

# Dry Fork Education

A log school had been built along Dry Fork on land owned by the Shield's family late in the 19th century and the children of the community began receiving an education. The photograph of the log school shows several children of Pal Saunders and William Charlton. From these identifications the picture can be dated to around 1910. Later a frame building was constructed on the Tynes Chapel grounds next to the road. Students who wished an education beyond the elementary level were bused to Tazewell County. In the mid 1950's the school house was closed and all the children were bused to Tazewell County for their education. This lasted until 1966 when Bland County Schools were integrated.



Teachers came in from within as well as outside the community and stayed with various families during the school term. Some families would charge a small amount for room and board, while others would merely expect help with the house work and cooking. They were treated like family. It seems the teachers were universally remembered with fondness and respect by their former pupils.

The Reverend Fred Saunders recalls using his primer in the old log school house and carrying wood out of the mountains to keep the school warm. His wife, Estellia, in a joking way says she does not remember Fred going to school at all. There were Christmas plays in the old school house and egg rolls and maypoles. Estellia remembers riding a small pony to the log school. After the eighth grade there was nothing else to do but get married.

Later the frame school was constructed on land next to the Tynes Chapel A.M.E. Church. Martha Cobb describes it as ".....one room, and you had seats on both sides of the school room and the teacher's desk was in the front and the stage was behind the teacher's desk." There were a boy's and a girl's coat closet on either side of the entrance. There was also a rope to pull the bell that called the children to school. Nate Charleton remembers the bell could be heard all the way to Rocky Gap. As a little boy he was the janitor, and would clean, build the fire, and ring the bell, The bell was so large Nate recalls, "that thing went and swunged me up off the ground".

The community supported the school in many ways. Wood was dragged to the school by parents and sawed into pieces by the boys to warm the school in the winter. Sometimes the boys would have to be sent for kindling and one time the school and community connected in an inappropriate manner. Nate Charleton remembers going up the holler above the school with another boy and finding a still. They got into the mash and returned to school in an obviously inebriated condition. Nate said, "We had a time, buddy! The mash. You make liquor out of it. That stuff was workin' and boy that stuff was rollin'. Yeah, they stopped us from getting wood up there for a loooong time."

School desks that were discarded by the white schools were used, and desks were made in the community. Pete Ferguson remembers the community fathers filling the unmet needs of the school.

“We never had no new desks. We always got desks from down here at this white school. After they done used them and done cut 'em up and done broke 'em up, then they'd bring 'em up here to the black kids. . .and they set 'em up and that's the way it was. And they'd make. . some of them had desks what they done made. And Mr. Robinson, he was a carpenter and that's Layne's grandfather - he was a carpenter and sometimes he would make little desks. He'd make a desk, or my daddy sometimes would make a little box desk that the kids needed. Just bring it up there and set it so they'd have something to write on, a place to sit, like that, and they would have that.”

When the snow would fall, Pete's daddy, Rueben, would take a horse and a scraper and clear the road for a mile and a half to the school. Estellia remembers her dad dragging a log through the snow to make a path to the school for the children.

The bell would call the children to school. They would begin the day with a devotional and a song. Then the work would begin. The students were usually broken into groups by combined grades. The better students would help the slower students and the older students would help the younger ones. The school was packed.

“Whew, man. . .we had a bunch of kids. It was a bunch of kids. That little one room school was full. It was full of kids. And, let's see...I think it was three rows. . . there were three rows of seats on each side, if I'm thinking clearly. I think there was three rows of seats on each side. Big wide aisle way to the door. And set over next to the door, they had a black, on that side they had a blackboard, a blackboard on that side over there. Now, come out about three foot, about three foot, about the length of that table away from the wall - it might not have been that far - just enough room for you to walk down to get to the blackboard. It might have been about as wide as this chair. And seats started - and that row - the aisle ways - I think it was three rows. Three rows. There's quite a few kids in there. I know a good . . whew. . there was a good thirty, forty kids in there.

Discipline was stern. Corporal punishment was liberally applied and notes were sent home, where often a second punishment was given by the parents. The school and the community were intimately tied to each other. Children were raised by a village where the interrelations created webs of care and respect. A child was not someone else's kid, the child was part of the extended family.

The curriculum was a basic one or readin', ritin', and rithmetic', but it reached out to the community in many ways. The school was an institution which defined community and gave identity to its members. School, God, and land. Field trips were forays into and just out of the community. In the fall the school would hike up East River Mountain along the road to

Hardy and Ingleside. Martha Cobb recalls fondly some of these hikes.

“We hiked all the way up to that cave, and when you got all the way up the mountain where the cave you had to climb a lot of rocks and we went up and went inside of it and looked around. It wasn't a real huge cave but you could walk back in it. When the chinquapins and chestnuts was ripe we use to go up and get them and that was about it.”

Pete Ferguson remembers hikes over Buckhorn Mountain all the way to Rocky Gap where students would go to the Honaker Store and get their family's mail and buy candy and what not. One time the group walked by the white school while the students were at recess. Some of the white boys started throwing rocks at the black children who then fled back towards Honaker's Store. Along the road they loaded themselves with rocks and went back and retaliated. Rocks filled the air and windows were broken before the adults could bring things under control. After word of this reached Mr. Honaker, he informed school officials that his black customers' money was as good as his white customers' money and such an event better never happen again. From that time on when black children walked by the white school, the teachers made all the white students go inside.



