

Godfrey Van Kampen
Transcript of Oral History on One-room School 1980
From April 2005 newsletter

Godfrey Van Kampen, who attended the one-room school from 1906 to 1914, wrote the following account of his school days. He was the son of the Rev. Isaac Van Kampen, the minister at the Old Stone Church. He grew up in the Parsonage just north of the Church's Education Building on East Saddle River Road. A bit of a prankster, he told us that it could be difficult being the minister's son – "you had to be twice as good." At right is a postcard of the one-room school from the early 1900s when Upper Saddle River was predominantly a farm town with few trees in a vista of cleared land. Under the leadership of Joan Fabris, who attended the one-room school in the 1940s, the Historical Society has created a "one-room" school in the Tenant House at the Museum using desks and books from Upper Saddle River's one-room school. It's shown in the photo at left. The wood stove is much smaller than the one in Upper Saddle River's one-room school, but the idea is the same – it was the place to be near on a cold winter's day.

The building had white clapboard sides and brown trim. Later it was shingled and known as the "Little Green Schoolhouse." There was no well. Water was carried in a pail from Berdan's pump. That used to be a duty for the boys. We'd get a little time off to sneak up there and get a bucket of water. Of course, it always took two boys to carry a bucket of water. The pail was placed on a stand in the hall with one dipper. (Very sanitary). On either side of the entrance hall were the boys' and the girls' cloakrooms. Near the entrance to the schoolroom was a large, round stove, with the stovepipe extending to the back of the room. This gave fair heat to that end of the room. When it was too cold, the pupils sat on benches around the stove. In the winter that was a pretty general thing. We'd just move out of this corner and get down and huddle around the stove. On windy days the frame building would creak and groan.

There was no real system of lighting, just a few kerosene lamps on the walls and the teacher's desk. However, the windows seemed to give adequate light during the day. At night, when the School Board met, they added kerosene lanterns. I remember they always used to carry their own lanterns when they held school meetings.

A few of the pupils still used slates rather than buying pads of paper. That was not encouraged and paper soon came into general use. I started out with a slate. You'd use a slate pencil or soap stone pencil and wash it off. The school did not furnish paper or pencils, only ink and chalk. The fairly large bell in the belfry was used to signal the start of school and termination of 10:30 and 2:30 recess.

At noon, when weather permitted, the boys took their lunch pails outside and sat in a row on the ground on the south side of the building where it was nice and warm. The lunches were hearty – plenty of good sandwiches, nearly always a boiled egg. Boiled eggs seemed to be universal. We had a little game to see whose egg knocked against another would break first. There was one kid who could put the egg against his teeth and always

tell which egg was the stronger and would break the other. He was infallible. Cake or pie were just as universal and sometimes some fruit. No junk food. Plenty of energy was needed for the walk to and from school, averaging from a mile to nearly two miles, and the strenuous games at noon and recess.

We really had strenuous games. Favorite games were Red Rover and another one similar to that called All Geese, where you dashed back and forth and tore through a line, and sometimes tore your clothes. Then we played Duck on the Rock, too (which was a little dangerous. Once in a while somebody would get hit with a rock.) Another game was Prisoner's Base. Some baseball was played when a catcher's mitt and a usable ball and bat were available. Those were scarce items and nobody had money to buy them. So we were lucky to have kind of an old bat or ball and if we had a catcher's mitt, why that was swell and the rest we'd do without.

Sometimes at noon, the boys would wander down to the brook and the swamp that existed then below the hill. There were always things to investigate – fish, snakes, frogs, turtles, and now and then a muskrat. Occasionally a frog or turtle would show up in the teacher's desk.

Each spring it was traditional for the teacher to take the whole school for an afternoon walk in the woods to pick Mayflowers, Jack-in-the-Pulpits, etc. That was always an enjoyable diversion. On Arbor Day we always planted a tree. I suspect that there's one tree out there yet that we planted. I often look at it. We put a bottle with it with a piece of paper in it with everybody's name on it. I wonder if the bottle is still down in the roots. Christmas was observed in a rather festive way. We roamed the woods and gathered ground pine and greens that were used to make wreaths and to festoon the schoolroom. This was in preparation for the annual Christmas entertainment to which the community was invited. As I recall, about 30 or 40 would attend, not a bad proportion of the citizens. Various pupils would recite pieces that were the result of considerable practice, and some dignitary would give us a little talk. Then the members of the School Board would pass out boxes of candy and an orange. They had personally chipped in and bought them. There was no provision in the budget for candy and oranges.

After Christmas the winter weather would get a bit rough at times, but, for the most part, the pupils trudged through. I don't think that the school was closed for weather any more than the present system with better transportation, maybe not as often.

While it may now sound rather primitive, attending the little old school had many compensations. It bred some healthy kids – generally good kids. There was no vandalism. With the exception of a few initials carved on desks, I do not recall anyone damaging school property. (That was a solemn duty – carving initials on the desk. Nearly every desk was all chipped up with initials).

The boys played pranks, too. A lot of the boys had 22 rifles and a favorite stunt was to walk by and throw a 22 bullet into the stove. Pretty soon it would be WHAM and make a little disturbance. And I remember another time a boy put a worm on a fishing line and

hung it out the window and caught one of the Berdan chickens. The school was right next to the Berdan farm.

It was really a wonderful experience and I think that there were certain advantages to going to a one room school. You'd start in the first grade and you'd hear all the other classes recite. By the time you got around to those grades, you'd already picked up some of it and you had a constant review of it. When it came to graduation time, we had to pass the same examination as the town schools because they were county board exams, and we always did very well.

Incidentally, I was in the first class that ever graduated 8th grade. Individuals might have gotten there before, but ours was the first class. There were four of us in it, myself, Atlee Carlough, Helen Kroner, and Rollie Stratton.