

ONE GENERATION TO ANOTHER

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Before undertaking graduate study, Miss Shoen taught in public and private elementary and junior high schools in New York and New Jersey. While doing graduate study, she did part-time teaching in private schools in the City of New York -- Chapin, Spence, the Masters School, Traphagen School of Fashion, and the Child Education Foundation, a Montessori training school for teachers -- teaching in two or three schools each year. After completion of the Ph.D. she served as a member of the staff of THE REGENTS INQUIRY INTO THE CHARACTER AND COST OF EDUCATION IN NEW YORK STATE (1936-38) -- at the time when New York's normal schools were changed into colleges. After 1938 she gave full time to writing and research, with two exceptions: (1) two years of intensive war-work in engineering drawing and design on the U.S. Navy's sensitive calculating instruments; (2) four years as Head of the History Department, Davis and Elkins College. West Virginia.

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By HARRIET H. SHOEN

"But they only pay \$6.000 a year," said my young friend who was seeking his first job as a teacher. He left the impression that he valued his untested competence in his chosen profession much more highly than that. Yet I knew that he had only the vaguest notion of what true success in that profession would require from him.

Where does a teacher get his ideals of professional service? Where did I get mine?

I began to think back -- fifty years or more -- to the day in 1915 when I signed my first teaching contract. It was a contract with the State of New York. I found it still in my files -- printed on such good paper that it looked as though it might Number 7 of the St. Regis Indian Reservation "at the compensation 01 \$L80 for each day actually taught." The New York State Education Department agreed to "employ and pay as stated the teacher thus engaged." And there was a clause that protected both parties: "The teacher may be dismissed at any time for incompetency or neglect of duty and may be released from this contract by giving due notice of a desire to leave the service."

I remember how thrilled I was to get that job -- even though my father reminded me that there would be weeks when I would not earn enough to pay my board (\$6 per week). And the idea of teaching Indians appealed to my desire to render service to people who needed education.

The reservation was only fifteen miles from my home. But in those days, before automobiles were common and when all roads were bad, that was a long distance. In reality I had never seen many of the Mohawk Indians who lived there and knew but a few facts about them. Indian men who worked on the cables of a suspension bridge that was built near my home had seemed like all other men to me. My father admired the steady nerves that won for them a good reputation on high steel construction work. Yet he had no love for Indians who came at night and cut down the best black ash trees in his "wood lot."

The inspector from Albany who hired me had explained the rules of my job. My teaching vocabulary was to be limited to 300 words, and I memorized the list. He warned me never to permit pupils to speak the Indian language in the school building or on the school premises. I was not to

fraternize with adult Indians, never to spend a night in an Indian home, and certainly not to marry an Indian. Should I disobey these rules, I would be “instantly dismissed.”

There were a few tense days of preparation before I left home. I needed some new clothes. Just before I left, my father bought me a \$30 worsted suit. I promised that it would be the last thing that he would have to buy for me. As things turned out, it was to be the only new thing I had that year -- except footgear.

A two-seated covered surrey, drawn by a team of frisky bay horses operated as a stage, carrying mail and a few traveling salesmen over a route that stopped at the village on the edge of the reservation. My father was more afraid of having me associate with traveling men than with Indians. So he drove me out to the reservation himself -- in the open rubber-tired buggy he usually used only to go to town on Saturday nights. It was a day's trip, part of it over a road with deep mud holes in it.

At the boarding house I was shown to a room with a ropespring bed. On top of the ropes was a corn-husk mattress, and on top of that a buoyant feather bed that was on a level with my shoulders. When I told the teacher who was to share the bed with me that I wondered how I would ever be able to climb into it, she said with a laugh, “I'll lift you in!” She was a jolly girl of Canadian-French ancestry. Beside her, I was a “shrimp” -- under five feet tall and less than ninety pounds in weight.

