

There are not many mementoes of my school days that have survived the decades. Most of them I threw out myself and never thought about again. A few items I wished I had kept, but by the time that regret developed, they were long gone. My mother did retain a paper or two from my time in early elementary grades, and she also, for some reason, hung on to my report cards. I dug them out today for a specific reason. With all the problems associated with school closings, virtual learning, and hit and miss education opportunities, I wondered just my own experience in thirteen years of public school might throw light on the situation.

I soon realized that it illuminated nothing, because my experience was so far removed from that of most children then or now. But, it did turn out to be interesting.

I was not a little girl who normally indulged in tantrums. My “acting out” was much more likely to result in my going outside, standing under the kitchen window, and pouting. That was easy enough for my mother and father to ignore, and so, of course, I did not keep it up very long. It was quite boring standing out there in the heat of summer or cold of winter feeling sorry for myself.

However, there was one exception, one situation where I did not placidly pout and eventually give up. I did not want to go to school.

Before I began kindergarten, I had looked forward to it. My older siblings did not seem to think there was anything traumatic about going down the lane to meet the school bus, lunch boxes and notebooks in hand. That must be fun, I had thought.

Then, though, reality reared its head, and I soon understood that it meant five days a week. It meant riding all that way to the village, away from the home farm. And, it involved a lot of children I had never seen before, a nice teacher who did not at first understand that I could already read and who had a lot of boring things that she had to teach. I didn’t know it would mean having to lie on the floor and take a nap, though we had school for only half a day. The glamour of going to school wore off very quickly.

So, I decided I would not always go. Persuasion did no good. I soon understood in those days that nobody would drive children to school. If I was able to hold out until the bus had gone by, I could stay home that day.

I don’t know if my plan would actually be called a “tantrum.” I don’t remember screaming or refusing to put on my coat or anything like that. Instead, I used a different tactic. I wound my arms around the back of a kitchen chair, my legs around its legs, and refused to be pried loose.

I couldn’t do this every day. I didn’t have the will for constant sit-in demonstrations. So, some of the time, I went to school willingly. But, I did not want to go. And, this was not only on the surface. I suffered such stomach aches in kindergarten that my dad had to meet the noon bus and carry me up the lane to the house. I truly was traumatized by school.

This problem eased as time went on, but I never liked school until I reached the university. In the meantime, I piled up a considerable amount of AWOL at school. So, I wondered just how much avoidance of school actually

had occurred during my kindergarten to senior 13 years. And, for that reason, I dug out those old report cards. What I found wasn't all that surprising. I missed school twelve per cent of the days all in all. The early years were the most difficult for me, and I did pretty well as a senior, but twelve per cent means I missed 284 days of elementary and high school. This number does not include snow days. And it does not include, of course, our vacations that provided some relief from daily attendance. As a first grader, I missed nearly forty days of school.

From seventh grade on, we needed to take a note from a parent when we returned after an absence. And, "helping at home" was a valid excuse. And, it was also not any kind of blurring of the lines between truth and fiction. I did not have to help at home, in most instances, but I did help. And, to be perfectly honest, the work I helped my dad with at home was much more interesting than anything I might have otherwise been doing at school.

This glimpse into my own past sheds no light on the school situation that has arisen because of Covid. But, it is curious what one discovers upon looking back at a few unimportant documents from one's own personal past.