Programs were a community event. There was a raised stage behind the teacher's desk and on special holidays a play, a recitation or singing would be put on. Most of the residents of Dry Fork would come and families from as far away as Bluefield would attend. Whites from Rocky Gap and down Dry Fork would also come. The school along with the church were the centers of community life. Mayday was celebrated in the spring and Halloween in the fall. Hazel Tynes remembers that when school would let out they would....

“....we would go up here in one of these fields and spread out and have a picnic, and the par—have the parents come. And we'd have a May Day at the school house, and, uh, and we'd plat the ribbon—go one over top of the other and plait this ribbon—they May pole wrap. And we'd have games and they'd fix food an bring to the school, and this kind of stuff. I—one year, I remember, I was about— I might not even have been 6 or 8 years old, and they had us to run for May queen— the little girls. I didn't win, but I was in second place, and my mother made me a dress out of crepe paper, and I had to crown my cousin. She had the most money—she either had 14 or 15 dollars and I only had 13 dollars. “At Halloween time we bobbed for apples and chewed all of these dry crackers to try to win—see who could eat the most crackers, and put these in water in the tub and our head down there and bite these apples. If you'd bite them apples and you won a candy bar or sucker.”

At recess games were played that included baseball, jacks, hide and seek, farmer in the dall, ring around the rosie, and of course races and other competitive events were held. Estellia Saunders remembers playing jack in the bush.

“You would have some chinquapins in your hand and the other person would chinquapins in their hand and one would say "Jack-in- the-bush" and the other would say "cut 'em down, how many's in?" They was five. If it wasn't five, you had to put the rest of 'em in there. Nobody plays it anymore.

Lunch was an hour and many students would go home while others would bring a pail with a biscuit or a boiled egg. Going to school and coming home was a process that took the children by the homes of their grandparents and uncles and aunts and cousins. Visits were made. Pete remembers stopping on his way home at his grandparents, Mac H. and Fanny Ferguson, and being delayed by treats from Fanny's kitchen and chores done for Mac. The home of A.J. Tynes was a stopping place for all the grandchildren as well. Unfortunately for the community, Dry Fork like all one room schools in Bland County was eventually closed in the early 1950's. Blacks were bused to the segregated schools in Tazewell County. Aubry Gore laughingly says, “I went through three counties and two states. Yeah went from Bland county to Mercer county in West Virginia back to Tazewell County to get to school. We went across East River mountain. We passed four schools to get to school. It was an all black school, Tazewell County High School.”

In 1966 segregation ended in Bland County and the black children of Dry Fork were sent to Rocky Gap Combined School. In the memories of the people of Dry Fork the event went very peacefully. Pete's brother, Marvin Tynes remembers a story his father, Ferguson Tynes told about the event. Ferge was having a conversation with Conrad Tuggle, a white man of some property and influence in Rocky Gap, concerning the upcoming first day of school.

“Mr. Tuggle said, they are going to send them all to the Gap, I don't know what's going to happen. Daddy said, I bet you a six pack of pop that there won't be no incidence down there much. He said they won't have to get no law to put them down there. Mr. Tuggle said, I don't know, there might be some stuff go on there. After they enrolled them down there, daddy said to Mr. Tuggle, I told you, now you give me my six pack of pop you promised me, and he did. That's when Charlie Taylor owned the store down there.”

Mack T. Ferguson, was the bus driver for all of Dry Fork. During the segregation times he had hauled the black kids all the way to Bluefield, Virginia. He worked at night cleaning a bank in Bluefield and came home and drove the bus. He farmed a little, also. When integration came he was the one that continued to drive the now, one Dry Fork bus. He hauled the white children as well as the black children. He was a well respected man in and outside the community. He is fondly remembered by many. His grandson is a starting full back for the Virginia Tech Hokies. Tim Havens, a white resident of Dry Fork, remembers his first day of school.

“I remember my first day of school, and boarding the bus on Dry Fork. I remember being petrified, I remember all of those nervous feelings. But, I remember the greeting of my bus driver, Mr. Mack Ferguson, who was also a resident of Dry Fork, who took me in his arms and told me everything was going to be all right. And I remember during those first two years, maybe first grade and second grade, my most vivid memories of school bus rides would be on especially cold mornings he would sit me right up, practically on his seat, on the heater. And he would do that with other small children. But he had such a genuine care for his students, and that has been with me since that time. “

Mack’s wife, Blanche, was an aide at the school. She had once been a teacher at the last one room school on Dry Fork and she was much beloved by the children. After her death the funeral was held in the gymnasium of the school and the attendance by whites and blacks overflowed the capacity of the structure. Aubrey Gore was an eighth grader when integration began at Rocky Gap. He recalls some minor problems with adults, but none with fellow students. He played sports, was in the Beta Club, and played in a combo with white boys. Whites and blacks in the Rocky Gap area had been neighbors for over a hundred years and the transition to integration was a smooth process unlike many places in the South. Perhaps it was Andrew Ferguson’s barber shop, and working together in the fields and the mountains, or perhaps it was the mutual respect of mountain people trying to make a living in an unforgiving environment.

Education was always recognized as an important commodity in the Dry Fork Community. Mac Daniel Ferguson left Dry Fork and pursued his education at the Christiansburg Institute second class citizens. The freed slaves who arrived on Dry Fork knew this and passed it on to their descendents. These were no ordinary people. The Fergusons, and Tynes, and Charletons, and the other families knew that there were no guarantees in life. Education was just one more hedge in the vagaries of a black’s existence as a free man.