At dinner I was the only new teacher. I quickly learned that I was also the only blonde and the only Protestant. Then I discovered a few facts about my new position. “District Number 7 is the worst school on the reservation,” I was informed. “Those kids got rid of four teachers last year.” “You have the longest walk to school of any of us,” said someone else. “It's awful in the winter in below-zero weather,” added my roommate. “Two years ago a teacher from that school froze to death on the way home.” I did not talk much -- except to answer questions about my education. Even then what I said was too much, for I unwittingly let them know that I had had more education than any of them. It was then possible for a high school graduate, age 18, to get a license to teach in rural schools. None of them had attended normal school, as I had. I tried to apologize for having been graduated at seventeen, which made it necessary for me to go away to school until I was old enough to teach.

Next day I was able to visit my school building in advance of opening day. I was pleased with what I found. The building, no more than five years old, was well built and better equipped than the average rural schoolhouse. Two little rooms with windows opened off a big schoolroom. There was a good cloakroom and a roomy supply closet that contained plenty of books, paper and pencils. A big furnace-like stove stood in the middle of the schoolroom, and there was a generous supply of wood in the woodshed and coal in the cellar. The prospect of having to build fires did not frighten a farmer's daughter. A wall-ladder led to an attic that had a good floor and windows. Under the building was an artesian well, securely sealed with cement at the level of the cellar floor. The hand pump in the classroom worked easily. The State of New York had been generous with traditional school supplies and equipment, but I was soon to learn that any unusual supplies would be totally unobtainable because they would be unauthorized by law.

Twenty-eight pupils were waiting for me when I arrived the first day. They stopped speaking Indian before I was within earshot and eyed me slyly from head to foot as I came up the path. Never had I endured such scrutiny. I said my first “Good morning, boys and girls” before I unlocked the padlock and opened the door. The pupils entered quietly and took seats wherever they liked. Then it was my turn to scrutinize them.

Half of them were clean and well dressed and had dinner pails that they took to their seats and clutched tightly. Two big boys wore new suits. Eight or ten girls in stiffly starched dresses, with their black hair painfully curled, looked uncomfortable. Most of the rest formed a motley group -- ragged and dirty, with disheveled hair. Three nine- or ten-year old boys looked as though they were wearing their father's shoes and overalls.

From the way they chose their seats I suspected that something besides economic status separated the two groups of pupils. I decided not to change the seats. By the time I had taken names and sorted pupils into classes, it was time for recess, fifteen minutes of play in the schoolyard.

After a summer of neglect, the yard was ablaze with the color of wild flowers -- golden rod, Queen Anne's lace, purple asters, and tiger lilies. "Pick some flowers to make our room look pretty," I suggested as the children filed out. Then I cringed, for the word "pick" was not on the 300-word list. I was not eager to begin my duty as policeman against the Indian language, so I decided not to go outside. What I did not hear I would not have to be responsible for. It seemed very important to me to get names written into a seating chart. But I listened to two boys who wanted to talk to me. "We eat snakes," said one boy whose feet were swimming around in his father's shoes. "Where do you get them?" I asked, "Few snakes could live in this cold climate." I felt another pang of malfeasance of duty because neither "snake" nor "climate" was on the 300-word list.

"We eat rats," growled the other boy. "Too bad for the rats," I replied in an unconcerned manner. Then I said in a stern voice. "Now run along and get some fresh air." The word "fresh" was not on the list either.

I had been a teacher for less than half a day and had broken the rules from Albany four times in less than five minutes. But no one was present to exercise the "instant dismissal" penalty. I could see that most of the pupils had a larger vocabulary than 300 words. Common sense told me that I would have to interpret that rule loosely.

Before the day ended I had solved the riddle of the difference between the two groups of pupils. Some came from Christian homes where American ways of life were practiced. The rest had parents who were making a somewhat futile effort to maintain old Indian customs and beliefs. The children, in their conduct and attitudes toward each other, reflected this conflict of religion and culture. The Christians were Catholics, most of whose fathers were farmers. They called the others "pagans", and that term did not seem to offend children whose parents tried to make a living by hunting, fishing, and basketry, and were not opposed to theft, so long as they could get away with it. Conditions were present for continual strife.

