
Contes et nouvelles – Short Stories

IMAGINE... a day in the life of Eleanor Murray, teacher

Sandra Jewett, June 2010

"Imagine" is a distillation of fun and fact - drawn, in large part, from conversations with my late aunt, Annie Jewett Lahue and Pauline George Tibbitts, both of whom were students and teachers in Vale Perkins School. Many others contributed their memories as well, notably Mrs. Mary Hamelin - who is the four and a half year old in my story, and also the girl who really did build the fires at Sweet school #7. I enjoyed imagining - and I hope you will enjoy reading! We should tip our hats to these fine ladies, and the many more like them.

Imagine, if you will, being the teacher of 16 children, all of different ages, different abilities, and different sizes. And all of you - in one small room! This is your first year of teaching. In fact, today is your very first day. Eleanor May Murray, elementary school teacher. You like the sound of that!



Circa 1908 Vale Perkins

You've only just turned 18, and are now boarding with Mrs. Adelaide George, a stern widow, living near Vale Perkins. One term at

MacDonald College has earned you a provisional teaching certificate, but you'll need two years of practical experience before it becomes permanent.

You will be paid \$48.00 per month from September to June, plus a very small stipend for board and travel. You have no guarantee of a job here next year. Nonetheless, you're quite happy with your new independence and are eager to begin your new career.

Mrs. George lives over a mile from the schoolhouse, and you, like your students, will walk to school each day. The 25 minute trek is pleasant and quiet, allowing you time to gather your thoughts for this important day. You're very nervous.

On September 6th, 1921 you will walk into a modest building, one room really. It is drab; the walls are bare. The place could use a good sweeping. It seems the last teacher in here did not wash the windows, much less the walls. A lot could be done to brighten the place. Maybe some inexpensive material from Giroux's to make curtains. The room is functional, equipped with a blackboard, a few pieces of chalk, a wood stove, two tables and a few benches.

There are a few books, a Bible, and a folded map neatly stacked on one shelf. On your table are the attendance book, a blotter and an inkwell. A short strap hangs on the wall to your left. (It's the « enforcer » and you dread ever needing to use it!) Another shelf holds metal cups and bowls. A straw broom stands near the door. A not-so-clean pail sits on the floor. You wonder where to go for water? You forgot to ask. Is there a spring? Or, do you go to the brook? You make a mental note to bring a clean cloth and a bit of soap, just in case of any scrapes or accidents. There seems to be nothing in the room for first aid. Two

toilets are in the shed out back, pails of ashes at the ready.

You notice the wood box is empty, but on this first day of school it's warm enough, so no matter. You've heard that for ten cents a week, a family nearby sends their daughter to build the fire early in the morning so that in the winter the class will be somewhat warm.



**Cooledge Schoolhouse
Knowlton Landing Circa 1910**

In a few weeks, the Inspector of Schools, Mr. Chandler, will be visiting you. You've heard that he's tough but fair. His standards are high. Time will be short for you to accomplish what you must with so many students. Every child will be tested for progress. Mr. Chandler visits twice a year and again in June.

You know there will be a Christmas pageant: decorations, music, recitations, singing and a play – all to be prepared and rehearsed. Everyone in the community will come to the Christmas celebrations. You'll have to budget very carefully in order to buy a small gift for each student.

But! You can't think about any of that right now ... It's nearly time for school. Quickly you pick a few goldenrods and ferns, scoop up

some ditch water, and shove them into a cup for your desk.

It's fifteen minutes before the school day begins. You visualize your day: first, the Lord's Prayer, followed by a hymn the children are likely to know, and finally a salute to the flag. For the first few minutes, we'll get to know each other a little. (Although it is quite a distance to Brome, perhaps some families will have gone to the Fair. Doubtless, there will be stories to tell!)

Arithmetic review will be the first order of business, where the older girls should be a big help. Recognizing and writing numbers for the little ones, because perhaps some haven't yet learned to count. Addition drills for the middle children. Will they have remembered how to carry and add larger numbers? The oldest ones will practice multiplication tables. Then, spelling class for everyone, and Annie could begin teaching the alphabet to the little ones. Recess will be at 10:15 when everyone will need to stretch their legs. At 10:30 you will begin literature review with the class. A Scripture lesson will follow.

By noon, your class will be ready for lunch and play. Most will have brought bread and butter for lunch. Some may have nothing at all. Mrs. George has given you a few apples for the children as a treat. Everyone eats together, seated in the classroom, and then goes outside to play. (Remember to assign monitors for cleanup and supervision.)

