

*This letter was written to my five kids in April of 2001*

April 2001

Dear Larry, Lori, Cindy, Sandi, and Randy,

Following is an account of my first four years of grade school. You may read it, keep it, or scrap it.

### **ILER SCHOOL MEMORIES**

During my first four years of school I attended a little one-room white wooden building about a mile and a half (as the crow flies, but about 4 miles by road) from home. The picture below was taken about 1946, three years before I invaded the place. That's Joyce Hageman and Norman Miller way on the right...no idea who the others are.



The teacher was Mrs. Wilson, who often brought orphan lambs to school so she could bottle feed them there instead of driving home each noon. (Since she was the only adult present at the school, there was no way she could have left anyway.) I do remember us kids arguing over who would feed those lambs.

My mom had the idea that Mr. Wilson must be Irish with a name like "Wilson" so, each St. Patrick's Day, I had to bring Mrs. Wilson a bouquet of shamrocks, freshly picked from the plants in Mom's window.

Oh, how the memories are flowing this morning. I remember the day Mr. Miller appeared at school and announced that the Shrine Circus was in Freeport, and "Does anybody want to go?" You bet we did! It was at the Masonic Temple and, to a little kid, that place seemed to be just immense and there must have been a "million" kids there. The acts were on stage and I was awestruck. We were each allowed to buy a souvenir and mine was some turquoise bird feathers on a stick. That thing was around for many years. Several years ago I was at a Corporate Newell Christmas party and my friend, Lottie, and I sat in that same Masonic Temple auditorium. Such a disappointment to realize that the place was actually pretty small and "millions" of kids could never have been at that circus so many years ago.

Miss Gregory, a tall slender gray-haired spinster came once a week to teach us religion. Some days she would start howling and crying as she taught us. That would never fly in today's world. My parents were not very thrilled with her but she was just there and she showed up every week. And once a year Mr. Pfister, the county school superintendent, came to pay us a surprise visit. I was always worried that he would open my desk and give me the dickens for not having it neat enough.

Just across the road was the Reemtsma farm. Walter Reemtsma was hired by the school board to fire up the coal furnace each winter morning so it was warm in our home-away-from-home during the day. I am curious just how much the board paid him for that job. One morning when we got to school, Walt had written on the chalkboard in large letters the name of his son, Arlyn, who had been born the day before. It was so exciting!

West of the school, along the road, was a fence built with long iron pipes. We spent a good bit of time crawling between those pipes and climbing to the top of the fence. The hand-pump was in the southwest corner of the yard and I remember the teacher hauling a bucket of drinking water into the building every day. Hanging on the side of that bucket was a long handled ladle and everybody drank from that same ladle -- and nobody died of some dreaded disease.

Late every summer was "School Cleaning Day" and all the moms and dads showed up with scrub buckets and old rags to get the place ship-shape for the new school year. Below is an entry in Mom's 1949 diary.

FRIDAY, AUGUST 26

---

*clean school house  
to day*

Usually Mr. Miller (who lived the closest) brought over his hay mower and the dads tamed a grassy jungle so we kids could find the swings and outhouses again. The high point of the day was always a picnic lunch at noon. During the rest of the year it seemed to be solely Mrs. Wilson's job to keep the place habitable. I recall coming in the mornings and finding her sweeping up some kind of oily, smelly sawdust compound that was supposed to make the floor more sanitary.

Because I had a hernia before I even entered school and my dad refused to allow me to have surgery, I was blessed with wearing a strap and pad affair (called a truss and purchased from Emmert's Drug Store) 24/7 to keep the hernia pushed into place for re-healing. This caused the rule that I did not dare run or jump the first several years of school. As a result, I became really good at sitting out recess in a swing. Oh, the thrill of flying through the air and floating so high till the chains jumped. One day Glenn Hageman got "bonked" on the head by a metal swing seat. There was blood coming out of his ear by the time his parents arrived to take him home. An ambulance was unheard of in those days.

My cousin, Margaret, once visited school. She was probably all of four years old at the time and I vividly recall being mortified when she headed for the boys' outhouse instead for the girls'. It seemed awfully important at the time!

Oh, and the end of the school year picnics -- such a fun time with all those people coming -- and not just the kids and their families. Anybody from the district could attend -- and most people did attend, just for the social aspects of the occasion. Sometimes the picnics were held at The Seward Forest Preserve (maybe, ten miles from the school) and the picture below is from one of those years. In the back row were Menno Miller (Norman, Roger and Marilyn's dad), Margaret Poppen (She was the substitute teacher and lived about a half mile west of the school.), Ann Saaijenga (my mom), Ada Hageman (Joyce, Glenn and Gene's mom), Folkert Saaijenga (my dad), Dena Miller (Norm, Rog and

Marilyn's mom), Ernest Hageman (Joyce, Glenn and Gene's dad) and Ethel and Alfred Kruse (They lived across the road from the school. They had no children but were so supportive of the school.). The kids in front were: Roger Miller, Charlene Ackerman (She lived about five miles north of the school but came along that day with her Aunt Margaret), Glenn Hageman, Linda Saaijenga, Norman Miller, Joyce Hageman and Marilyn Miller (Yup, she's there...just snuggled against her mommy...you have to look closely for her).



