

School Days...

By CAROL KATZ

To the casual observer, Perrinville School on Farmington Road south of Joy in Westland is a typically pleasant, sprawled out suburban elementary school.

Passing it on the south, however, one can see that it is actually built around a small, old fashioned one room schoolhouse, which stands out quaintly from the rest of the building.

The story of the old schoolhouse is full of surprises. It is not as old as it looks; it was built in 1937.

Nor was it built and paid for by a hard working community of farmers. There was just one man responsible for its existence, and his name was Henry Ford.

SINCE HIS BOYHOOD in the 1870s Ford had visited the quiet country area known as Perrinville along the Rouge River. He enjoyed watching the nearby Nankin Mills grist mill; observing its giant water wheels actually inspired him to construct his first moving device -- a homemade wheel to which he attached a coffee grinder.

After his spectacular success in the automotive business, Ford again returned to the area that he had loved as a boy and turned the old mill into a small, automotive parts factory.

His purpose was admirable; distressed by the increasing crowding and pollution of cities, Ford sought to combine the best of both town and country life.

He wanted to provide jobs in rural settings so that people wouldn't be forced to abandon the pleasure of the countryside for the pollution of the cities.

THE FORD FACTORY at the old mill functioned as the first of several Village Industries from 1918 to the 1940s.

During those years Ford maintained his personal interest in the tiny rural community. In 1937 he presented it with a gift wrapped package in the form of a one room schoolhouse on which he paid for all taxes, the teacher's salary, equipment and all students' medical and dental bills.

Small though it was, Henry Ford's schoolhouse was considered quite desirable. It boasted indirect lighting, a machine shop in the basement, sewing machines, special instructors in singing and dancing and small plots of land on which every student practiced gardening.

A full time janitor was employed by Ford and library books were provided through Wayne County. Morning chapel services were carried out in the school every day.

SCHOOL ACTIVITIES were not all work and no play. Students skated on the adjacent pond during recess; sometimes the children went on sleigh rides pulled by horses down Farmington and Joy Roads.

Attendance at the school was something of a local status symbol. Parents in other districts tried to enroll their children in it. Compared to other nearby schools, many of which skimmed along on meager budgets and half day sessions, the school at Nankin Mills was truly deluxe.

A man of old fashioned ideals, Henry Ford, who could have built a multi-roomed facility if he had so desired, believed in the soundness of one room schooling. He also stuck by the old textbooks; students learned reading from McGuffey's Reader, which dates back to the 19th Century.

HARD WORK AND DILIGENCE were other values imparted to students at the school. Girls sewed their own graduation dresses on school sewing machines; each child was responsible for a small vegetable crop which he was encouraged to keep up even during the summer months.

Life continued happily at the school and at the picturesque old factory for most of the remainder of Henry Ford's life.

IN THE FORTIES the factory was sold by the Ford organization to Wayne County. Today it functions as the Nankin Mills Nature Center, a quaint haven for animals and woodland displays open to the public. It is run by the Wayne County Road Commission and is located on Ann Arbor Trail just east of Farmington Road.

The schoolhouse was sold to the fledgling Nankin Mills School District in 1946 for the price of \$1, although it has since been absorbed into the Livonia School system.

SOME NEWER RESIDENTS were in favor of tearing down the school in order to make way for the large, modern structure that was to replace it; sentimentalists won out, however; the little old schoolhouse remains to this day and is used as a kindergarten for Perrinville youngsters.

The intersection at Farmington Road and Ann Arbor Trail provides an interesting chunk of local nostalgia. A Sunday afternoon visit will give you a glimpse of Ford's old schoolhouse, as well as the Nankin Mills Nature Center with its outdoor collection of a wide variety of animals.

Adjacent to the Nature Center is a white frame building, formerly used as the miller's house, that is being renovated for use as the future Westland Historical Museum.

And down the road to the east you'll find a number of old farm houses and roadside stands which sell fresh picked fruits and vegetables.

Much of the land here is still being farmed, and along with ears of corn on the cob you'll find, if you ask, talk of the good old days when Henry Ford himself used to visit the same area and chat with the folks who live there to this day.



PERRINVILLE SCHOOL has grown up and around this one room schoolhouse, formerly a pet project of Henry Ford. (Evert photo)



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