

CUMBERLAND TALES

Pigtails in the ink wells: Yet another history of Holladay School

By Sam T. Barnes
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Several excellent and warmly personal articles about Holladay School were written by the late Arda Lee. This new commentary is intended to present the history of the school in a somewhat broader perspective. It describes the way a country school originated and how it was equipped a century ago.



Consolidation of schools in autonomous school districts were combined into a necessarily larger school. This was not an easy accomplishment 93 years ago. District schools were usually much smaller. They had one teacher, one room, rough-hewn benches and long plank tables to write on. Each district had a district school director who hired and paid the teacher. In many cases the curriculum was overseen by the director, who was

concerned with the political correctness of his day. District school directors were replaced with county school boards by the state legislature in 1907. Attendance at school, however, was not compulsory in the state of Tennessee until 1913. These are the enactments that impelled this first consolidation in Putnam County.

The Putnam County school board of 1916 was chaired by attorney Oscar K. Holladay, and the secretary was J. M. Hatfield. The other board members were J. T. Moore, W. R. Verble, E. M. DuBois and W. T. Sewell. It was the decision of this board to begin consolidation in the county. About five miles southwest of Cookeville, there were three relatively close schools. In their respective districts were Lone Oak, Lee Seminary and Pleasant Valley schools. This was the area the school board chose for consolidation. A convenient and acceptable five-acre site was purchased on the farm of Mr. and Mrs. C. A. Smith for \$100. Access to spring water 100 yards southwest of the school was assured in the deed. The decision was made to name the school after Mr. Holladay, who was not only chairman of the board but was a prominent and distinguished attorney. As state senator in 1908, Holladay had initiated the legislation that began prohibition of liquor in the state of Tennessee.

The new frame schoolhouse had four rooms. There were two chimneys for the coal – and wood-burning stoves. Fifty feet south of the school was the coal pile. At another discrete 50 feet the outhouse was located. Above the front porch and in the middle of the symmetrical slanted roof was a belfry containing a large bell. This bell proved to attract both students and lightning!

Certain advances in educational technology of the time were available at Holladay School. There were individual slates on which to practice arithmetic and penmanship. There were blackboards, and the teachers had their own bookcase. It is probable that they were individual “patent” desks. The individuality of a desk must have been quite emancipating in a time of necessary sibling sharing in the large families. Under the desk’s sloped writing surface, there was accommodation for slate tablets and other writing materials. At the top of the desk was a perforation to take the glass ink well. When the little girl in front of

you had long pigtailed, it was almost impossible not to stick those pigtailed in the ink well. That was when the miscreant met the principal, and his paddle.

The first principal at Holladay School was Harvey D. McCulley. Early teachers were Notie Proffitt and Kate Davis. Hurst McCaleb came in 1921, as did Vallie Carr, who taught for many years. In 1922 Carr had a confrontation with U. L. Whitson, a wistful 9-year-old who was staring out the window. Carr reprimanded him, and out the window he went! She actually chased him, but never caught him. Another disturbance to the school routine occurred in 1927. During a sudden windstorm little Nannie Pearl Ament had gone to the outhouse. As teachers and students looked out the windows in amazement, the outhouse blew over, but little Nannie Pearl crawled out safely. Ten years later, Pearl and U. L. Whitson were married. She chased him – and she caught him.

In July 1929, during a thunderstorm, lightning hit the belfry of Holladay School and the building burned to the ground. When classes started the following fall, it was necessary to divide the students into two temporary sections. Holladay “one” attended Lee Seminary School and Holladay “two” attended class at the Judd Graveyard Church. This situation continued for three years until the new Holladay School was opened in 1931.

The new brick building was very similar in size and layout as the previous frame building. Modifications were added in succeeding years. We have no record of when the old outhouse was replaced by septic tanks and indoor toilets. We do not know when running water came to the bathrooms. There is evidence that there was a stove in the school for cooking, and an indoor eating area. We do not know when the cellar was dug and the furnace installed. The school bell, which was thought to be the culprit in the fire of '29, was not reinstalled on the building. Where is the bell nowadays?

Another local first for the Holladay School was its use of school buses. The horse-drawn and covered wagon buses were “for students who lived more than three miles from school.” If you lived three miles or less from school you were expected to walk.

Another interesting observation from the numerous pictures available is that all the teachers and students were thin. And in many of the pictures there were more overalls and aprons than shoes!

Use of the brick Holladay School continued from 1931 until it closed in the late summer of 1965.

The county sold the building and land to Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Carter in 1968. In 1976, it was bought by the author of this essay, who resides in the school at this time.

Story by: Dr. Sam Barnes, a retired orthopedic surgeon.

“Cumberland Tales” is a service of the Cookeville History Museum. The editors Calvin Dickinson and Michael Birdwell invite anyone to submit a story of 800 words concerning the history/folklore of the Upper Cumberland region.

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Holladay School 1915, is believed to be the first consolidated school in Putnam County. This picture was made the first year the school opened. Shown is the original building and the first teachers and students. Standing to the left in the back row are the teachers, Miss Notie Proffitt (sister of Herman Proffitt), Miss Kate Davis, and the school’s principal, Harve McCulley who was the father of Charlie and Sam McCulley. At the right near the horses is school superintendent James Monroe Hatfield. At the right is one of the first school bus-wagons and driver, Jim Sutton. Some say this was the site of the beginning of the Putnam County Agricultural Fair where community fairs were held for several years before the fair was organized. This building burned on July 18, 1929, after being struck by lightning. Photo courtesy of Arda Lee.

Pictorial History of Putnam County Tennessee by First American Bank, pg. 205.