

Lorne Avenue School

by W.D.E. Matthews

Introduction

June 15, 1955

Many things in life, both desirable and undesirable, are contagious. One of them is an interest in bygone days. Therefore, it is not surprising that, during this year when London is celebrating its hundredth anniversary as a city, our interest should be aroused to poke around among all sorts of forgotten corners and dust-covered records.

Investigations of this kind are good for us, for they help us to develop a new sense of perspective toward the development of our community and its educational facilities. It is the long view that helps us to measure and evaluate progress; to appreciate the opportunities of the day in which we live; yes, even to discern some of the weaknesses of our rapidly changing era.

At this time when reminiscences are the order of the day, we who are the Lorne Avenue School of today take pleasure in presenting to you who were the school of yesteryear this brief sketch of the city's oldest school east of Adelaide Street.

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W.D.E. Matthews

Principal

Brief History

What the famous old Union School was to the infant city of London in 1855, Lorne Avenue School has been to the suburban fringe that gradually developed east of Adelaide Street between 1850 and 1875. By the time three-quarters of the century had elapsed, the scattered suburbs that sprawled on both sides of Carling's creek had grown sufficiently large to warrant incorporation as a village. As a community it began to take on individuality and to display a spirit of common purpose.

One of the first evidences of this communal development was the erection of a public school. It was a two roomed brick building that occupied part of the site of the present school. Because it faced toward Timothy Street, it was for a short time known as that name; but before long, as a tribute to one of the village's prominent public citizens, it was renamed the Anderson School.

Fortunately some record of the official opening of the school remains. To villagers, that day in October, 1875 was an occasion of prime importance. Reeve A. M. Ross was master of ceremonies, while Mayor Benjamin Cronyn represented the big city next door. Obviously, the citizens were proud of their new school building. Trustee Murray Anderson stated that their schoolhouse as furnished, was second to none of its kind in the province. Rev. N. F. English, when invited to express his views, was even more venturesome, and declared it to be "the neatest and best furnished school he had ever seen in the Dominion," and he believed that he had traveled more than the average person. Praise and eloquent words were not the only medium of exchange that day. After the speeches had concluded, a hat was passed "for the purpose of procuring a Bell for the Building" and the necessary amount was quickly oversubscribed.

The child population of London East grew so rapidly that within four years the original two rooms were quite inadequate, consequently two more rooms were added in 1879.

In 1880 Mr. Ambrose Stock's principalship came to an end, and the responsibility of managing the four room building was placed in the hands of Miss Bella Boon, who had been appointed as teacher of grade seven the previous year. For ten years, during which time annexation to the city took place, Miss Boon demonstrated her ability not only as a classroom teacher, but also as an administrator. Of all the early teachers probably none is remembered more vividly than she. By 1890 the steady increase in the population warranted the addition of four more rooms. In keeping with policy of the London Board of placing the larger schools in the hands of men principals, Miss Boon became a classroom teacher and Mr. W. D. Eckert, who had previously been principal at Rectory Street School, took charge.

Annexation took place in 1885 and London East became Ward Five of the city. Inspector J. B. Boyle seems to have been most concerned over the exceedingly inadequate accommodation of the east end schools. In his opinion Lorne Avenue, at that time, had "not a single good classroom." While he regarded the Rectory Street School as a "credit to the taste, enterprise, and liberality of the citizens of Number Five Ward, he thought that the Park Street School (now Chesley Avenue) was "surely never designed for the work of education." For a few months following annexation the Trustees tried to meet the badly crowded conditions in Lorne Avenue by a half day system (probably London's first experience with staggered classes), but it proved to be very unpopular. The Board then made arrangements to utilize the first floor rooms of the old east end town hall on Rectory Street. Miss Sadie Vining was put in charge of the pupils who attended there. By means of a large coal stove fairly

comfortable accommodation was provided. Inspector Boyle's observation about this arrangement

bespeaks a bygone day: "If this kind of stove should be selected, then a barrel should be provided so that ashes may be had as a substitute for dry earth for the use of the closets."

