated into us along with all the knowledge acquired from the required courses of study. During my stay at Center School in the midst of World War II, patriotism loomed large and one of Miss Buker's annual reports in the Town Report illustrates one example of her effectiveness in training us to be good citizens:

Apparently some resistance to the daily salute to the flag had arisen in some Massachusetts communities and the state's education authorities had announced that such a salute could not legally be required and that no students refusing to salute the flag could be disciplined for refusal to do so. Miss Buker concluded her brief discussion of this issue in her report by stating that, "No students in the Center School refuse to salute our nation's flag." We all knew better.

Well, that is the big picture, but how did she strike us as students? During our grammar school years Miss Buker was mostly a "presence" in the

school not in our everyday classroom lives. We most often saw her periodically at special school functions, her tall and rather severe appearance completely dominating the assembled student body, brooking no disruption whatever of any kind simply by being there. She never raised her voice, but that voice carried implicit authority.

During my junior high years, errant behavior that merited more than our classroom teachers' disciplinary admonishments occurred more often, resulting in a trip to "Miss Buker's office." This was a much feared fate, contemplation of which did much to discourage misbehavior. Youthful disregard for such contemplation did arise from time to time, however. I recall at least once when I had to make that fateful visit. I do not recall my actions that caused this.

I had to sit down opposite Miss Buker at her desk, eyeball to eyeball. It was here that one of her most effective disciplinary "tools" came into play. She had what was then called a "cast" in her left eye. A "cast" was a disconnect between her eyeballs which resulted in her left eye not always following her right eye around, but heading off in another direction while she was staring into your eyes. Perhaps an adult could adjust to this but we juveniles were not yet worldly wise enough to do so and the effect was frightening.

In a quiet voice she would inquire as to the reason for my transgression and when whatever elaborate alibi I had constructed to justify my behavior was presented (admitting guilt was usually not a first gambit) she fixed her right eye upon me (the errant left usually hidden under a closed eyelid) and quietly said, "Look at me. I know you are lying." There it was, I was reminded that indeed, Miss Buker sees all.

Miss Buker stayed on 23 years after I left the ninth grade, retiring in 1957. When discussing some of my thoughts for this page with Althea Prescott Cranston, a graduate of the Buker School in

1958 and again living in town, I found the exact same memories and felt that her poem, *The Ghost of Bessie Buker*, written in 2008 for her 50th Class Reunion, perfectly captures the essence of this devoted woman who did so much for our town.

The Ghost of Bessie Buker

By Althea Prescott Cranston

She roams the halls at night
Checking rooms for messy desks,
She peers into dark corners
And looks into the cloak closet.
Notes made, contraband confiscated,
She awaits the morning arrivals.

She watches as children hop off the bus.
Tall, spindly woman with flat
brown shoes.
Her grey hair tied back in a tight bun,
Print dress, sweater on shoulders,
Glasses on nose.
Her eye looks at each child.

Children scurry by her
Afraid to look up.
Her one piercing eye sweeping over
the students.
Checking for infractions.
They know she sees all.

Miss Buker has been gone for
many years
But she lives on,
They say the eye in her portrait follows
you as you pass.
There is no lingering there.

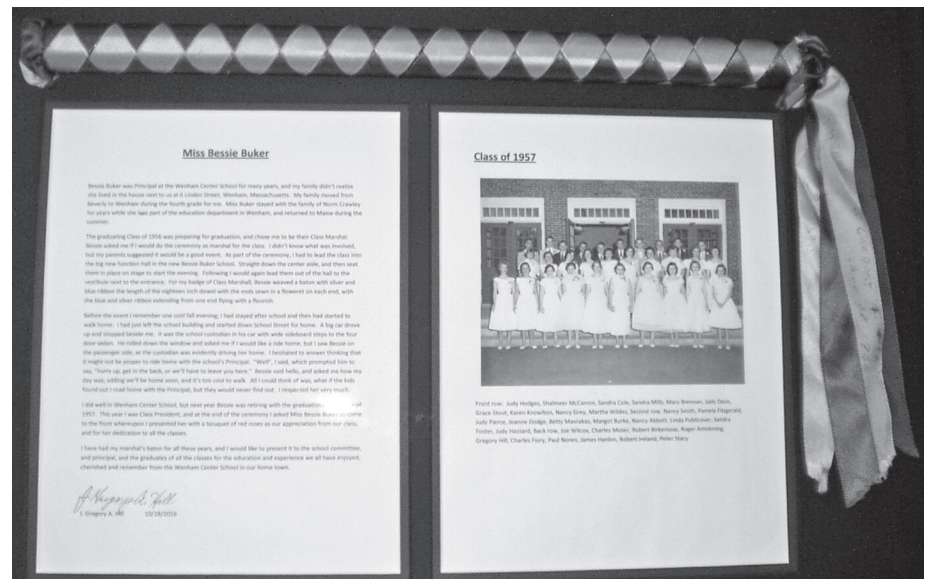


A Tribute to Miss Bessie Buker J. Gregory Hill 10/18/2016

Bessie Buker was Principal at the Wenham Center School for many years and my family didn't realize she lived in the house next to us at 6 Linden St, Wenham, Massachusetts. My family moved from Beverly to Wenham during the fourth grade for me. Miss Buker stayed with the family of Norm Crawley for years while she was part of the education department in Wenham and returned to Maine during the summer.

The graduating class of 1956 was preparing for graduation and chose me to be their Class Marshal. Bessie asked me if I would do the ceremony as marshal for the class. I didn't know what was involved but my parents suggested it would be a good event. As part of the ceremony, I had to lead the class into the big new function hall in the new Bessie Buker School. Straight down the center aisle and then seat them in place on stage to start the evening. Following I would again lead them out of the hall to the vestibule next to the entrance. For my badge of Class Marshall, Bessie weaved a baton with silver and blue ribbon the length of the 18" dowel with the ends sewn in a floweret on each end, with the blue and silver ribbon extending from one end flying with a flourish.

Before the event I remember one cool fall evening, I had stayed after school and then had started to walk home. I had just left the school building and started down School Street for home. A big car drove up and stopped beside me. It was



This memorial display is located in the Buker School just around the corner from the main entrance corridor opposite the Principal's office.

the school custodian in his car with wide sideboard steps to the four door sedan. He rolled down the window and asked me if I would like a ride home, but I saw Bessie on the passenger side, as the custodian was evidently driving her home. I hesitated to answer thinking that it might not be proper to ride home with the school's principal. "Well," I said, which prompted him to say, "Hurry up, get in the back or we'll have to leave you here." Bessie said hello and asked me how my day was, adding that we'll be home soon and it's too cool to walk. All I could think of was what if the kids found out I rode home with the Principal, but they never found out. I respected her very much.

I did well in Wenham Center School, but next year Bessie was retiring with the graduation of the Class of 1957. This year I was Class President and at the end of the ceremony I asked Miss Bessie Buker to come to the front whereupon I presented her with a bouquet of red roses as our appreciation from our class and for her dedication to all the classes.

I have had my marshal's baton for all these years and would like to present it to the school committee and principal and the graduates of all the classes for the education and experience we have all enjoyed, cherished and remember from the Wenham Center School in our home town.