

XI. What We Learned: Classrooms of the 1920s and '30s

Those of us who are today of the "older generation" can sometimes be heard to sigh with nostalgia for the good old days, as we regale--and perhaps bore--the youngsters with tales of "how it was when I went to school," all with the tacit (or not so tacit) implication that things were better then. What were those classrooms of the 1920s and '30s really like--those classrooms that, to a large extent, shaped the thinking of many of us now in our fifties and sixties?

A look through the 1923 and 1933 editions of the Manual for Public Schools, published by the office of the County Superintendent of Schools, may give us some insights. This Manual, required to be "a part of every teacher's desk equipment" throughout the 1920s and '30s, set forth the official educational standards and procedures that were to be followed in first through eighth grade classrooms of Santa Cruz County schools.

The Manual shows that the basic subjects taught then were much the same as those taught today. But there is a noticeable difference in another area: the instilling in young minds of the virtues of patriotism, clean living, and high moral purpose received an emphasis that may seem somewhat quaint to us today. The 1923 Manual declares:

...It shall be the duty of all teachers to endeavor to impress upon the minds of the pupils the principles of morality, truth, justice, and patriotism; to teach them to avoid idleness, profanity, and falsehood; and to instruct them in the principles of a free government, and to train them up to a true comprehension of the rights, duties, and dignity of American citizenship.

Society expects the child trained in the public schools of the State to know his rights and duties as a citizen. The teacher is expected to embrace every opportunity to teach the principles of morality, good manners, and upright citizenship. The uncompromising insistence on absolutely honest work from the pupils, the best of which he is capable, and the continual encouragement to improve are influences that must be constantly alive.

A clean, attractive, well lighted school room, a tidy, well kept yard, a teacher who habitually impresses one as a lady or gentleman, with all the qualities these denote, an air of earnestness and respect for the dignity of the profession, manifested in well planned, well conducted class work--all these things and many others do much toward character building.

Also included in the Manual is "The Children's Code of Morals," which the book suggests should be memorized by all pupils in the third grade and reviewed every year thereafter, through the eighth grade. Because of its interest, and because of the possible role it may have played in shaping the characters of the boys and girls of that era, we reproduce here those pages from the 1923 Manual:

MANUAL FOR SANTA CRUZ COUNTY SCHOOLS

The Children's Code of Morals

Prepared by Wm. J. Hutchins, and accepted by the National Institution for Moral Instruction (Inc.), Washington, D. C.

Boys and girls who are good Americans try to become strong and useful, that our country may become ever greater and better. Therefore they obey the laws of right living which the best Americans have always obeyed.

The first law is **The Law of Health**. The Good American Tries to Gain and to Keep Perfect Health.

The welfare of our country depends upon those who try to be physically fit for their daily work; therefore:

1. I will keep my clothes, my body, and my mind clean.
2. I will avoid those habits which would harm me, and will make and never break those habits which will help me.
3. I will try to take such food, sleep, and exercise as will keep me in perfect health.

The second law is **The Law of Self-Control**. The Good American Controls Himself.

Those who best control themselves can best serve their country.

1. I will control my tongue, and will not allow it to speak mean, vulgar, or profane words.
2. I will control my temper, and will not get angry when people or things displease me.
3. I will control my thoughts, and will not allow a foolish wish to spoil a wise purpose.

The third law is **The Law of Self-Reliance**. The Good American is Self-Reliant.

Self-conceit is silly, but self-reliance is necessary to boys and girls who would be strong and useful.

1. I will gladly listen to the advice of older and wiser people, but I will learn to think for myself, choose for myself, act for myself.
2. I will not be afraid of being laughed at.
3. I will not be afraid of doing right when the crowd does wrong.

The fourth law is **The Law of Reliability**. The Good American is Reliable.

Our country grows great and good as her citizens are able more fully to trust each other. Therefore:

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1. I will be honest, in word and in act. I will not lie, sneak, or pretend, nor will I keep the truth from those who have a right to it.

2. I will not do wrong in the hope of not being found out. I cannot hide the truth from myself and cannot often hide it from others.

