

## Readin' Ritin' and Rithmatic

By Barbara Bedau Brow

The following is written with information from the Montague and Whitehall Centennial books, as well as articles that appeared in both of the local newspapers.

The first Mouth School was originally a log cabin with a dirt floor, built in 1849, and located on the north side of Old Channel Trail near the Lau Road intersection. Pat Powers was the first teacher. A second Mouth School was built on the bluff overlooking the Old Channel Trail Bayou near the Hamilton property. It also burned. The third Mouth School was built in 1864 near the site of the current tennis courts on Indian Bay Road. This building also burned and the fourth Mouth School was built at the same site in 1899. It was an independent school until 1967 when it was consolidated with Montague. The building housed elementary pupils through the fifth grade.



There was another schoolhouse built in the early 1860s, north of the Mouth. This school was known as the Germantown School, but the name was later changed to Pershing after the First World War. Later it was moved to a site about two miles further north and was used until it consolidated with Montague School around 1951. The White River Township Hall used it until it was replaced with the current building.

Montague Area Public Schools began in 1864 when moderator D. Leitch, director J. Heald and assessor E. Knudsen organized the board of education. A tax was levied in September of 1865 that funded the construction of the first school house, which was built on Sheridan Street between Williams and Knudsen Streets.

In 1875, a white brick structure spanning three stories was constructed. The \$16,000 school included a belfry and a cupola. The school was located at the site of Oehrli Elemenrary School on Knudsen Street. In November 1919, the school burned down, but it was rebuilt in 1921. School was held in various churches during the rebuilding period.



About 1885 another school was built on the North Hill and was known as The Holland School. This building was two stories high, consisted of four classrooms and two teachers; but this school only went to the third grade. It was used for about 13 years and by 1902 was used only for basketball practice. From 1907 to 1910 it was the site of the Empire Knitting Mill.

By 1898 both schools were operating with eight teachers. Nonresident pupils were admitted to the High School at a \$1.00 per month tuition. All text books were free and a regular curriculum was taught. A class of ten graduated from the first class and one of them was Nellie B. O'Connell Chisholm.

Another schoolhouse was built in the area was called the Trading Post School. Originally on the side of George Fehrenbach's mill, it was later moved farther west to the side of the James Reavey home on Fruitvale Road. One of the early teachers was 15 year old Nellie B. Chisholm. This was her first teaching job after graduating from high school.



In the late 1880s the Maple Grove School was built. It was located on the present Old Channel Trail and Anderson Road. It was the first Standard School in the county. In 1907, while Nellie B. Chisholm was teaching in this school, she became the first woman to run for the office of County School Superintendent. She held that office for many years and started the P.T.A.

Maple Grove, along with the Trading Post, Mears and the Redding schools were the first to consolidate with Montague Public School System. The Maple Grove school continued under the firm but loving hand of Mrs. Dolly Flagstead, known to all as "aunt Dolly" until 1921 when the building was moved to the property of George Lindrup.

The Montague School on Knudsen was the first consolidated school in the County under the Smith-Hughes Act, which allowed such subjects as Home Economics, Agriculture and Manual training. It had three busses and about 350 students in all. An addition was added and in 1956 a new high school was built. In 1959 still another school was built as an intermediate and was named the Nellie B. Chisholm .

The Knudsen school is now called the R. R. Oehrli Elementary School after Raymond Robert Oehrli who served as superintendent for 36 years. He was hired by Montague Schools in 1929, at the age of 25, when the school system had 285 students and eight teachers. When he retired in 1965, there were over one thousand students and 55 teachers.

Other schools within the Montague School area included: Gee which was located on the corner of Lamos and Meinert Park Roads; Sumner which was originally built in 1866; Pine Grove , Flower Creek which was located on the Randall Fordham farm with Don Tower as the first teacher; Green which was dedicated in 1877 and operated for 72 years before burning to the ground in December 1949; Mouth and Rothbury.

Another interesting thing is the unusual way the early teachers were hired and paid. The teachers were boarded and roomed at each family, and the family with the most children had to keep the teacher the longest. As it was hard to get teachers, the following examination was all that was necessary. First, the one to be hired was asked: How old are you? What is your name? Will you agree not to get married during this term? These were the most important questions. If the teacher answered yes to the last question, she was hired. But the trouble came the next term, when she was not asked if she would remain single, then there would be a vacancy to be filled. And so it went.

Usually the schools were open only two or three months of the year because of the poverty of the settlers and the need for the help from even the small children to make out in a pioneer community. The first school in Whitehall was in 1860, the year after the village was platted. "Aunt Polly" Allen had a private school in the house of Daniel Basom with half a dozen pupils.