That afternoon I intercepted a note that was being passed around. On it was a recognizable picture of "Teacher" and the statement "Teacher has yellow hair." I thought to myself: "This poor dream teacher with lemon-yellow hair is going to have a bad time trying to keep pagans and Christians from fighting each other." I had studied enough psychology in normal school to know that it would be my duty to try to provide opportunities for using this competition in constructive ways.

"This is a good picture of me. I shall save it," I said. "Some day I will draw some pictures for you on the blackboard." I did not intend to punish any note-writers who used the English language correctly!

It was not difficult to discover why certain pupils wanted to talk about what they ate. They were hungry. They brought no lunches to school and did their best to steal lunch boxes from other pupils. This gave me some knotty disciplinary problems that could not best be solved by punishment. Food was what was needed, and I had no easy way of getting food for fifteen hungry children. Certainly I could not stretch my \$1.80 for each day actually taught to cover much more than my own board.

Through talks with other teachers I learned that they had no sympathy for those Indians who lived by feast or famine without planning for the future. "Punish those little pagans," they advised. "That's all you can do when they steal lunch boxes."

By the end of October, nevertheless, I had decided that it was almost futile to try to teach hungry children to read. They could not keep their attention on books. I determined to do all I could to get food for them -- in spite of what other teachers might say if they heard about it.

The mother of one of the older girls had been a teacher before she married an Indian many years before. She had five stalwart sons, three of whom worked off the reservation and sent money home. The

other two ran the home farm, which was the best farm in our district of the Reservation. Every day they hauled big cans of milk to Borden's factory in the village. Their milk wagon usually was the only vehicle I passed on my way to school. I invited their mother to come to school and enlisted her sympathy for my hungry pupils. For the rest of the year her sons left a big three-gallon pail of milk at school every school-day morning. We needed more than milk, and I had to exercise nerve and tact and ingenuity to get it. I knew the owner of a general store in the village (his daughter had been a high school classmate of mine). He was not famous for generosity -- as any Indian who traded muskrat or fox skins with him could have confirmed. I bearded this lion in his den. For the rest of the year he gave me a five-pound package of oatmeal and a big can of cocoa every Monday morning -- on condition that I tell nobody about it. I packed these supplies over the three-mile hike to the school in a big knapsack.

Fortunately our stove had a flat top with two griddles. The girl whose mother furnished the milk had the honor of preparing cocoa and oatmeal, with assistance from two big boys who lifted pots and pans and kettles. This was done while I taught the "non-English Class", just before lunchtime. That was my largest class (eight pupils) and the hardest to teach because ages ranged from five to twelve and none spoke English. I was ready to eat oatmeal and drink cocoa with the pagans by the time that class was over.

There were nut trees near our school building -- butternuts, black walnuts, hickory nuts, and hazelnuts. For weeks the children gathered nuts -- after school and on Saturdays and Sundays. We spread them on the attic floor to dry. This solved the ladder-climbing problem, which had been fast approaching disciplinary proportions. While the nuts were drying nobody had teacher's permission to climb the ladder. It was understood that, when dry, half of the nuts would be left at school and half divided equally, by count, among the pupils. I expected nuts to provide a nutritious addition to our meager luncheon diet. I also hoped that the fact that we saved and used them frugally would teach a lesson to children whose parents were in the habit of gorging themselves when they had plenty and then starving for weeks.

I could see the chasm between pagans and Christians gradually narrowing as pupils worked together on various activities that they liked. Boys seemed to take it for granted that I would expect a pagan and a Christian to work together, and it was fun for them to empty ashes, so long as they were building a cinder path. A climax came at Thanksgiving time when one of the pagans brought a big cake of maple sugar to school to share with everybody. I used our best butternuts to make some maple fudge. We were all friends that day, and we drank tea because we had no cocoa. After that, tea was always available for everybody who wanted it; it was our beverage of unity and hospitality.

