

HETTY BROWNE FARM SCHOOL

by Louise Pettus

Visitors to Hetty Browne's one-teacher school found it difficult to comprehend that they were observing a school that met all the state and county requirements that a more traditional school had to meet.

The building was constructed like a comfortable farmhouse with a wrap-around veranda. The 28 students, aged 6 to 16, were scattered about working alone or in small groups.

Some students were measuring and cutting garden stakes in the carpentry room; some were preparing the noon meal in the kitchen. A few were at the chalkboard, while others worked in the garden outside. Mrs. Browne, the teacher, was on the porch listening to two children read.

There were no school desks to be seen. No child was assigned a grade level; in fact, he might read in a third grade reader and work his arithmetic out of a fifth grade book, or vice versa. He worked at his own pace unhampered by a rule of silence. The tools for the child's learning were numerous: plows, hoes, books, pencils, paper, yardsticks, saws, globes, pots and pans. His curriculum materials were the plants, animals, soil and climate that made up his environment inside school and out. The children were being trained for their future roles as farm men and women.

The experience was so designed that the youngster was forced to make constant decisions about things that mattered to him. His problem-solving skills were challenged by realistic farm problems. The teacher asked questions; the child discovered the answers.

The year was 1911 and 79% of the South's rural schools had only one teacher. To combat this problem, the Peabody Fund contributed \$600 to found an experimental school. The S. C. Department of Education selected Winthrop College as the site for the school. Clemson College cooperated by furnishing the blueprints for a variety of rural schools, chicken coops, garden layouts and outhouses.

Mrs. Hetty Browne, a member of Winthrop College's education faculty, thought that most rural schools were poor copies of city schools with all of the formality and dry bookishness of the city. It was understood from the beginning that she would have a free hand.

Mrs. Browne's school was successful and soon surrounding school districts requested similar schools. To 6 of those schools houses were attached (so that the teacher could live in the farm community, and Winthrop sent student teachers who would receive an A. B. degree in rural education along with a lifetime license to teach when they graduated.

Mrs. Browne wrote of her experiment in 4 prestigious journals. The wire services gave the school national publicity. Postcard views of the school were made for sale.

The garden was the center of all the school activity. The children learned how soil is formed and how to recognize the types of soil. They learned the effects of moisture, and they recorded weather observations daily. They estimated the amount of seed needed, ordered from catalogs, and read agricultural books.

They germinated seeds and learned botany. They studied birds, moles, rabbits, and all the garden insects, helpful and destructive. They wrote a book based on their observations and titled it A Book of Bugs.

The children planted vegetables in individual plots 7 feet by 35 feet. After harvesting, they studied how to prepare nutritious meals. The surplus was sold and the profits used for the benefit of the school. The students kept all the records.

The school wasn't all work. Mrs. Browne had strong feelings about the value of play. She even participated in the active games which included footraces.

Everything that happened in Mrs. Browne's Farm School evolved around the principle of learning by doing.