3. I will not take without permission what does not belong to me.

4. I will do promptly what I have promised to do. If I have made a foolish promise, I will at once confess my mistake, and I will try to make good any harm which my mistake may have caused. I will so speak and act that people will find it easier to trust each other.

The fifth law is **The Law of Clean Play.** The Good American Plays Fair.

Clean play increases and trains one's strength, and helps one to be more useful to one's country. Therefore:

1. I will not cheat, nor will I play for keeps or for money. If I should not play fair, the loser would lose the fun of the game, the winner would lose his self-respect, and the game itself would become a mean and often cruel business.

2. I will treat my opponent with politeness.

3. If I play in a group game, I will play, not for my own glory, but for the success of my team and the fun of the game.

4. I will be a good loser or a generous winner.

The sixth law is **The Law of Duty.** The Good American Does His Duty.

The shirker or the willing idler lives upon the labor of others, burdens others with the work which he ought to do himself. He harms his fellow citizens, and so harms his country.

1. I will try to find out what my duty is, what I ought to do, and my duty I will do, whether it is easy or hard. What I ought to do I can do.

The seventh law is **The Law of Good Workmanship.** The Good American Tries to do the Right Thing in the Right Way.

The welfare of our country depends upon those who have learned to do in the right way the things that ought to be done. Therefore:

1. I will get the best possible education, and learn all that I can from those who have learned to do the right thing in the right way.

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2. I will take an interest in my work, and will not be satisfied with slipshod and merely passable work. A wheel or a rail or a nail carelessly made may cause the death of hundreds.

3. I will try to do the right thing in the right way, even when no one else sees or praises me. But when I have done my best, I will not envy those who have done better, or have received larger reward. Envy spoils the work and the worker.

The eighth law is **The Law of Team-Work.** The Good American Works in Friendly Co-operation with his Fellow Workers.

One man alone could not build a city or a great railroad. One man alone would find it hard to build a house or a bridge. That I may have bread, men have sowed and reaped, men have made plows and threshers, men have built mills and mined coal, men have made stoves and kept stores. As we learn better how to work together, the welfare of our country is advanced.

1. In whatever work I do with others, I will do my part and will help others do their part.

2. I will keep in order the things which I use in my work. When things are out of place, they are often in the way, and sometimes they are hard to find. Disorder means confusion, and the waste of time and patience.

3. In all my work with others, I will be cheerful. Cheerlessness depresses all the workers and injures all the work.

4. When I have received money for my work, I will be neither a miser nor a spendthrift. I will save or spend as one of the friendly workers of America.

The ninth law is **The Law of Kindness.** The Good American is kind.

In America those who are of different races, colors, and conditions, must live together. We are of many different sorts, but we are one great people. Every unkindness hurts the common life, every kindness helps the common life. Therefore:

1. I will be kind in all my thoughts. I will bear no spites or grudges. I will not think myself above any other girl or boy just because I am of a different race or color or condition. I will never despise anybody.

2. I will be kind in all my speech. I will not gossip nor will I speak unkindly of anyone. Words may wound or heal.

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3. I will be kind in all my acts. I will not selfishly insist on having my own way. I will always be polite. Rude people are not good Americans. I will not trouble unnecessarily those who do work for me. I will do my best to prevent cruelty, and will give my best help to those who need it most.

The tenth law is **The Law of Loyalty**. The Good American is Loyal.

If our America is to become ever greater and better, her citizens must be loyal, devotedly faithful, in every relation of life.

1. I will be loyal to my family. In loyalty I will gladly obey my parents or those who are in their place. I will do my best to help each member of my family to strength and usefulness.

2. I will be loyal to my school. In loyalty I will obey and help other pupils to obey those rules which further the good of all.

3. I will be loyal to my Town, my State, my Country. In loyalty I will respect and help others to respect their laws and their Courts of Justice.

4. I will be loyal to humanity. In loyalty I will do my best to help the friendly relations of our country with every other country, and to give to everyone in every land the best possible chance.