In my November report to Albany I had more to say about our housekeeping activities than about book-learning. I fully expected to be rebuked for giving school time to activities that were not mentioned in the state's curriculum for elementary schools. I was surprised and delighted when I received a letter of appreciation for the "industrial work" I had been doing! The letter ended with these encouraging sentences: "A teacher's best work is often what she does outside the ordinary classroom routine. These Indian schools particularly need a great deal of the kind of training you have been giving the children."

I needed that letter to raise my spirits. It came the day before I was to leave the reservation for two weeks of Christmas vacation. Because of that long vacation I would not earn enough to pay my December board. I faced the embarrassment of having to ask my father for money.

What my father had to say about my job was not printable. He was sure that I could do much better as a waitress -- "what with tips and all." He begged me to quit that job where I had to be near children who had the itch and lice in their hair. He noticed that I had lost weight on my boarding-house diet of boiled potatoes, codfish cakes and cabbage, with an occasional dried-apple pie. Such food was not fit for a farmer's hired hand, he said. Nobody should be expected to pay good hard money for it.

I was tired enough to quit the job. But I had been taught in normal school that it was a point of ethics for a teacher to keep her side of a contract -- and also to stay at least two years in her first job. So back I went to the reservation.

For that trip my father drove a team of horses hitched to bobsleds. I sat on the seat beside him, wrapped in bearskin laprobes from bears my grandfather had killed. Behind us, wrapped in more robes and nestling in straw, was a barrel of russet apples, several bushels of potatoes, a big bag of onions, another of beans, and some sides of salt pork. As I remember the logic I used to get it, this loot was supposed to represent the food I would have eaten if I had not been earning my own living.

We made the whole trip almost in complete silence. I imagine my father was disgusted with his stubborn eldest daughter. He stowed my provisions in the school cellar before he delivered me to my boarding house.

Had I not used snowshoes, I doubt that I would have survived that winter. Roads were never open at the hour I set out in the morning. The only milk team that came that way would be waiting at the school for me to open the door. Wearing skirts that reached my ankles, I often had to walk through drifted snow a foot deep.

No lady in those days wore short skirts. Slacks, ski pants, or leotards were unheard of. I must confess that I was no lady as I made my way through sub-zero snowstorms. I turned my skirt up to my knees and fastened it to my belt with safety pins. On snowshoes I defied the drifted roads and made my way across fields and fences -- directly toward three tall pine trees on a hilltop from which I knew I could see the schoolhouse. I thought that nobody saw me. But I should have known better.

I shall never forget the day that an aged Indian, with a face like leather, burst into my warm classroom, carrying a pair of snowshoes he had made especially for me. "Big man, big snowshoes; little woman, little snowshoes," he said. From his gestures it was clear to me that the snowshoes I had been using were too long and too broad for my height and weight. "Little woman, big snowshoes, big backache," he explained. I knew from experience what he meant.

The pupils had had advance notice of this surprise. Over and over again they shouted a name that I was told was to be my Indian name forever. Its meaning in English was "Walking Through Snow."

Walking Through Snow greatly enjoyed her own snowshoes after that. By placing her feet in the proper position from step to step, she could cover three miles in half the time it took her to do it in summer.

On days when it was between twenty and thirty degrees below zero I longed to stay all night at school. But I did not dare to do it. I knew that if I did not get home by six o'clock, a search party would set out to find the frozen body of the missing teacher. So I waited as long as I dared before banking the fire, which I wanted to be still burning in the morning. From 5 p.m. to 9 a.m. is a long time to keep a coal fire burning.