One year I was in tears at the picnic. My Grandma Pieper had very definite ideas about when I dared wear my prettiest "Church" dresses and often made me wear my older clothes to church if she decided that I would not take off my coat during the services. Those special dresses were deemed "too good" to be just worn under a coat and not shown off. Most of my prettiest dresses were only worn a few times before I outgrew them and they were given on. Once Marilyn Miller was the recipient of one of my favorite frocks and she wore it to the end-of-school picnic. I was inconsolable! I had only been able to wear my beautiful garment a couple of times and here she was wearing it to a picnic! (I made up my young mind that day that, if I ever had little girls, they would be allowed to wear their pretty dresses anywhere....and they were!)

I do remember one other school picnic at Iler. In the dim recesses of my mind I can picture a bonfire just southeast of the building and, again, "millions" of people roasting hot dogs in the dark. Somebody brought marshmallows for toasting and I was enthralled. My mom only used marshmallows in Jell-O but here was a totally new concept. Tried one, didn't like it a bit, and still despise the gooey charred things. Such

a culinary disappointment. Below is an entry from Mom's 1950 diary.

Friday            OCTOBER 27

---

Party at the school house  
we all wore masks & clothes  
was a lot of fun  
we were wait for lunch

One spring day Norman, Allen, and I went for a walk at noon and ended up clear south along the little creek, sitting on the sunny bank, munching on some of Mom Miller's date bread. All three of us were angry with some of the other kids that day and the entire conversation consisted of "bashing those rotten kids". The wisdom of age explains to me now why Mrs. Wilson forbade us to ever do that again but the whole thing was completely innocent at the time.

I often wonder how Don and Allen were able to attend Iler School. They lived too far out to be part of the district. Allen used to ride with Mrs. Wilson because he was her neighbor but Don's folks usually brought him. Many years later your dad and I sold Don some straw and we delivered it to his farm. Oh, my, such a wilderness back in that long lane. At the time Don's mom lived in the house and Don lived in a corncrib. Not long after that Don took his own life.

As soon as Thanksgiving was over, beloved Vernie Wilson, the teacher, guided her flock into Christmas preparations. Oh, such excitement! We always made gifts for our parents, but the last year of Iler's existence, before consolidation forever changed our little community, there were only six students. Teacher Wilson piled us all into her car and we hit the big time painting plaster figurines in a craft shop in Forreston, IL, maybe 15 miles away. I remember painting a shiny black dog for my dad and a pair of poinsettia candleholders for my mom. (That dog sat on Mom's "what-not" shelf from then on and the candleholders were carefully packed away each year after Christmas. Today that same plaster dog still is tucked among my treasures.)



To a greenhorn kid from German Valley, it seemed like we traveled for hours. I remember seeing a place along Highway 72 east of Forreston with a row of tall pines along the fence row. It seemed like another world. A few of those trees are still standing and I am, once again, a little kid going on a secret mission to make wonderful presents for my parents each time I drive by that spot.

There was an Iler School Christmas program every year and we kids pulled out all the stops to entertain our parents. Each small school planned their program on a different night so you could attend all of them. Fannie Juergens (Harlan and Valerie's grandma) was a very spunky German lady who was known for harassing the local teachers with the loud comment, "Dot vas goot, but now let's hear it in German!" One year we were ready for Fannie. Weeks of secret practice and Mrs. Wilson's swiftly graying hair were a pay off when we launched into "Silent Night" in German in response to Fannie's suggestion. We got a standing ovation for that one! That's Fannie below:



Each school day began with a mini-assembly with us kids singing together and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. We really belted out "Old Black Joe" and "Wait for the Wagon!" Another song was about some guy wanting to marry a girl who was a "young thing and cannot leave her mother". Sometimes Joyce Hageman played the piano, but usually it was Mrs. Wilson. That's Joyce below:



My mom always made me wear those despicable long brown cotton stockings in the winter. Oh, how I hated them because the rest of the girls wore anklets all year long. I used to wear long trousers and anklets over the despised brown sox so people didn't know I had them on. One day, during a session of studying spelling while sitting on the floor of the coat room, my pant leg hitched up above the anklet line and, there for everybody to see, were my hated brown stockings. How humiliating! Not quite as humiliating though as the time the elastic broke on my slacks and they slid down when I stood to spell some words. YIKES!