One advantage of wood stoves over coal ones, which by this time were coming into general use, is apparent in a very sharp quarrel that arose between the Lorne Avenue caretaker and a certain Mr. Penn who had for many years looked after the Central (Union) School. Although ashes have today, little more than nuisance value, at that time they were regularly used to keep down odours in the lavatory compartments. Apparently, by this time coal stoves were in use in the comparatively new rooms of Lorne Avenue, but in the much older Central School wood stoves were still being used. The Lorne Avenue janitor, thinking it was a pity to have anything so useful as wood ashes go to waste, laid claim to some that he was sure the janitor at the Central School must be throwing away. But Mr. Penn was not in a sharing mood and maintained that he needed all of his ashes for his large school. The Lorne Avenue man however, took the point of view that the ashes belonged to the Board of Education, and as one of its caretakers, he was entitled to a share of them. Neither was willing to give the ground and so the dispute grew, until finally, Inspector Boyle submitted it to the Board for settlement. They promptly handed down their decision "that Mr. Penn had full legal right to all the ashes at the Central School."

January of 1892 brought one of those exceptionally cold spells that stir reminiscences in the minds of old timers. The Board received complaints of cold schools, therefore, each principal was asked to submit a report on the adequacy of the heating facilities of his school during the cold week of January 14 to 19. The majority of the principals reported fairly satisfactory conditions. However, Mr. Eckert's comments bore a note of individuality that deserves repeating: "The teachers are perfectly satisfied with the heating of our school. Miss Carroll has mastered the furnace well, and I think runs it as economically as possible."

By 1896 the building was again straining at the joints to accommodate the rapidly increasing school population to the northeastern fringe. This time two more rooms were added at the south end of the building, bringing the total number to ten. The ground floor addition became the school's first kindergarten room, and still serves the same purpose, while the one above was furnished as a regular classroom. By 1900 the enrolment had reached 600 under the care of the following teachers: Mr. W. D. Eckert, Misses Bella Boon, Edith Vining, Emma Tarry, Bella Grieve, Emma Northcott, Edith MeMechan, Missie Laidlaw, Theresa Smibert, Mabel Cannon and Maud Mathews.

While the second quarter century of the school's history did not witness nearly the same expansion in number of rooms that the first had experienced, nevertheless numerous modern improvements were added. The first major change came in 1904 with the resignation of Mr. Eckert after fifty-five years of service in the teaching profession. As a teacher and

principal he was held in high esteem by the hundreds of children with whom he came in contact. Attendance records still extant in the school bear silent, but eloquent witness to the extreme neatness of his penmanship.

In 1905 the sturdy old building underwent a major operation in its lower regions. By this time the Board was convinced that hot air heating, even with furnaces, was not efficient for a school building, therefore, out came the old furnace that Miss Carroll had fired so effectively. The city's expanding sewage system had sealed the doom of dry lavatory compartments and their day was done. With steam heat and new water toilets the old school could well hold up its head among the most modern of school building society.

By 1906 the average enrolment per teacher had reached 55.5 pupils, and into the make-do kindergarten room at the back of the building were crowded 80 to 100 children each half day session. More accommodation was a necessity, therefore, once again "Topsy" grew some more, and four classrooms were added at the front which brought the building almost out to Lorne Avenue. With its new look it was regarded as "one of the most modern public schools in the city." With satisfaction and pride the citizens of the East End gathered on February 22, 1901, for the official opening. After listening to an address by Mr. James Hughes, a prominent Toronto educationist, they visited the various classrooms, admiring the large halls, up-to-date sanitary facilities, and modern heating system. Remarkable changes had taken place since 1875.

The enlarged quarters provided a further advantage. It was at this time that manual training was passing through its experimental stage as a subject of the public school curriculum. By 1909 the Board had become convinced that it was worthwhile. The basement of the new addition was therefore used as one of the first centres for classes in this subject. It was not until two years later that household science classes were established for the girls. After the opening of Boyle Memorial School in 1915, it became the instruction centre in place of Lorne Avenue.

The expansion of the school building introduced a new problem - the playground was much reduced in area. This was remedied by the purchase of 150 feet from the owners of each of four lots facing Lorne Avenue on the west side of the school.

