

## **School House Days** **Contributor: Ruby O'Brien**

### **Ruby O'Brien Shares with us an account of when she taught school in L'Anse au Loup and West St. Modeste.**

Here's a little bit about the years I spent teaching, and how things were different fifty odd years ago.

I began teaching here in L'Anse au Loup in 1956. First of all, our modest little school in those days, could not compare with the schools we had later. Technology has taken us a long, long way. I loved the little one-room school with its nice green walls, its wood stove in the middle of the room, lots of light from its nice big windows, which took up most of the front of the room. It had a little cabinet in one corner, which held all our teaching resources, a few books, a globe for our Geography lessons, a large wooden protractor and a wooden ruler for Math classes on the top. This and the chalk board was what we had. Our toilet facility was the little outhouse, not far away from the school, which was not visited too often on stormy days. The school was kept nice and clean, as the women took turns cleaning it every weekend. The small porch had a row of wood in the back, as the families took turns bringing the wood and lighting the fire each week.

I remember it not being all that warm on very cold and windy days. You would soon see the mitts going on. Imagine doing your math with your mitts on! That's when the students had a good day! I would move all the little ones in close to the stove, and the bigger boys and girls would move their desks in next to them, until everyone was crammed together. The next thing you might smell, might be a mitt scorching. Sometimes we would have to close school for a little while, to try and get some heat around. It wasn't closed too long though, because we had no time to lose. Late on we got the oil stove, which solved a lot of problems, and was much more comfortable.

Being an all-grade school, it took a while to get to help each student. One minute you could be working with a grade nine or ten student, and the next minute you could be helping a grade one, to add two and two. That's the way it was.

We started the day with Morning Prayers, Catechism, Math, Spelling Work, and that took most of the morning. We said the Angelus at noon, then home for lunch, no electric bells to tell us when to come or go. One thing I can say, we didn't get out of school at three o'clock. In those days I had a problem to leave at four o'clock. So many grades, so many subjects, you just couldn't get it all in.

I remember one time, late in the afternoon, I was asking a certain grade questions on Geography. I asked one of the boys a question, when no answer came I looked down, he was standing by his desk by the window, he looked up and said, "teacher, it's too dark to see it". It must have been time to go home.

Anyway, we tried to make time for everything. We had our Red Cross Meetings on Friday evenings. On Victoria Day we had our little parades and picnics on the graveyard barrens. We never missed having our Christmas Tree in the school, not so many gifts, as they have today, but everyone enjoyed it and was happy. I still have a note I received from Father Tessier regarding the Christmas gifts. On it, he said, "tell the parents to put just one good gift on the tree for each child, in that way, no one will have more than the other."

We had a wonderful surprise the first Christmas I was here. Everyone was up by the school waiting for Santa. All of a sudden, up over the Brook Hill came a horse and sleigh with Santa on it. Reg had gotten his horse, Dais, the year before. I think this was the one and only time that Santa came to the school on a horse sleigh....next thing to the reindeer.

Although we usually only had 21 to 25 students, there was one year that I had a full house. They didn't have a high school teacher in the Anglican school, so I took in as many of the students as I could.

Our little school was also used for a church. We even got married there. I have, to this day, the Cross, the Mass Book, and even the collection plate that was used. I wonder how much money would be in the collection back then. I guess it wouldn't pay for much heating. Anyway, these things are great souvenirs.

The one thing I could never understand though, was how some parents could let the older children go berry picking for a couple of days in the fall. Looking back now, I guess a good old boil-up was well worth it, not something that wouldn't happen in these days.

Later, after I got married, it was so convenient to be so near the school. When Reggie was born in the month of August, I said to myself, I'll have two weeks to recuperate. I'll be ready for school in September. No one years paid leave back then. When Tony was born on August twenty-eighth I had just one week to be back in school. You just did what you had to do.

When Reggie was small, he used to want to go to school. On this particular day after lunch when I walked into the school, everyone was sat in their seats. I had a clue that something was going on, but what could it be? Everyone was so quiet, suddenly out pops Reggie from under my desk.

When I taught in West St. Modeste, besides helping with the high school grades, I had 38 grade ones and twos in my home classroom. They were from L'Anse au Loup, Capstan Island, West St. Modeste and Pinware. For years, at Our Lady of Labrador I supervised close to one hundred children in the auditorium during lunch hour. I remember one year, we had a wonderful concert, one of the many that was put off at Our Lady of Labrador School. Fred Marshall, Olive Bolger, Theresa O'Brien and many others helped make the concert so good. We raised money and purchased the first copier for the school, before that our only copier was a sheet of carbon paper.

The last years that I was at Our Lady of Labrador, I had five of my own children at school with me. We had our own table in the dining hall. Some of the other large families also had their own table. I could take care of my own children, while working at the same time. I could also help all the children on the bus, when Reg needed help. I even walked up the Battery with some of the children, when Reg thought the bus would never make it, on a slippery, icy road, on a stormy day.

One thing I am sure you will never forget, are the children you had in your classroom. I can still picture every one of them. Looking back at it all, what you do, is what you choose to do.

Ruby O'Brien