

## Remembering Vergas School District No. 268 by Rodney Hanson

As soon as I looked at Roland I knew he was asking for trouble. We were straggling back into the school after recess and he had a big smile he couldn't contain. All us guys had heard a dirty story out in back by the outhouses and he was beaming.

It was actually a riddle with a naughty answer, at least naughty for the late 30s and at least bad enough so you wouldn't want Mr. Bachman to hear it. But Roland wouldn't leave it alone. As soon as story time came around in the classroom he stood up and asked the question, expecting one of us to give the answer and surely catch heck.

No one was dumb enough to raise their hand and Roland started to worry. "Come on 'Cloudy' you know the answer. Come on 'Booby,' you know. Come on you guys." He started to sweat and with reason. Bachman was on him like an attack dog, grabbed him by his left ear and marched him off to his office. You could hear the hollering and the whole classroom sat quietly, glad they were all innocent as angels. Many years after whenever Roland would happen to come into our store I instinctively looked at his left ear and imagined it looked longer than the other.

Mr. Bachman was one of the few male teachers in the rural schools back then. He taught the 7th and 8th grades in that upstairs classroom and was also the Vergas Superintendent with an office just off his classroom. I considered him a good teacher although very strict. Not only did he teach us English, geography, history and so on but he would elaborate on current events. He didn't believe in the coming aviation age declaring one day that "If God had wanted us to fly he would have given us wings."

I know I had a smart reply but never in all the world would have dared to say it aloud. Also one day he was worked up about Vergas being the kind of town where everyone knew your business. "In fact" he told the 20-30 of us listening "I can go home tonight, go upstairs, pull down my shade and sneeze and the next day Mrs. Olsen will meet me on the street and ask me how my cold is." I suppose we all went home and told our folks.

The other room on that second floor had also been a classroom at one time, but by the time I got there it was used for some all school activities as well as storage for the instruments left over from the old Vergas town band.

I can also remember it being used by the W.P.A. instructor sent to us for our vocational training. One summer some highway engineers met there when they drew plans to cut through the woods and hills north of town for the new County Highway No. 17.

The lower level of that two-story-frame building was for the first six grades. The 1st, 2nd and 3rd grades were in the room towards Ernie Brooks livery barn and the 4th, 5th and 6th in the room towards the tennis court.

Both had female teachers, all had the advantage of listening to the lessons of the other classes so students could review what they had missed last year or listen in on what they could expect next year.

The desks with their lift-up tops and seats were not always big enough for the kids that had failed a couple years. Some were built to hold two pupils and you went through phases of not wanting a girl to sit next to you, to really wanting one there. One of the accidents waiting to happen were the inkwells cut into the top of each desk with liquid ink to use with quill-type pens and later fountain pens. Of course ballpoint pens had not been invented yet. I recall blackboards along the walls with small and capital letters across the top and a globe of the world hanging down on some rope and pulley apparatus.

Twenty-year-old maps that you could pull down like window shades and search for borders in Europe that were changing as you looked. Wood floors smelling like oil, chalk erasers waiting their daily dusting. A stone crock drinking fountain with a galvanized pail underneath about to overflow.

Teacher pointer sticks resembling the pool cues down at Fankhanel's Beer Hall. Large pictures of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln and of course the U.S. flag with 48 stars. And also the steaming radiators with an erratic pinging that sounded like tin cans being shot off a row of fence posts with a .22 rifle.

We called half of the basement in that old school an "industrial arts" room but it hardly deserved the name, it was so lacking in tools. Nothing electric of course. The other half of the basement housed the boiler room, tended at that time by the dependable Iver Lee. Outside were cords and cords of wood brought in from the surrounding farms to feed the boiler. Also outside were the boy's and girl's outhouses, separate frame buildings, about 8 feet by 12 feet, located about 50 feet apart. The boy's had a trough tacked to the wall on one end that was slanted all the way to the hole in the ground below. It could accommodate boys of any age or height.

There were about 15 rural schools in the three townships surrounding Vergas. All were one room



**The Vergas school  
built in 1905**

buildings with one teacher who not only taught all eight grades but was their janitor, schoolyard coach, music instructor, lunch-maker, nurse, counselor and arbitrator. An underpaid wonder woman.

Once a year the Vergas School would invite the neighboring districts of No.'s 121, 98, 76, 151 and others to take part in "Field Day." There would be pole vaulting, broad jumping, sack races and ball games. Another school yard competition was marble shooting, most of us using the common clay variety and then advancing to the glass type or "aggies," and then the big shots would come along with "steelies." Most of us boys wore overalls as did some of the girls, if not dresses. No slacks that I recall. One year Lottie showed up with a "chore girl" hair piece-a copper scoring pad unraveled into a hair net. It was a short summer fashion craze.

District 268, the two-story, four-room schoolhouse I'm remembering here, my school, started in 1905 and served Vergas until 1958 when it was replaced with a modern consolidated new building which has since become our community center and the school kids are bussed to Frazee. It's hard to realize it was our school home for 53 years and has already been gone 43 years.

Mr. Bachman left Vergas and went on to Fergus Falls becoming Superintendent of all the 289 rural school districts in the county. (Otter Tail County had more rural schools than any other county in the state.)

I had a lot of respect for Bachman as I think back. He taught me a lot, not only did I learn who wrote "A Tale of Two Cities" and what the capitol of Delaware is" but also how nosy Mrs. Olsen was.