This period of history cannot be passed over without reference to the Home and School Association, or Mothers' Club as it was then called. The movement had its origin in Talbot Street School in 1905. Three years later the mothers of Lorne Avenue organized their first club with Mrs. Richard Greensides as president and Mrs. Harry Burch as secretary. At first, meetings were held immediately after four o'clock; later an evening hour was adopted. This involved additional difficulties, since the school was not then supplied with electricity. To overcome this problem kerosene lamps were brought by the members to light up the kindergarten room. In order to raise funds for pictures, extra library books and special

equipment for the school, a garden party was held each year in the schoolyard.

The staff members for 1909 were as follows: Mr. W. J. Snelgrove, principal, and Mr. John Dunbar, vice principal; Misses Boon and Johnson taught grade six, Misses Tarry and Waugh had charge of the fifth graders; Misses Grieve and Miles taught grade four; the grade three youngsters were in the hands of Misses Allaster and Northcott. Miss Gould cared for grade two and Miss Hayes grade one. Three kindergarten teachers daily endeavoured to find elbow room for 177 five year olds in a classroom scarcely large enough for half that number. Misses Hoston and Daly handled the larger section in the morning while Miss Boake taught a smaller group in the afternoon.

Something else happened in 1909 that brightened the whole future for Lorne Avenue School - the Board voted to install electric lights. Being careful trustees, only the kindergarten room, where the Mothers' Club meetings were held and the caretaker's basement sanctum were granted this boon.

Three years later Mr. Snelgrove was saddled with a new responsibility that encroached upon his teaching duties - a telephone in his office. This however, had its advantages, for many a lad susceptible to the temptation of taking off for the afternoon was reported to his parents before he arrived home for supper.

The decade that followed was a period of rapid expansion on the northeastern fringe between Adelaide and Quebec Streets. The four classrooms added in 1909 were soon filled, and by 1913 increases in population had once again created crowded conditions. The problem was temporarily solved by the use of a rented room in a Baptist Mission building located in the district. Two years later Boyle Memorial School was opened just east of Quebec Street, thus providing adequate elementary school facilities for that section of the city.

One of the unique features about the school is its memorial to those who made the supreme sacrifice in World War I. In 1920, under the leadership of Principal W. J. Snelgrove, the students and staff combined their resources to provide the funds for a fitting memorial to former students of the school who died for the cause of freedom. A bronze table on a pyramid of stone, not far from the foot of the school flagpole, bears through sunshine and storm silent testimony to the bravery of twenty-three men whose names, like the school, live on, while pupils and teachers come and go.

During the twenties Lorne Avenue bade goodbye to two staff members who had contributed much to the ongoing of the school. In June, 1920, Miss Bella Boon erased her last arithmetic problem from the blackboard and gave out her last yearly report cards. In October of the following year Principal W. J. Snelgrove died after a lengthy illness, having served twenty-one years as head of the school. In January, 1922, his place was filled with W.E. Opper, who

had already served London for nine years. His staff at the time included: Mr. R. J. Shaw, and Misses E. Johnson, E. McCallum, E. Cooms, M. Tayler, E. Spence, B. Brieve, F. Kerr, N. Cleugh, M. Nichol, C. Blair, I. Carson and M. Angus.

While the 1920's were characterized by very noticeable increases in secondary school enrollments, most of the elementary schools experienced some decrease. Lorne Avenue was similarly affected. In 1924 one room was closed and by 1926 the enrolment had dropped sufficiently to warrant closing another room. In the second one an auxiliary class was established under the direction of Miss Dora Kingsborough. The other vacant room was converted into a library.

The 1930's may have been days of economic depression, but under Mr. Opper's leadership progress went on nevertheless. The almost complete lack of auditorium facilities created both a problem and a challenge. In 1935 he and his able assistant, Mr. G.C. Jarvis, undertook to build and install a public address and intercommunication system that would help to coordinate the activities of the school. It was a pioneer venture and a tremendous undertaking from every point of view. After scores of hours of spare time labour, success was achieved. On December 20th the new system was formally inaugurated with officials of the Board of Education being present. It marked the beginning of a new era for Lorne Avenue.

