

Episode 4: Old School: The One-Room Schoolhouses of Bonner County

Welcome to North Idaho Nuggets, a podcast where we share fun facts and scintillating stories from North Idaho's rough-and-tumble past. As we dig deep into the archives and brush off some shiny nuggets of history, won't you come along for the ride?

Today we're going old school, talking about the one-room schools that once dotted the Bonner County countryside.

A recent article in the Bonner County Daily Bee caught my attention. It said that an old one-room schoolhouse in Ponderay had been purchased by Ponderay officials and would be restored as an important piece of local history. Naturally this piqued my interest. I'm always happy when a historic structure is preserved rather than torn down. According to the article, the Ponderay schoolhouse, built in 1908, is pretty dilapidated and it will take quite a bit of work to bring it back to usable condition. But the town officials think it's worth doing, so kudos to them. The building still has its original hardwood floors and much of its chalkboards. While the future use of the building is uncertain, it will possibly become some sort of community gathering place, which has worked out well for a few other local schoolhouses.

In doing research on the Ponderay schoolhouse, I learned that the first teacher was a Mr. Henry Irion. Henry Irion was a prominent businessman in Sandpoint, and his wife Nell Irion was school superintendent and a longtime teacher at the Farmin School. So the Irions invested a lot of their time and energy into the education of Bonner County's children.

Looking into the Ponderay School lit my interest in old one-room schools in general. In the earliest days of Bonner County, education was rather catch-as-catch-can as this area was still very much the Wild West. But as the area developed and particularly as the newly built railroads brought in new residents, families wanted schools for their children. Parents pooled their money to hire whatever teachers they could attract to the low-paying position under primitive circumstances. Understandably, school terms were irregular and the quality of teaching was limited to a particular teacher's strengths and interests. Pretty much they stuck to the fundamentals, the proverbial readin', writin', and 'rithmetic. But for the types of lives most local children expected to lead, as farmers, ranchers, loggers, mill workers, and homemakers, these basics were adequate for the demands placed on them. In fact, I'll submit that, having studied primers of the era such as the McGuffey Readers, 8th graders of that era were often as well or better educated than some high school graduates today, judging from the vocabulary lists and math problems presented. So a limited education was not necessarily a terrible education. But a better, more standardized system was needed.

From about 1884 to 1894, school was held in various places: private homes and outbuildings, rooms in businesses. In 1885 a man named Pappy Smith held school for 7 pupils in a private home, for which he was paid the princely sum of \$50 a month. For a while in Sandpoint, school was held upstairs at the train depot and the stationmaster's wife was the teacher. Later it was held

in a converted saloon called the White Swan. Granted, the school population at the time was small enough that moving around wasn't the massive undertaking it would be today. Still, not having a real schoolhouse wreaked havoc on consistency and made it difficult to attract teachers.

The first schoolhouse built for that purpose in Sandpoint was located at the northwest corner of First Ave. and Church Street. It was built in 1894 by the Farmin family, who did the lion's share of developing the current townsite of Sandpoint. The first teacher, a Miss Musselman, lasted a year. The second, a Miss Andrews, was still on the roll a few years later. Later the school was moved to Second and Church, and finally Third and Church. When the student population outgrew it, it was sold and used for other purposes and finally torn down in 2004. The school most longtime locals remember was the two-story brick Farmin School that was located between Church and Main, where the present U. S. Bank building sits these days. But that school, of course, was no longer a one-room schoolhouse, so we'll discuss the Farmin School more in depth on a future episode.

Some schoolhouses of the day were built with separate entrances and coat closets--one for the boys and one for the girls. Some were built with a bank of windows only against one wall--this was felt to provide better illumination for students working at their desks than windows on both sides. There was often a large woodstove or furnace, a raised platform for the teacher's desk, and students' desks attached in rows with a hole for an ink pot. Although there were no gymnasiums or official physical education classes, most schools had ample room outside for playing games and running around, and some teachers would take their pupils on hikes to burn off excess energy.

In the early years, anyone who completed public school was considered qualified to teach. Eventually teachers were required to attend annual training institutes put on by the county. The majority of teachers were women, although schools were reluctant or even outright refused to hire married women. Occasional exceptions were made, if, for example, a husband was chronically ill or disabled and unable to work. But for the most part schoolteacher jobs went to single ladies. An interesting twist on this rule happened in the early 1920s at the Lamb School near Nordman. The school desperately needed a teacher, and a plea from the superintendent asked for candidates who had at least two children. Why? Because a minimum of six children was needed to hold school, and the Lamb School had four. So if a teacher brought at least two more, they'd have the needed six pupils. Since they were asking for a teacher who had children, I think it's safe to assume they were open to her being married as well, especially back in those days. In any case, the Lamb School did survive. A log schoolhouse was built for it in 1934 as a WPA project. It's one of the last log schoolhouses still standing, and some of you may know it as the Priest Lake Library.

Some schoolhouses had a teacherage nearby--a small cottage or living quarters where the teacher would live. Other times he or, more likely, she was expected to board with local families. The

teacher's duties included things like lighting the stove in the morning, cleaning the schoolhouse, and clearing the snow.

Schoolhouses often did double duty as community centers as well, hosting meetings, parties, Christmas parties, box lunch socials, and dances. If the walls could talk, what stories they could tell!

Over the years there grew to be more than 60 schools in Bonner County, many of them quite small. We don't have time to talk about all of them, but here are a few examples.

You can still visit the Cocolalla school, located at the south end of Cocolalla Loop about a half mile west of 95. This cheerful yellow building, built in 1907, has been beautifully restored and is now used as a community center. Before it was built, school was held in a Northern Pacific Railroad boxcar, so having a dedicated building with nearby spring water and a stove for heat was a big improvement. The school also had a big bell which could be heard far and wide. For a couple of years, some mothers organized a hot lunch program, bringing food and cooking it on the wood stove. But most of the time the kids brought their lunch to school in lunch buckets.

Another old school that's interesting to visit is the Settlement School, located on Highway 200 in Priest River. The current brick building, which boasts a main floor and basement and two classrooms, opened in 1923 after fire destroyed the original wooden schoolhouse. The school had originally been tied to a church, and continued on even after the church consolidated with St. Catherine's in Priest River. It was also known as the Italian Settlement School.

The era of country schoolhouses came to an end in the early 1950s, when all schools were consolidated into one district. The one-room schools closed and students were transported to the new schools. Some of the old schools were bought and repurposed, many more of them torn down.

If you're lucky enough to have an old schoolhouse still standing in your neck of the woods, drop by the Bonner County Museum's Facebook page and tell us about it or, better yet, share a photo. We love to learn about our local treasures.

This podcast was brought to you by the Bonner County History Museum in beautiful Sandpoint, Idaho. If you live in the area or come here on vacation, stop in for a visit. We'd love to get acquainted. In the meantime, we invite you to visit us at bonnercountyhistory.org or find us on Facebook. Give us some feedback on the show and let us know what kinds of topics you'd like to hear about. And tune in again soon when we'll be talking about another North Idaho Nugget.