

Getting Acquainted

Story by Moira Coulter

On July 4, the Chatsworth Country Club celebrated its fortieth anniversary at the farm of Art and Mavis Tovell. At the same time and place, a reunion was held for those formerly from the four adjoining school districts of Bird Hill, Indian Lake, Chatsworth and Ottawa. Several students and teachers from the Ottawa school, in particular, came to reminisce and get reacquainted with former classmates or others they once called neighbours.

These people came to the Tovells' from far and near; there was Myrtle Thompson who journeyed from Chilliwack, British Columbia and Bill Taylor, who came from Vancouver, British Columbia. Taylor's brother, George, came to the reunion but calls home a place in Desert Hot Springs, California. Evelyn Earle just came from Vermilion while Art Tovell, the host, never had to go beyond his houseyard. Yet no matter where these men and women came from, all of them had a single purpose in mind; to get acquainted with today and reacquainted with yesterday.

These people can share between themselves or strangers their memories of the friends and companions they had at the Ottawa school. Earle, who went to the school during the 1920's, remembers the children with whom she attended school not as friends exactly but as "one big family". "Everybody knew everybody else," she explained, "and all the parents were friends."

Just as the parents would be watchful over their children so were the older students over the little ones. It was the older students, Art Tovell recalls, who made sure that the small, carefree children had their mittens on and their scarves tied; they might even have carried the youngsters' lunch pails. The older students also considered it their responsibility to be referee in the school yard during recess.

Earle recalls with a chuckle a conversation she had had with a younger man at a previous reunion. "He was telling me," Earle related, "that he remembered that something happened to him out there and I rescued him. I was the one who went to the teacher for help." The many years may have blurred the exact incidents of this episode for Earle but Myrtle Thompson recalls quite vividly a time she played guardian angel. Her younger sister had been strapped by the teacher for misbehaving. "Then, at recess, this older girl, who was older than I was even, she harassed my sister and

teased and tormented her and locked her in the toilet, and I went after her, I tell you. She went screaming to the school teacher and tattle-taled to the teacher but I gave her (the older girl) a good thumping," Thompson remembered with satisfaction. The teacher stopped Thompson from hitting the girl any further but did not punish her. Thompson thinks that the teacher understood; Thompson just did not want her sister to be punished any further.

This tale of a sister's loyalty reveals that it was not simply so many scattered students but families who attended the Ottawa country school. The students at Ottawa were really a family of families. This experience also shows that like any or-

ordinary family, the school family also had disagreements.

But when all the grudges and disagreements were put aside, the small merry episodes shone through. Bill Taylor, who went to Ottawa school with his brother George in 1915, shared a chain of practical jokes that were pulled on other students or on the teachers. "One particular time," he said, "the teacher went away, for some reason I don't remember. We went up to the attic and when she came back, she couldn't find us. We were all hiding in the attic and then we started throwing little bits of plaster and stuff down on her desktop 'til finally she spotted where we were at and we all came on down." Bill Taylor continued, "And then on Hallowe'en, of course, we took the teacher's buggy all apart and reassembled it up on the barn roof." Then there was the soap-in-the-candy episode. "Remember that time, George when we took that candy to school and we had taken the centres out of the candy and put soap in? On April Fool's Day. You know those candy kisses? Took a section out and filled it with laundry soap and took it to school and just left it in the cloakroom. And it was found by some students. And they started eating it. They were in for a bit of a surprise." Bill Taylor also remembers teasing the girls. "I remember one time when I was monitor at the school and I wanted to get my work done and these students were hanging around so I got one of these girls' stockings and hid them on her. She wasn't supposed to take her stockings off and go barefoot at school. She went home without them and my dad and mother were visiting at their house when she came home. Her mother said "Where's your stockings?" She didn't know what to say, she didn't want to say anything, wanted to protect me, I guess. But they finally got it out of her. So my mom and dad came home and I got a lickin' for it." No more stockings were stolen after that.

All of these practical jokes aside, George Taylor can remember his school days as much simpler and less artificial. For instance, there was no peer pressure. "There was no social climbing or anything like that as there might be today. Just because somebody did something you didn't necessarily do the same thing. Some of the older kids might have smoked, well, you necessarily didn't have to figure you had to smoke too." Bill Taylor readily agreed, "You didn't want things the older kids had and they didn't want what you had."

Neither was there any competition to obtain friends. Companionship was taken for granted by the students of Ottawa. "It was just there and you took it," George Taylor said simply. The children did not have to compete for friends; they were all accepted. Myrtle Thompson felt that while she enjoyed her school chums, much of her companionship was derived from her own sisters. It was not thought to be "uncool" to want to play with one's family members.

Art Tovell noted that the students today lack the same creativity that was present when he went to school. "We always had to make our own fun," Tovell remembered. Games were invented and the equipment was neither standard nor expensive. If the children decided that they wanted to play hockey, they scraped a slough clean of snow and pulled hockey sticks out of a nearby bush. Now, Tovell said playing has become more complicated. The students are all expected to wear uniforms and they spend more time practicing for games than actually playing them.

Tovell also remembered that in the former school days, the students, especially the older ones, learned to be more responsible than those of today. Besides "looking out" for the younger children, the older children often had farm chores to do before and after school hours. Evelyn Earle can remember doing the janitorial duties at the school, as well as looking after a half a dozen students' saddle horses including the teacher's. The teacher knew much more than the young Evelyn Earle but apparently not about such practical matters as how to hitch a horse to a bunnv!

All of these former students of Ottawa are acquainted with the changes in the school system because of their own children. After having years of rural schooling, these presently retired men and women had to learn another "school of thought." At this reunion, they were able to exchange school stories, update family histories, satisfy private curiosities about the fortunes of classmates or chat lightly about their everyday lives. It provided them the perfect chance to reacquaint themselves with the simple school spirit of yesteryear, away from the complications of today.