Twenty years does not seem very long ago; probably many who read this brief historical sketch will remember Messrs. O.S. Fells and G. C. Jarvis also Misses I. Bradish, M. Taylor, G. Hertel, M. Anderson (now Mrs. Fells), G. Murray, M. Nichol, I. Carson, M. Angus, and D. Kingsborough, also Mrs. E. Smith.

The years take their toll upon heating facilities as well as teachers. By 1936 the existing system had served its day. That year the basement underwent considerable renovation. A new heating and ventilating plant was installed. This necessitated the construction of a new boiler room, storage bin for coal, and fan room. The following year another boiler room was added, thus increasing the comfort of the rooms in cold weather.

Empire Day celebrations have come and gone; probably the details of most have been forgotten. Some readers may still recall, however, the programme of May 23, 1936. On that occasion the school was presented with a portrait of Mr. W.D. Accept by his daughter, Mrs. R. Orr. The official presentation was made by Mr. E. H. McKone of the London Normal School. Inspector J.C. Stohers and Trustee Mrs. John Rose also spoke appropriately.

Several changes inside the building have taken place during the last quarter-century. By 1930 the school had a dental room which at first was shared with a school nurse. As the work of each department was expanded, separate rooms on the first and second floors were made available. One of the major changes of the late thirties was the construction of a fireproof central stairway. Only the more recent graduates will recognize the platform that occupies

the northern end of the upper hall. It was built in 1948 to facilitate the broadcasting of morning exercises. Throughout the school, an activity in which the various classes share by turns.

In 1950 the old bell on the roof made the headlines in the Free Press. For scores of years it had ding-donged the hours of work and play for the girls and boys. However, the age of electricity moved in and the old bell lapsed into silent retirement. One summer night, in the midst of a violent thunderstorm, aroused by a piercing, shattering bolt of lightning, it shuddered, clanged, and spoke no more. Later when workmen repaired the roof, both bell and turret were removed.

The most recent, and probably final, classroom addition came in 1952. In the basement beneath the kindergarten was found the last bit of suitable space for a fifteenth classroom.

In June, 1953, Principal W. E. Opper retired after thirty-one years of service in the school. In the use of public address systems he did pioneer work and helped to demonstrate the value of this kind of equipment in the administration of present day schools. His years of leadership contributed much toward developing the harmonious atmosphere found among both pupils and staff.

Lorne Avenue pupils have from time to time distinguished themselves in sports activities. The earliest available record indicates that back in 1906 the lads were swiftfooted enough to win the silver cup donated by the Canadian Club for the best track team in the city's public schools. In 1911 the boys captured the Sheriff Cameron Baseball trophy. In 1930 they did it again, and then to show that they carried off the Lawrason cup offered for the public school cadet corps attaining the highest general efficiency. In more recent years the boys have excelled in basketball. Under the skillful coaching of Mr. Richard Peaslee they won the Optimist Club basketball Championship for the city in 1950, 1951 and 1954.

Inspired by the excellent example of those who have gone before, the old school and its staff endeavour to carry on. As of June 1955, they are as follows:

W.D. E. Matthews, principal, Miss Grace Baker, Miss Maxine Bowden,
Mrs. Eva Cunningham, Mrs. Mary Green, Miss Hazel Henderson, Mr. George Jarvis,
Miss Marilyn Matthers, Mrs. Joanne Parkes, Mr. Richard Peaslee, Mr. Richard Pope,
Miss Myrta Taylor, Mr. Edwin Tufts, Miss Jessie Weld, Miss Alice Wilson, Miss Alma Youse,
Custodial service are provided by Messrs. H. S. Tucker and R.A. Edwards.



Lorne Avenue Public School
PM Kindergarten Class - 1933

Photo supplied by Kelly Stadelbauer



Lorne Avenue Public School
Circa 1937

Photo supplied by Kelly Stadelbauer



Lorne Avenue Public School
1939

Photo supplied by Kelly Stadelbauer