If I try simply to be loyal to my family, I may be disloyal to my school. If I try simply to be loyal to my school, I may be disloyal to my town, my state, and my country. If I try simply to be loyal to my town, state, and country, I may be disloyal to humanity. I will try above all things else to be loyal to humanity; then I shall surely be loyal to my country, my state, and my town, to my school, and to my family.

And he who obeys the law of loyalty obeys all the other nine laws of the Good American.

Reference Books

- Good Manners and Right Conduct (Books I and II)—D. C. Heath & Co.
- Golden Rule Series.
- Golden Ladder Series.

This Code of Morals also appears in the 1933 Manual, but in a much abbreviated form; apparently by this time less emphasis was being placed on it.

In those days the rules and regulations for promotion and graduation were strict and well-defined by the County Board of Education. (The Board sent out tests at "appropriate intervals" in order to check on the progress of every student.) Academic standards were rigorous. "In computing the percentage for promotion," the 1923 Manual states, "the daily work must count two-thirds and the tests one-third," and in order to be promoted or get a diploma from the eighth grade a student had to have an overall average of 80 per cent and not fall below 70 per cent in any one subject.

By 1933, however, the standards had relaxed a bit; daily class work now counted for three-fourths of a pupil's grade, and tests one-fourth. Diplomas and promotions were awarded for an overall average of 75 per cent, if no subject grade fell below 65 per cent, and trial promotions could be granted in some circumstances.

It seems that the county office kept close tabs on all students in those days. "At the end of the first and second months of school," the 1923 Manual dictates, "a detailed report of the progress and standing of all pupils . . . must be sent to the office of the County Superintendent of Schools. Such report must include written examination papers in at least two subjects, together with the questions." (This was still required in 1933, but by then the test papers didn't have to be included.) And at the end of the year the teacher had to make a final report to the County Board of Education on every student, recommending whether or not the pupil should be promoted. No promotions could be made at any time without the consent of the Board.

The county office also was concerned with the professional development of the teachers, just as it is today. According to the 1923 Manual, each teacher was "required to read at least two standard professional books during the year and to send to the County Superintendent's office a written report on the first book during the month of November, and on the second book during the month of May." Appended was a list of 22 books from which the teacher could choose.

(One can imagine how busy teachers greeted this semi-annual task!) The 1933 Manual merely suggests that the teacher "read professional books," but no longer requires the submission of book reports to the superintendent.

Other duties were spelled out for those teachers of the 1920s:

The teacher or principal is in charge of the school buildings and property. See that the janitor's work is thoroughly done, the yard kept in good condition, the out-houses clean and sanitary. The teacher should inspect the toilets at least once a day. Insist upon right conditions. . .

Pure air promotes both mental and moral vigor; impure air lowers the energy of the body, and as a result dullness, drowsiness, headache, and inattention to work are occasioned.

During recess open the windows at top and bottom. Make this a duty and attend to it. Allow as much ventilation during school hours as possible without creating drafts. . .

Each teacher should make an inspection daily of hygienic conditions in the classroom if she would emphasize habits of cleanliness, noticing the personal cleanliness of the pupils' hair, face, hands, finger nails, clothes.

(Just in passing we may note the high value apparently placed on "pure air" in those days. The "necessity of fresh air in homes; open doors and windows," and the "value of sleeping outdoors," were two items of the curriculum that were to be taught to all second graders. Perhaps there is less emphasis on this today because the air isn't so pure any more?)

The curriculum of the day leaned heavily toward the basics. One can get an idea of the relative importance attached to the various subjects by studying a table in the 1923 Manual which gives the suggested minimum time, in minutes per week, that was to be allotted each subject. These minimum times, for instance, were recommended for the fifth grader:

Reading	250 minutes
Arithmetic	150 minutes
Composition	150 minutes
Geography	150 minutes
History	150 minutes
Spelling	100 minutes
Physical Education	100 minutes
Penmanship	75 minutes
Physiology & Hygiene	60 minutes
Drawing	60 minutes
Music	60 minutes
Nature Study	30 minutes

(The recommendations vary for different grades.) The recommendations are pretty much the same in the 1933 Manual, except that even more time was allotted to reading and arithmetic, and by then geography and history were combined into the single subject of "social studies."