In such weather Monday morning was a nightmare. There had been no fire in the building for two days. We were all cold when we reached school. Ashes had to be removed from the stove before a fire could be built. Usually I kept a hot wood fire going for two hours before I put coal on it. To keep children from getting too near the hot stove, I had them sit in a circle on the floor, with feet pointing toward the stove. They stayed there as long as it took to dry their shoes and get their feet warm. They drank cocoa or hot tea and studied spelling or reading books. School did not begin in earnest until about eleven when I called arithmetic classes, one after the other, to the bench in front of my desk.

I remember one stormy Monday when Father Buchette, the Franciscan missionary who visited our school every month or so, came in while we were still shivering around the stove. His broad brimmed, low-crowned, black hat was covered with ice and his long cassock frozen stiff to a point well above his knees. I was proud of my big boys who helped him crack the ice from his clothes and get dried out beside our roaring wood fire. But I began to teach spelling classes earlier than usual. In school, as well as at the boarding house, I formed a Protestant minority of one, and I did not want Father Buchette to get the impression that I neglected my duty. The good priest had permission from Albany to speak to the pupils.

so long as what he said was “nonsectarian” and spoken in English. Since I had orders to report on what he said, I was not sure that he did not have the same kind of orders to report on me.

Father Buchette was of great help to me in many ways. To say to any pupil, whether Christian or pagan, “If you are absent again without a good excuse, I’ll tell Father Buchette,” was far more effective than to send a truant officer to a place where truants could slip into Canada after they saw the officer coming. Father Buchette visited homes in both countries, knew all of the Indians, and spoke their language well. News that I heard from him was sure to be accurate.

The state employed a doctor on a part-time basis. Occasionally he held office hours in my school. He fought a persistent battle against “the itch” and I was left in charge of the hardest task connected with his method of treating it. There was a galvanized iron washtub in one of the little rooms that opened off the schoolroom. I was supposed to force stubborn pagan boys to take hot baths in water that had sodium bicarbonate in it. I did it -- but not without having to go into the room to make sure that the patient was really in the tub. Among these remnants of the once-great Iroquois Nation, the idea that “witches” controlled disease was still prevalent. Children would tremble with fear lest they offend the witches by taking a bath.

One little girl was absent from school because her father saw witches pass the house on the road. She was not permitted to come to school until her father found the right leaves to make tea to exorcise the witches. I must have reported that incident to Albany because I still have a letter in which I received the official reply to that one: “I think the little girl should be in school in spite of the witches. I know of no better protection against them than education.” Father Buchette said that he knew the child’s parents and would call on them. The child came to school the next day. Later Father Buchette told me, “No, I did not convert him. But I convinced him that my God had power over witches. I knew that fellow before he got this notion of trying to be a witch doctor. My practice is bigger than his is!”

Our school’s washtub was not a popular gadget. I decided that it might be worthwhile to teach pupils about other uses for washtubs. I taught them what my Puritan grandmother had taught me about the five waters for washing clothes: 1) cold soaking water, 2) hot scrubbing water, 3) warm sudsing water, 4) warm first rinsing water, and 5) cold last-rinsing water.

Our first washday was a huge success. The boys brought dirty shirts and the girls dirty dresses. By night they were all dry and smelled “sweet” as we put them into a big new laundry basket, contributed by one of the basket-weaving mothers. We washed on Monday and ironed on Tuesday -- according to the old New England rhyme, which I had taught them. We borrowed an ironing board and real flatirons from the woman who gave us the milk, and her daughter supervised Tuesday’s ironing.

The project was repeated on four Mondays and Tuesdays. Then I put a stop to it. They had begun to wash their fathers’ shirts. I did not intend to turn the school into a free laundry for the whole reservation. Besides that, I was afraid that the older pupils, who supervised all of this washing and ironing while I did my regular teaching, were not getting enough book learning.

