

Old School Day awaits students as opportunity to relive history

By June Kennedy
Eagle correspondent

Jennie Johnson is a life-long Westford resident and holds a chair in the Acton School System where she teaches fourth grade. As a member of the Parkerville Re-use Committee she recently, with great enthusiasm, shared her successful curriculum entitled "Old School Day...a Living History Experience" with the Westford school board, suggesting that the town has a wonderful resource in the Parkerville one-room schoolhouse.

(Incidentally, Jennie's students are transported to the neighboring town of Boxborough for their "Old School Day" because Acton did not have the foresight to retain any of its one-room schoolhouses.)

Jennie's curriculum is exciting and creative. It made me want to head for the nearest district school house and sample those schooldays of yesteryear. The following is taken from her presentation to the Westford School Committee:

"What an awesome school! Look at these desks — they have inkwells! Do we really write on these slates? Look at this old map. I can't find my street. Let's go see what the outhouse looks like!"

"The comments above were actually made by fourth graders as they arrived at Old School #2 in Boxborough where they spent a whole day 'learning the old way.' The students and teachers wore outfits typical of the early 1900s, carried their lunches in baskets, and used slates, hornbooks and quill pens for reading, writing and arithmetic. When they left at the end of the day, they reluctantly packed up, saying, 'That was fun! I liked writing with those quill pens. The Spelldown words were hard, but I wish we could go to an old school every day!'"

"Thus, the evaluation of such a unique living history experience is immediate and ongoing as students continue to talk enthusiastically about their day and to further research old schools and town history. Parents write letters of thanks and send pictures, newspaper articles and video-tapes to school so that students may realize this special day in their 1989 classroom setting.

"The curriculum for this day encompasses all areas — history, math, reading, spelling, art, music, oral recitation, health, physical education, social skills — and the setting allows for maximum exploration. Westford's rich history can

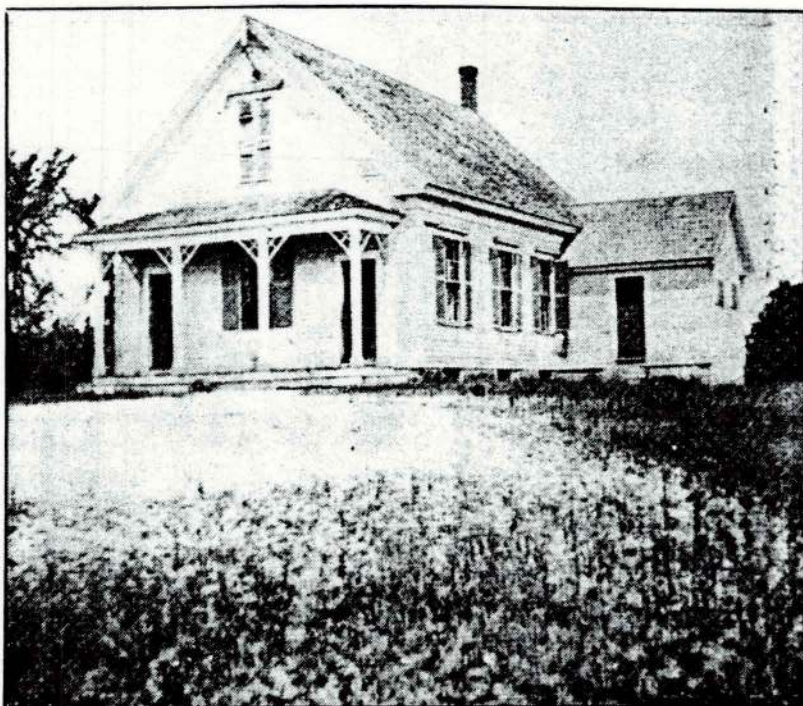


Photo courtesy June W. Kennedy

A 1904 photo shows the "Parkervillage School" on Concord Road at Carlisle Road. A community effort is underway to renovate this last one-room schoolhouse in Westford to serve as meeting space and a living history experience.

come vividly to life at the Parkerville School.

"Materials needed for implementation include: enthusiastic, inquiring minds; willing hands (for a "hands-on" approach to learning); tools of the old school — slates, hornbooks, quill pens, old poems for oral recitation, antique books for history and spelling lessons, and of course, recess equipment: marbles, wooden tops, jacks, hopscotch stones, jump ropes, hoops for rolling and string for making 'cat's cradles'; community volunteers to provide oral history, to share old pictures, to teach old games and dances or songs, to supervise the hand-cranking of home-made ice cream; art and/or music specialists who will come to the Parkerville School to present a lesson during this day; research and development committee — teachers interested in participating, spend time planning for, and gathering materials for Old School Day; school committee approval and support — most essential.

"Please consider this as you

spend A Day at the Parkerville School:

"The old white schoolhouse stands ready with its doors open as the students go hurriedly up the steps. The girls' long dresses glide noiselessly across the porch while the boys' boots (not Nikes!) cause a clamor.

"Suddenly, the teacher appears, ringing a hand bell, and the students file in, wide-eyes, to find a desk that 'almost fits.' This classroom has many of different sizes and it smells like books and oiled floors.

"The classroom also has windows on both sides that really open and there is a platform at the front where the teacher stands sternly, waiting for silence.

"Attention and good behavior are most important as lessons begin — reading aloud in unison from hornbooks in 'blab-style,' writing arithmetic problems on slates and quickly holding them up as soon as your 'figuring is done,' writing fancy

OLD SCHOOL-PAGE 15

A day in a one-room schoolhouse

OLD SCHOOL-FROM PAGE 5

letters with a quill pen dipped in the inkwell while using a blotter and pen wipe correctly, standing up on the platform to recite a memorized poem, always raising a hand and standing up to answer a question, and perhaps learning the consequences of bad behavior by sitting on the stool while wearing the 'Dunce' hat or a sign that labels a 'Whisper Baby.'

"Then, nature calls, and students find that the 'necessary room' here is quite different. It is a fascinating 'indoor-outhouse' with two holes!

"Lunch means opening up baskets of sandwiches, sharing corn-

bread, gingerbread, oatmeal cookies and lemonade. During the recess that follows it, students play marbles, spin tops and make 'cat's cradles' while others take turns cranking the ice cream maker.

"After lunch, a community volunteer relates stories of Old Westford and then the art teacher directs the students outside to draw pencil sketches of Parkerville School. When they file back into the classroom, it is time for a Spelldown. Who will be the spelling champ today?

"The day ends with songs around the piano and, possibly, a folk dance or two. All too soon, the teacher rings the bell signalling the

close of a school day. Students gather up their books, exchange goodbyes, and leave. The classroom becomes very quiet and very empty — waiting for the return of students.

"How long will the Parkerville School have to wait before it comes to life again? With your approval and support, it could become a reality soon. Thank you for coming to 'Old School Day.' "

Jennie Johnson's mother, Jennie Seifer Richards was a student at the Parkerville Schoolhouse.

June W. Kennedy is a Westford resident and author of "Westford Recollections," a series of historical vignettes and photos.

2 NOV '89, p.5