The daily program plan of each teacher varied considerably, of course (particularly since many who were in multi-graded classes had to teach more than one subject simultaneously to different grades in the same room), but in general, reading, composition and grammar, arithmetic, penmanship, and spelling were taught almost daily to all. History might be taught two days of the week, alternating with two days of geography, with such subjects as drawing and nature study being allotted a little time only once a week--often on Friday afternoons. Each day was usually started with about 15 minutes of music. Standardized textbooks, prescribed by the state, were required in most subject areas. And what of the various subjects?

In arithmetic, of course, the "new math" was far in the future; heavy emphasis was placed upon memorization drills. "Much drill

must be given on the various number combinations in addition and subtraction," the 1923 Manual says, "and on the tables in multiplication. The child should have them thoroughly memorized. Absolute accuracy must be insisted upon."

Reading was given much attention in the 1920s curriculum because, as the Manual says, "Reading is the golden key that unlocks all knowledge." Phonics were the accepted method of teaching, and here too we find stress placed upon the value of memorization and drill: "A judicious use of phonetics in every grade; of word and phrase drills; of exercise in enunciation, articulation, and pronunciation [sic]; of exercises to increase the reading pace are absolute essentials."

Children read from standard primers and readers and from supplemental books obtained from the county library. "Library Diplomas" were awarded by the county school superintendent to those pupils who read and reviewed at least six "good books" in a year and who had "a good record in deportment."

There were lists of poems and selections that students in each grade were expected to memorize. For example, in the 1920s, fourth graders had to learn by heart the following: "The Village Blacksmith," "The Flag Goes By," "Seein' Things at Night," "The American's Creed," "Look for Goodness," and "America, the Beautiful."

The 1923 Manual devotes much space to describing how history and civics should be taught--and one can detect a political bias that was perhaps dictated by the times:

... We must choose such materials as will contribute to our fundamental objective, that of socializing the child. ... The material must lend to the truth that our American Government and our present civilization are the highest achievements in the never-ending progress of mankind. ...

The fundamental considerations in method are growth, patriotism, and sympathy. The materials must be so presented as to portray the present as an outgrowth of the past, and as a stage in the progress toward an idealized future. An abiding faith in our people, a patriotic devotion to our institutions, and a sympathetic respect for other peoples and their institutions must be inspired. Progress must be so portrayed that evolution and not revolution is fixed in the mind of the child as the ideal growth. Faith in the American people should be of such a quality that the growing citizen will look with disfavor upon the pseudo-reformer with his doctrine of destruction, and further that he realize the necessity of protecting what we have by wise legislation looking to immigration control.

(Teaching children the value of "immigration control" may seem decidedly strange in these days of the multi-cultural curriculum!)

The subject of geography apparently seemed less fraught with philosophical danger to young minds; there are no such wordy admonitions appended to its description in the Manual, aside from the suggestion that maps, globes, a stereoscope, and a sand table could aid in its teaching. Sand tables--three by four feet was given as a good size--were considered standard classroom equipment then. Children could build relief maps in them--or, indeed, any kind of imaginary terrain that fancy dictated.

Spelling and penmanship seemed to be given more importance in those days than they are now. Both were taught through constant repetition, practice, and drill. The use of ink for writing was introduced in the third grade. In the 1920s the Zaner method of penmanship was in use.

Language and composition, of course, covered grammar and the mechanics of written and oral expression. In California today

(1978) school boards are busy developing proficiency standards for graduation, as required by recently passed state law. In the 1920s this proficiency standard regarding language was in effect:

Grammar School graduates should be able to recognize the part of speech of any word in a sentence by its use in the sentence. The ability to do this easily and quickly is a fundamental of technical grammar. ...

By the close of this [the eighth] year, pupils should be able to stand before their class and talk upon a subject within the range of their knowledge or experience, speaking plainly, in clean-cut sentences, and without grammatical mistakes. They should be able to write an original paragraph on a subject within the range of their experiences or interests.

