

The early days getting to school at the Mouth fostered hardy souls

By Helen Panzl

“Getting to School at the Mouth”  
Submitted by Barbara Bedau Brow  
White Lake Area Historical Society



Found a copy of the following article written by Helen Panzl stuck to a page in an old photo album. There is no date for the article and no name of the newspaper in which it was written. The title that appeared above the article is “The early days getting to school at the Mouth fostered hardy souls” which is a really long title. “Getting to School at the Mouth” seems to sum it up nicely. Below then is Helen Panzl’s article followed by some additional historical information provided at the end.

A cold, harsh wind blows off the big lake in winter; and down in that area of Montague known as the “Mouth”, rough weather presents a challenge for its year-round residents. Yet this is perhaps one of the factors which has contributed to the close-knit relationship they have always enjoyed.

Their history has been one of overcoming great obstacles. Just devising ways of getting their children to school used to be a major problem in the early 1900’s.

Of course, in those days all the little one-room rural school houses which dotted the countryside had a rough time of it during the rigors of our Michigan winters, but this district had an added problem. Because it then extended across the channel into the Sylvan Beach area, the children

who lived on that side of the lake had no other way of attending school but by crossing over the rough water by boat.

Each morning Captain William Bush, who was keeper of the White Lake Light House, and William Murray of Murray's Inn, would gather the children into one of the coast guard boats and row them across the channel to the Mouth side' from there they would walk the rest of the way to the school house which stood on its present site. There were three Bush children, three Murray children and the daughter of Albert Anderson who was caretaker of Sylvan Beach.

When school was out the boat was there, waiting to transport them back across the water again.

This system worked pretty well during good weather, but when winter really set in, other problems arose. After the lake froze over, the water in the channel became a crushing mass of great ice chunks and rowing a boat through them was almost impossible. With true pioneer spirit, these men found a way to also overcome this problem.

A rope was strung from the light house to the coast guard station on the Montague side of the channel, and by using this as a guide, they were able to half push and half pull their way across.

What is even more unbelievable is that these children had a record of never being absent or tardy.

Mrs. Bud Umstead of San Juan, Montague, has quite a store of knowledge about these times. Being a descendant of the Robinson family, pioneers in this area and keepers of the White Lake Light House for generations, she remembers frequently visiting her uncle, Captain William Bush, when he lived at the light house, and of hearing him tell about getting these children to school.

"Crossing the channel was only part of their ordeal," she recalls. "After landing on the other side they often had to wade through huge snow drifts to get to the school house during the blustery Mouth winters."

"I know", she laughs, "although we lived on the Montague side, I have vivid recollection of how we managed. My father would tie a rope around his waist and that of my two brothers and myself and then stomp ahead of us to make a path through the drifts. When we got to the school house our outer clothes were covered with snow and we would hang them on chairs around the stove to they would be dry for our return trip."

Marie Heitman, who started her teaching career at the Mouth school in 1922, recalls that despite the many hardships encountered daily, she enjoyed the three years she spent there.

"The children were well behaved," she says, "and the parents were always interested in their progress in school."

She still remembers the names of most of these pupils although she spent the rest of her teaching career in Muskegon schools. She has now retired and lives in Whitehall.

Despite the severity of its winters, most Mouth residents have always felt this district was an ideal place to live and raise a family. Many of them never did approve of consolidating with the Montague school system, feeling that their children had more supervision in their own small school and that the district was financially able to provide all that was necessary for a well balanced school curriculum.

The Mouth school had two rooms for many years when other rural schools had only one. At the time of consolidation with Montague there were five class rooms, one library-music room and a gymnasium, besides a well-equipped outdoor playground and a double garage to house their school bus which brought the pupils to school. There were four teachers and only about fifteen children in a classroom. A very high percentage of its students went on to high school and college.

The entire school took part in a flag raising ceremony each morning. They were taught pride in their community and love of country and there was very little vandalism.

Being the oldest settlement in the area, the Mouth naturally claims the distinction of having had the first school house, which, according to the Montague Centennial records, was a private school opening in 1850. It was taught by Mrs. L. M. Bennet, wife of a Methodist-Episcopal minister.

Quoting further from this record, "In 1856 Noah Ferry, a lumber mill operator, built a school at the Mouth. It burned but was rebuilt in 1864. This building also burned. Another structure, belonging to a German Baptist Church in Maple Grove, was moved to the school site. This school house is still in use."