The following year District No. 1, Mears, was organized and the countryside was searched to find 10 pupils which would make the district eligible for state aid. A room was obtained over a vacant store and Miss Ellen Foley was the teacher. In 1862 the district felt a need to economize and used a log cabin built by Capt. Hanson at the foot of Colby Street.

With public money having been used up in the winter of 1864, the school was closed, but in the spring Miss Phoebe Clark started it back up again. In the summer of 1865 Mr. Slocum gave the school district two lots at the southeast corner of Division and Slocum Streets and the White School was built there. The school could accommodate 50 pupils and was crowded the first term, probably due to students coming from miles around.

Three years later the district had to build a second school, the Brown School, alongside the first one. The next winter, the district had to take on an office room on North Colby Street to house the extra pupils. In 1869 Brown School added a second story and the school was divided into Primary, Grammar and High School departments. The staff consisted of a principal and three teachers. In 1870 it was necessary to add a story to the White School.



In 1878 the former junior high school building was completed on the southeast corner of Sophia and Livingston out in the midst of the oak grubs and the parents complained about the building being located so far away from the center of town.

The brick school had a basement and two floors, had four rooms on the first floor and two on the second, together with a large assembly hall on the top floor which was later made into the High School Department.

Two rooms were later added in the basement and rooms filled out for the janitor, housing being part of his pay.

Despite the fact the district had a high school department as early as 1869, the rigors of pioneer life showed no one was able to stay in school long enough to graduate. That is until Maggie Thompson, daughter of an early mill owner, became the first and only graduate in 1877. The next year Ida Wideo, daughter of a leading merchant, was the only graduate. In 15 years, up to 1892, there were only 54 high school graduates.



In 1881 the school boards of Whitehall, Dalton, Fruitland, and Blue Lake Townships met and set up School District No. 2, Whitehall Township. District No. 1 was the Schneider School out near Schneider Lake.

Fruitland District No. 6 – This clapboard school with its octagonal belfry was erected in 1883. The school was built by Thomas Keilor on land donated by John McNeil. Students attended class here from 1883 until May 1948 when Fruitland Township School District consolidated with Whitehall. In 1961 the school was donated to the White Lake Community Club. It was deeded to Fruitland Township in 1990.

In 1895 the state law required there be at least five months of school each year. In 1900 the local school board voted that there be 10 months of school a year. In 1903 a steam heating system was put in the school and coal replaced the many cords of wood previously stacked in the school yard.

As an indication of the wages in those days, the janitor was told he could receive \$300 a year and live in the school basement, or could receive \$360 if he wanted to rent a house off the school grounds.

In 1914 the district built an addition on the east side to eliminate the basement rooms. In 1924 a gymnasium was built and equipped.

The old belfry's weight had finally taken its toll on the attic beams and in 1937 was ordered removed from the building to avoid the possibility that the bell might plunge through the roof. A stage and shower rooms were built in the gymnasium that year.

The first Whitehall High School band was started in 1929 by Louis Peterson of Ludington, who spend one day a week in Whitehall, one in Shelby, etc.

In 1941 Whitehall District No. 1 (Schneider School) united with the Whitehall School to form the Whitehall Township School district. The Whitehall district then had a total of 345 students in all 13 grades.



In 1942 Mrs. Arthur Hall and Mrs. Arnold Panzl on behalf of the P.T.A. sponsored a hot lunch project designed to serve 125 pupils a day. Wilson School (Fruitland No. 4) and Blue Lake No. 4 and 5 joined Whitehall and the school enrollment was now 419.

Perry D. Chatterton became superintendent in 1943. Lakewood and Sparre school districts joined Whitehall and the name was formally changed to Whitehall Rural Agricultural School.

In 1946 White Lake School joined Whitehall and the wooden Lakewood School building was moved to

Whitehall to provide additional space. Conklin district joined Whitehall and enrollment was now at 744.

In December of 1948 the new elementary school was built and opened in 1950 with an enrollment of approximately 900 students. With the rise of population from the expansion at Misco and the Whitehall Leather Company as well as the incoming chemical plants to White Lake, the school began to bulge at the seams almost as soon as the new building opened.

In 1953 Supt. Wm. D. Munroe campaigned for a \$650,000 bond issue for a new high school. He was successful but died suddenly before work could even get started. The building project was completed under the direction of Supt. John Jacobs, and was again crowded almost before the doors opened.

In 1956 Melvin B. Lubbers succeeded Mr. Jacobs as Superintendent and the following year found himself campaigning for a \$2,200,000 bond to permit the building of additions to the elementary and high school buildings, as well as a new building to be used as the senior high school, to handle the total enrollment of 1,800 students.

Dedication of the new high school building took place in May 1960. The former high school building became the junior high and the elementary school will house kindergarten through fourth grade and special education.

The old building which served the area for so many years was torn down in July 1960.