One week the spelling words included "road" and "rooster". I got them confused and

wrote that I had walked down the rooster with my road. I caught a lot of flack for that one, too.

Since no buses were available, my folks, Henry and Rosetta Buttell, and Francis Epling's folks took turns driving us to school. It was the most fun to ride when it was Buttells' turn because they always had a fancy new car -- sometimes even a Lincoln -- but you didn't dare eat a cookie in that Lincoln!

One morning my mom was hauling us to school and Donald was showing us his new knife. It was huge and my mom called it a toad stabber. Boy, did I catch holy-what-for from him once we got to school. He was plenty insulted by Mom's description. School administrators would be horrified if the little boys carried knives today but it was just part of being a farm boy back then -- along with the high-top work shoes some of the boys wore and jeans that did not sport a designer label.

One afternoon Mom was bringing us home from school and we were all comparing our report cards. Francis was especially proud because she had an "F". She assured us that the "F" stood for "fine". My folks got as hoot out of that one!

Hot lunches were a luxury. Usually we kids carried our big black dinner buckets, filled with bologna sandwiches, a five cent bag of Blue Star potato chips, maybe a nickel Hershey's bar, and a few homemade cookies. The last year of Iler's existence, the moms banded together and decided that we should have hot lunches one day a week. Each of the four families took turns providing the lunch, which could be a big kettle of goulash, brought, steaming hot, at noon by one of the moms or a couple of cans of soup heated up on the old two-burner hotplate. Not so long ago the Miller kids shared with me how much they dreaded the times I bought cans of tomato soup. They were used to something other than Campbell's soup. I remember baking foil-wrapped potatoes on the shroud of the coal furnace in the basement and they tasted SO good! One time Don Zimmerman brought "Pepper Pot Soup" and it was less than excellence in gourmet dining. I can still taste the Miller kids' mom's wonderful date and grapenut breads.

The last year Iler School ran, we six kids made huts around the school. Mine was just east of the high cement steps to the front door, somebody had theirs under the back steps on the east side of the building, and the third one was somewhere along the west side of the school. It looked pretty junky with all those ripped up cardboard boxes and other treasures we dragged from home. I recall even bringing toy dishes and empty food cans. Eventually, the directors suggested to Mrs. Wilson that the mess had



probably been there long enough and we had to tear down our masterpieces.

Iler School had three directors (my dad, the Millers kids' dad, and the Hageman kids' dad). We kids used to catch all kinds of grief about being "The Directors' Kids." Below are Ernie Hageman, Folkert Saaijenga and Menno Miller:



The board meetings rotated between the three houses and the whole families came along to those meetings. The dads attended to business in the kitchen and we kids tore up the houses playing while the moms talked about whatever moms those days discussed. That's the six of us kids with Mrs. Wilson below:



One year Mrs. Wilson told the directors that she would quit if they did not raise her salary. Boy, did that ever stir up conversation! Bet her salary was pretty "small potatoes" compared to today. I can still remember hearing my folks talk about the decision to consolidate. My dad was very much against it but felt that there were no alternatives. The next two years the new consolidated school board decided to send two grades to each of the small schools until the new building was finished. Seventh and eighth grades used the Iler facility. I never had the opportunity to attend Iler School again.

The kids of today have lost a lot of the innocence that went along with a one room school. The curriculum was very basic and would never work in today's world but we kids sure did learn a lot from listening to the older kids' lessons.

The picture below was taken in 1951. Front row: Peggy Heise, Rose Marie Buttel, Roger Miller, Marilyn Miller, Larry Miller, Glenn Hageman. Back row: Linda Saaijenga, Donald Buttel, Don Zimmerman, Norman Miller, Mrs. Wilson, Allan Ackerman, Joyce Hageman, Gerald and Mary Heise.



Iler School is only a memory now and the youngest alumnus is almost 55 years old. Mrs. Wilson is long gone. She attended both my grade school and high school graduations, as well as my first wedding. The picture below is precious Mrs. Wilson in 1957.



Don Buttell is now retired from farming east of German Valley. Rose Marie Buttell Thompson is a teacher in central Illinois. Joyce Hageman Fullerton was living in Orangeville, IL the last I knew and her brother, Glenn, was in Freeport. Norman Miller still lives near German valley and his brother and sister, Roger and Marilyn, live in California. A few years ago Francis Epling Tracy lived in Rock City, IL. Allen Ackerman and Larry Miller were working for Honeywell in Freeport. I've lost track of the Heise family. The Hudson family eventually bought the school building and renovated it into a home.



That's all for this installation of my memories. Who knows what subject will stir up my infamous keyboard next!

LOVE YA!  
Mom