In a weak moment I had promised to teach the girls to sew, and they did not let me forget it. I had no way of getting new cloth until one day in early spring, when a complete surprise solved that problem. During the year I had written letters about Indians to some of my former teachers at the Oswego State Normal School. Unknown to me, the president of that institution had read some of my letters to the student assembly. The result was that pupils of the Practice School gave a play and earned \$20 which they sent to me to buy cloth. I bought cotton flannel and taught the girls to make warm nightgowns.

The boys were miffed because they had not been included in the sewing project. They said that all they got to do was to carry ashes, wood, coal, and water -- and scrub the dirty floor. There was truth in their complaint I knew that Indian men did some of the best beadwork, so I decided to provide opportunity for boys to sew. Their project was to be a quilt made from embroidered blocks of unbleached muslin. They decided to let everybody help.

Pupils drew pictures which I transferred to ten-inch squares of cloth. Boys drew the best pictures and did some of the best embroidery. But everybody, even the tiny tots, embroidered a picture-block in red thread. When all were finished, the girls washed and ironed the blocks, and I took them home and sewed them together on the sewing machine -- between strips of red sateen that framed them.

All parents were invited to our quilting bee, which came two weeks before school was to close. Women who had spent most of their life weaving baskets had clever fingers. They did the quilting. Their stitches were as fine as any I had ever seen. How delighted they were when I let them take home the long milliner's needles that I had provided for the work!

Fathers sat around the schoolyard smoking and talking -- pagans and Christians associating with each other. They had brought fresh fish and potatoes, which they roasted over the coals of a trench fire. How good that feast tasted!

With the fathers as audience we rehearsed the play that the non-English class was going to perform on the last day of school -- a dramatization of Little Red Riding Hood. I had completed a cape and hood for Red Riding Hood, which was the only costume that was ready. The fathers were so delighted that we did the play over and over again and accepted their advice about acting.

A few days later I received a wooden mask of a wolf that one of the fathers had made. In olden days Iroquois Indians had been famous mask-makers, and this was a good one. The wolf in our play had cause to be proud of his costume, but I had some difficulty in getting him to act his part without giving his total attention to his mask.

This dramatization grew out of my conscientious use of what was then called the "dramatic method" of introducing a foreign language to beginners. I wrote a 10- report to Albany about the adaptation of this teaching method for use in Indian schools. The result was that I was promoted. I was assigned to teach non-English and "industrial" classes in the Onondaga Indian School near Syracuse -- at \$400 a year.

We had another party on the last day of school. It was I who ruined the joy of it. I felt as though I were deserting my duty when I announced that I would not be back the next year.

The children wanted me to have the quilt, which had been used to cover the bed for both Grandmother and the wolf in the play. I suggested that they give it to an orphanage run by nuns for Indian Children. Father Buchette was chosen to deliver it with the special request -- proposed by one of the pagan boys -- that it be used in the room for "sick babies".

By keeping my school open for the full quota of days required for a legal school year in the State of New York, I was paid \$288 that year. All but \$48 of it went for board. My wages were less than what my father paid to an uneducated "farm hand". Farmers in that part of the country were then paying a "hired man" a dollar a day and "keep". The hired man received \$365 in hard cash, none of which had to be paid for board. That was seven times as much as I had left after paying board.

All of this happened fifty years ago. I passed through the reservation in 1963. The old schoolhouse was still standing, but it was somebody's residence. For years Indian children had attended a consolidated school, staffed by well-paid teachers. The three tall pine trees on the hill were gone. Other landmarks were under the waters of the St. Lawrence Seaway. And I knew that the most "Mohawk" of all Mohawks today live in Brooklyn and find preferential employment as steel construction workers in and around the City of New York.

What could I say from my own experience that might be helpful to my young friend who would be completing his first year of teaching in 1965?

"Have you ever thought of joining the Peace Corps?" I asked.

"Are you serious?" he inquired.

"I was never more serious in my life," I replied. "I gained my most valuable experience as a teacher during the year when necessity required that I operate like a one-woman Peace Corps."

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