Such a paragraph should show a mastery of the sentence idea, freedom from common grammatical errors, correct spelling, correct use of the commonest marks of punctuation, and a pleasing style of presentation of the subject.

A little time was given in some of the larger schools to less academic pursuits than reading, writing, and arithmetic. The state law of the time dictated that wherever there were six or more elementary school teachers at one school, "manual training and household economics" must be taught. The Santa Cruz County Board of Education accordingly directed that woodworking and sewing be taught in the appropriate schools during the seventh and eighth grades, for an hour and a quarter each week.

Physical education was made mandatory by state law in 1917, but it didn't seem to be given much importance as a subject, at least in rural schools. The 1923 Manual notes: "Much of the time for play has, in times past, been spent by the pupil in idle gossiping or in scuffling or playing foolish games." Teachers were urged to supervise the playground, teach games, and organize groups, so

that the various play activities of the students "may be more systematically conducted." However, to judge from both the 1923 and 1933 editions of the Manual, P. E. in those days just doesn't appear to have been an important part of the curriculum.

Similarly, music was not an important subject for educators of the day; it seems to have consisted mainly of the singing of songs, at least in the one-teacher rural schools. A list of 29 standard songs which all children were expected to know by the time they graduated is given. Teachers were warned: "In teaching any of the popular songs of the day, the teacher should use judgment in selecting only those of good musical quality and with words appropriate for school room singing." In addition, teachers were told, phonograph records were allowed as a teaching aid, but "trash should not be brought into the school room."

By the time the revised Manual of 1933 was written, the admonitions to the music teacher had grown stronger (perhaps because by that time jazz had been firmly established on the popular scene?). The 1933 Manual declares:

The voices of children should never be strained or forced, hence they should never be asked to sing LOUDLY. The tone should be kept soft, sweet, and flexible. The range should not go beyond that of C on the first line below the treble cleff to the G or A flat above it. To secure this good tone the teacher herself must NOT sing HARSHLY or LOUDLY, and should require the children to sing as though they were making an echo of her tone.

(One wonders what the educators of the day might have thought of hard rock.)

The time recommended to be allotted to nature study was only two 15-minute periods per week. The purpose of this study, the 1923 Manual says, was to enable the pupil "to do his part in the never-ending effort to have nature further and further serve the human race" -- a philosophical point of view that might make some modern-day environmentalists a little uneasy.

This chapter has attempted to give readers some idea of what was taught and how it was taught in Santa Cruz classrooms of the 1920s and '30s. Were those truly the "good old days" of education? Did students learn more?

