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Robert E. Lee Grade School

Back in the dark ages of my youth, Texas children began their eleven-grade public school education at age seven. I became a voracious reader when my grandmother taught me to read when I was about four. I had read every book I could find in the house by the time I reached the magic age of seven. I spent my first three school years in a temporary frame school on the western end of an entire block dedicated to the new Robert E. Lee Grade School. I have only scattered memories of the first few years in school, but the ones I have are vivid.

Just before I was seven, we moved to a red brick house on Morningside Drive, then the next to the last street on the north side of Dallas. The neighborhood was young and growing rapidly. Although I eagerly anticipated starting to school in order to join the children in the neighborhood, I recall none of the preparations for the actual opening day. I do remember the six-block route I walked daily. After all I walked that route the next several years until I finished the seventh grade.

Leaving our house in the middle of the block, I first passed the Meggs' house with its shady carport (he owned a tire store, and had a wooden leg and two children younger than I), then the Housers' house (he was a banker with two children also younger than I, and she was always questioning me about our family life), next the wicked witches' house (they were two maiden sisters who didn't approve of children using their yard for hide-and-seek), and finally the vacant lot where the Hancocks would soon build (he was an insurance man with a daughter my age and two older sons, one of whom later lost an eye watching an eclipse of the sun). At the end of the block, I then turned right onto Matilda, a graveled street divided by a slightly elevated track on which ran the Belmont streetcar and the interurban to Dennison.

Following the sidewalk, I crossed Mercedes (pronounced MER-su-dees), Monticello (that's Monti-Sello), and Marquita. At Marquita, I sometimes gazed in awe at the apartment building on the corner because I'd never been in an apartment and this one was intriguing with its beautifully landscaped open U shape. At this point, Matilda ceased being a street for a block. I flirted with the idea of entering the U of the building and knocking on a door, but I quickly decided that I'd never work up that kind of nerve. Heading on to school, I would pass the barricade on Matilda and walk on the grass or, more frequently, on the streetcar tracks. It was easy to make sure no streetcar or interurban was coming; the flat, straight track was clearly visible in both directions, and the sound of an approaching streetcar or interurban was unmistakable. If there were several of us walking together, we often placed crossed straight pins or, preferably, opened brass safety pins, on the track in the vain hope that the streetcar wheels would press them into a scissors shape. Alas, none ever survived until we walked home.

Finally, I crossed Vanderbilt Street to reach the school right in front of me, along the western border of the block next to Matilda, which had resumed being a street. The school consisted of ten separate, identical white frame rooms, five on each side of a long

covered wooden walkway, elevated slightly above the black earth, which turned into deep, black glue in wet weather. Each room communicated with the central walkway by a short, covered walk. These temporary buildings were replaced three years later by a magnificently ugly cast-concrete two-story building. The last time we were in Dallas, we drove by Robert E. Lee School; it's still serving neighborhood students. In a half century-plus of time, the building has not mellowed. It's still a magnificently ugly building, although it now looks smaller than I remembered it.



The usual exciting preliminaries of Mother's making new school clothes, buying shoes, and getting supplies must have occupied the time before school began that first September; I just don't remember it. The first day of school should have been exciting, but I do not recall any of the preliminaries. I just remember the familiar routine of taking my place every day in the second classroom on the right side of the sidewalk, in the last seat of the fifth of six rows which marched precisely from the front to the back of the room. The blackboard on the wall at the front of the room had the traditional black cardboard display of white lower- and upper-case cursive letters which we were forbidden to use until the third grade. They were beautiful, and I copied them whenever I could find a chance.

The only child I remember in that first-grade class was a blond named June who sat in front of me. I remember the teacher, Miss Beulah Irwin, a tiny, bird-like woman with beautiful black, curly hair. She was always in motion, moving about with gentle swoops. She swooped into my memory on two occasions: The first came when we were singing "America." She silently appeared by my side, listened to a phrase, and gently suggested that I was a listener, not a singer. "And we do need listeners!" I listened from then on, and still do. In fact, when I disregarded Miss Irwin's advice and tried singing to my firstborn years later, he cried.

The other swoop was caused by June's indignant howl that I had pulled her hair when I tried to re-enact a fascinating scene I had found in a Penrod and Sam book. Never mind that June's short Dutch bob did not provide me with a braid to dip in the empty inkwell in the right-hand back of my desk; my imagination provided the missing elements without actually giving June a braid I could pull. Miss Irwin swooped to investigate and chided me for unladylike behavior. My punishment was not being permitted to read aloud the rest of the day.

There must have been many routine incidents that occurred that fall season in Miss Irwin's room, but they made no impression on me. In January I was moved to Mrs. Anderson's Low Second grade next door. That was my first skipping of a part of a grade. Two more followed in the second and fourth grades, thereby putting me in a smaller class and dictating that I would go to high school in January several years later. The rationale was always that, since I could probably handle the work in the new grade, my seat in the old class would provide room for a student in an over-crowded classroom. (I never did learn about decimals, still preferring to convert them to fractions.) The effect of the skipped classes was something like moving to a new neighborhood. The rest of my tenure at Robert E. Lee Elementary School supplied me with a great many isolated memories, which have furnished a number of occasions for stories.