At 12:30 you'll ring the big brass bell and then afternoon class will begin. Memory work will start for recitations the Inspector will want to hear. History will be next. Recess will be at 2. The children then will have nature study followed by Geography. School dismisses at 4 p.m. after which you will tidy and sweep the school. That being done, you'll leave for the walk home. Supper with Mrs. George is

promptly at 5:30. In the evening, you'll prepare your lesson plans for tomorrow.

Though stern, Mrs. George is a kind-hearted lady who is knitting mittens, scarves and leggings for a family whose mother is ill. The oldest child, Ella, is 10. It is she who cares for the family and who makes the meals. Her brothers help their father with chores and the twice daily milking.



Jones School No 12, 1921
in Vale Perkins

Excerpt from *Yesterdays of Brome County BCHS*

You suspect they may be absent for much of the school term, if they come at all.

Every family hereabouts seems to be hard working. Parents want very much for their children to read and write. Every Wednesday evening there is a Bible study class in the schoolhouse, and you've been invited to attend. The Young People's Group is very active. You hope that Arthur, the tall handsome Taylor boy you met on Sunday at Church, is part of that group. (Perhaps he'll invite you to one of their dances or box socials) Every Sunday, a community worship service begins at 9 am in the schoolhouse. After that, neighbours and families spend the day in social visiting or relaxation. Sunday is a day of rest.

The fall school term begins in September and runs until Christmas, Monday through Friday. The last event before school closes for a week is the Christmas pageant in which every

student has a part. Easter will be the next school holiday. Dismissal will be in early June. Otherwise, school is closed only in the case of bitterly cold weather or some health emergency, like an epidemic of mumps or measles.

Last week, in Mansonville, you met Mademoiselle Brouillette, the Catholic teacher in the *école de rang* in Province Hill. She is your age. You and she spoke only briefly. Her school is smaller, and there are fewer students. Her duties seem similar to your own. M. le Curé visits weekly to ensure that the children are properly taught their catechism. Prayers punctuate each day. She will have visits from the school inspector as well. Discipline is very important. Not every child of school age comes to school. Some parents send only one or two of their children. Wistfully, Mademoiselle Brouillette tells you that she is not allowed to associate with the young men of the community. She too has noticed the handsome Arthur. But, her duties require her full and serious attention. Expectations of her are high. It is unlikely that you and she will have any social contact during the year.

From a distance, you hear children's laughter and chatter. George and Annie are proudly boasting of earning \$1.00 by selling radishes, carrots and green beans to wealthy American cottagers at the lake. Hilda earned fifteen cents churning butter; Douglas, a quarter for cleaning around the icehouse. You overhear that a baseball game is being planned – Quincy has managed to gather a pickup team. A French family has moved into the old Geer place – and is trying to make a go of that old stone pile!

As the group nears the school, you see that 4 and a half year old Mary, barely able to keep up, is chattering excitedly. Her mother has warned that she might fall asleep after lunch –

and you wonder just how you'll handle that eventuality. Your students range in age from little Mary, at just under five, to rather cheeky 14 year olds. Teaching this group will indeed require ingenuity and patience.

And what's this? From the direction of Knowlton Landing, a horse and wagon approach. Who is that? Are there children? Ah – it must be the new family. The Cadorette children, Lucille, Henriette and Jean-Maurice make their arrival with their father. Though they should go to the French school, the nearest one is too far away. (Do the children speak English? You wonder!) There, in the distance are Spencer Wright and Lawrence Benson striding down the hill. Both are 14 years old and taller than you are. These two are quite the mischief-makers, according to Mrs. George, who knows everyone's pedigree! Well, my goodness! Ella has made it to school as well, although she looks very tired. Your heart goes out to this brave little girl.

And so, there you stand at the school's entrance. Although you're curious about your new students, you show only a little smile. The children must respect you, and you don't want to appear too anxious or overly friendly. Discipline will be important for you to maintain with this ragtag group! Your heart pounds – your hands are a little damp! You tug at your skirt, pat your hair nervously, but stand very straight.

Only briefly, as you watch the children file into the room, do you wonder what kind of adventure all of you will have embarked upon this September day.

« Good morning, children. My name is Miss Murray. I am your new teacher. I'm glad to meet you. Now, we have much to do ... let us get started. Take your places immediately. Older children sit at the back, younger ones, to

the front. Spencer, over here, please – and Lawrence, you're on the other side. Now, everyone please stand – let us bow our heads... »

And so, the first morning of your first year begins ...
