

Labor Day always brings to mind the first day of school. When I started kindergarten--in the days before anyone in our rural area had ever heard of something called "preschool" or "daycare," I had the misfortune or good fortune, depending on one's point of view, of beginning that odyssey on my sixth birthday. I had never been away from home, and like most of the children of our community at that time, I was shy.

Still, I had looked forward to the beginning of school. And, I would not be alone. My sister was in the fourth grade, and my brother had just entered high school. In our township, that meant that we were all in the same building. Classes averaged about twenty students, so there were no more than 250 boys and girls in the thirteen grades from kindergarteners to seniors.

I had a new dress. I can't remember which one it was. My aunt in Traverse City had made me a pretty dress for my birthday, but I also had a new frock that my mother had made. That was my "button dress." The printed material had a bright red background with representations of different kinds and colors of buttons scattered over it. And my mother had made up the cloth into a pattern unlike any I had had before. There was a wide ruffle on the bottom of the hem. I think that was what really made me like that dress. I had never had a ruffle before.

So, with great anticipation, I waited for that first day of school. I can't recall if I enjoyed the beginning of kindergarten or not, but if I did, it was not pleasure that lasted very long. I found that school was not at all what I had expected.

In the first place, there were too many children there. The kindergartners and first graders were in one room, and I had never seen that many little people at one time in all my six years. They were noisy, and I was a quiet child. And they invaded each other's space in a way that perplexed me. They took bites of each other's lunches, a habit that still bothers me. The girls threw their arms around each other, and the boys jostled and were loud.

Then, too, I had learned to read and write long before I went to school. Kindergartners in that day were expected to go through a period

of "reading readiness" rather than beginning immediately to read. And, even when we did get to the books, the "Dick and Jane" primers were not interesting, so school turned out to be both boring and scary.

Soon, I began to have severe stomach aches. We had half-day kindergarten, and a long lane from the road where the school bus stopped to the house was too much for me. My father began meeting the bus and carrying me to the house.

I began refusing to go to school. I remember one incident when I hung onto a kitchen chair, wrapping my legs around it so that I had to be pried loose to go to the school bus.

I think my parents did the right thing. They did not force me to go every day. I looked back at my kindergarten "report card" the other day, and I saw that I had missed school 29 days, something that would not be tolerated today. When I looked at my report cards through elementary and high school years, I discovered that I missed the equivalent of an entire year of school during the thirteen years from kindergarten through high school graduation.

School seemed so far away from home, where everything was both secure and interesting. The five miles from our farm to the village seemed a lot longer when one rode a bus about thirty miles--picking up children along the way--and I was incredibly homesick.

My kindergarten year was just the beginning of thirteen years of finding school less than a satisfying experience. I liked many of my teachers, and the school books were interesting and the work easy and often enjoyable. The bookmobile that began visiting our school ensured that I would not miss school on the days that new reading material was available, and I played basketball in high school, giving me another incentive to get on the bus each morning.

But, every September, when Labor Day rolls around, I get an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach as I remember what the day after the holiday entailed. And now, as then, home is the best place for me.