Today, the same rugged determination which enabled their forefathers to overcome obstacles still prevails in this picturesque little community. It is a spot of great natural beauty and through their combined mutual interests will probably always remain so.

Below is some additional information that came to light since Helen Panzl wrote her original article:

The first Mouth school was 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. It burned down but was rebuilt across from the post office on the bluff overlooking the old channel bayou. It too burned.

The school house pictured is from 1895 and was the third school at the "Mouth". Perhaps this was the German Baptist Church that was moved to the location. It burned to the ground on Thursday evening, 22 November 1900. The loss was \$500 and was covered by insurance. By 3 January 1901 the fourth new school house had been constructed on the same site and was ready for occupancy. It was used until the new brick school building was built across the road in 1957, which had four classrooms, a kitchen, teacher's room and storage. Only 2 classrooms were finished in the beginning, however, due to enrollment. In September 1957, 40 students through the 7<sup>th</sup> grade were enrolled at the Mouth. 8<sup>th</sup> grade through high school students attended Montague school. This was the fifth and final Mouth School that was built.

In 1961, the new football and baseball field was ready for use. Plans were in the works for the building of a school gym/auditorium.

The following are just some of the teachers who were found to have taught at Mouth School over the years:

1855 - Mrs. L. M. Bennet taught that year, followed by her sister Mrs. Agnes Smith in 1856, and Mary Ann Hazelton in 1857. Amy Brown succeeded Mrs. Hazelton.

1868 – Mary Row – Came with her family to Michigan in 1866 when she was 14 years old, locating at the Mouth. She began teaching at White River at the age of 16. She married Frank Coleman in 1880 while he was stationed at the White River Life Saving station.

1890 – Mr. P. H. Fitzgerald was surprised by about 50 of the pupils of the “Mouth” school at the light house. Dialogues, declarations and singing by a number of the pupils were among the events of the evening. At 11 o’clock supper was served. After supper, games were played until about one o’clock. A very pleasant evening was enjoyed by all. Mr. Fitzgerald had taught a number of terms. This particular term ended March 27, 1890. Enrollment at the time was 67 pupils with an average daily attendance of 52.

1900 – Miss Helga Peterson – was born in Sweden in 1882 and immigrated in 1886. By 1900 she was listed as a teacher.

1901 – Miss Hazel Forbes – was born in December 1884 and began her teaching career that year at just 17 years old. In 1905 she married G. Judson Moog. Sadly, both she and their baby died that year during childbirth. She was just 20 years old.

C1910 – Miss Sarah “Sally” Masters.

1922 – Miss Marie Heitman began her teaching career this year at Mouth School. She taught in various other area schools all her life. She never married and died in 1993 at the age of 92 years.

1927-29 – Mrs. Gertrude Buttlemann – was born in Claybanks in 1881; married David Lewis Buttlemann in 1903; she died 13 Nov. 1961.

1936-42 – Miss Thelma Vannette who had taught in the one-room school for the past 6 years will return next year to teach again, according to a news item from July 1942.

1942 – Mrs. Murray Jackson – According to her 1969 obituary, she taught at Mouth School for about 7 years.

1956 – A news item from April of this year mentioned that Miss Joan Bean was the K-5 teacher.

1956 – Mrs. William Noyd, Sr. was mentioned as a teacher in a news article from December 1956.

1957 – Jesse Hepworth, Principal, taught the upper grades. Mrs. Gertrude Noyd taught the primary grades. Mrs. Noyd retired from teaching at the Mouth in 1960.

1958 – Mrs. Carl Bjerregaard was listed as a teacher during that year.

1961 – There were three teachers: Mrs. Thelma Hovey, primary; Mrs. Barbara Jensen, intermediate; Jesse Hepworth, Junior high room. William Hendricks was the bus driver and maintenance man. (Barbara Jensen a 2nd grade teacher and Principal at Mouth School retired in February 1981, after being a member of the Montague school system for 21 years.)

In 1967, Mouth School was consolidated into the Montague School System. At the end of the 1982 school year, Mouth School was closed and all students then attended school in Montague.

From 1982-85, Maranatha Christian School rented the Mouth School building.

In mid-1988 there was some interest among a group of White River residents to buy the building and use it as a Community Center. It was also suggested that perhaps the White River Township buy the facilities. But neither of these ideas materialized.

Currently White River Christian Ministries and Christ the Rock church are located in the former Mouth School, and have been for a number of years.