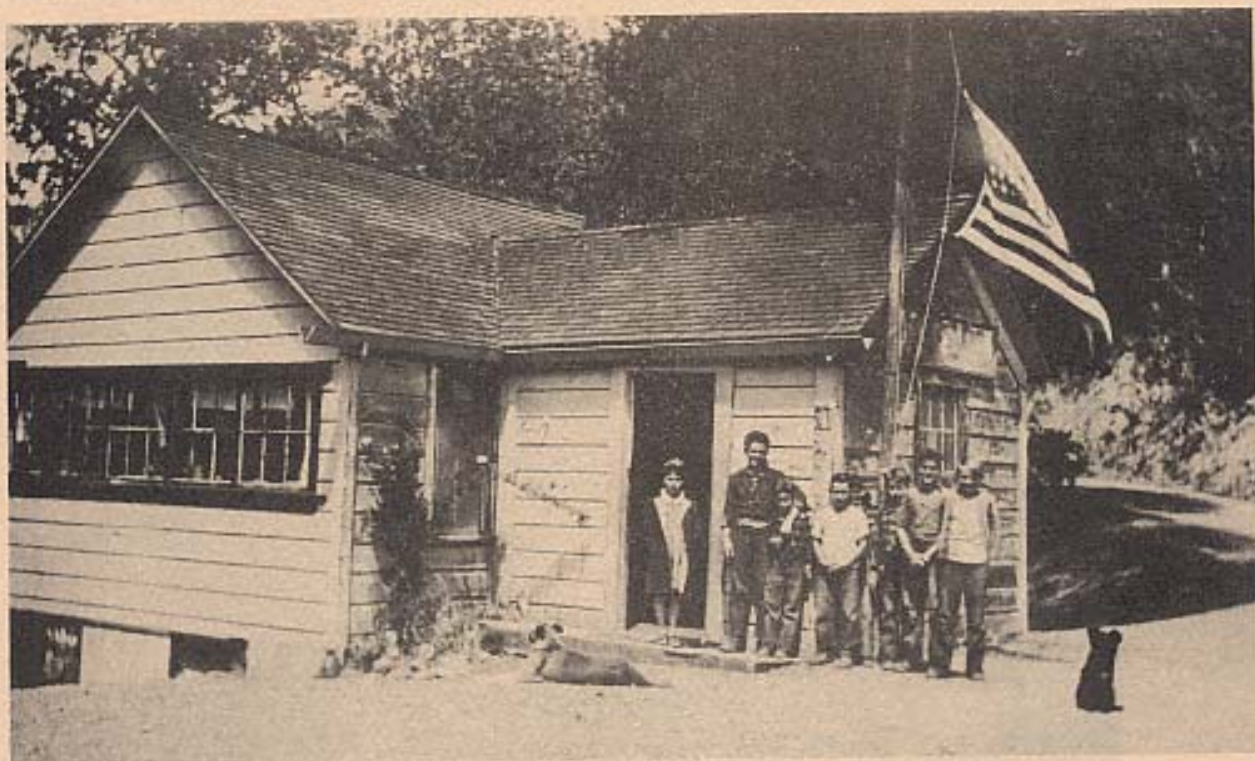
It does seem as if academic and moral standards were higher, stricter then. Yet, the description of the teaching methods contained in those old manuals often conjures up images of bored, glassy-eyed pupils, staring out the window or squirming impatiently at their desks (all desks arranged in precise rows, of course, and anchored firmly to the floor), awaiting deliverance by the school bell from their long day of recitation and drill. Classrooms are more open now, freer, less rigid. We see fewer of those glassy-eyed, squirming students today. But are they getting a better education today? That's a hard question to answer. Readers will have to judge for themselves.

It may be that the essential factor in getting a good education is not so much in the curriculum provided or the teaching methods employed--be they "strict" or "permissive"--but in the personal interaction between the individual teacher and the individual student. It may be that nothing in education is more important than that.

The 1923 Manual for Public Schools speaks to this point: "If the teacher has not becoming manners," it says, "her teaching of manners will be useless, for the pupil will do as the teacher does, not as he is told to do."



Students at work in classroom of old Calabasas School, probably in early 1940s.



The old Brown School near Bear Creek Road north of Boulder Creek. Established in 1875. This building erected in 1895(?). Suspended in 1950. This photo of the student body was probably taken in 1945 or a few years earlier. Mrs. Alice Larsen(not shown) was teacher in 1945.



Field Day at Soquel Union School in 1945. Teachers Kate Leonard and Alice Woolsey are shown here.



Eva Gurkovich, principal of Aptos School, in 1945. (Bus driver, unseen, was George Weiser.)



A pirate flag--fake, of course--was being hoisted at Seaside School back in the 1940s when this photo was snapped. The class was probably studying the coast history which abounded in tales of sea and ships.



Students of Eureka School, one of the many small, relatively isolated schools that still existed in the county in the 1940s. The pupils are unidentified, but the burro is named Sally. They are saddling her for the trip home from school.



Green Valley School band, early 1940s.



Roach School Junior Traffic Patrol, 1944-45.



Students of Oakdale School making a Victory garden, early 1940s. (This school was unionized with Aptos in 1947.)



Cadet Corps of Santa Cruz High School at Camp Kohler, 1945.



Scrap drive at Seaside School in 1942. Reportedly two tons of scrap for the war effort were collected.