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GEMS FROM CHERUBS

By Opal Hartsell Brown

PREFACE

"Gems from Cherubs" is Chapter 8 from a book-length manuscript, *THE CHALLENGING 5'S TO 50'S--AND POLITICS*, which covers my forty-year career (mostly teaching). This chapter begins in January, 1947, at Emerson Elementary School, Lawton, and extends to 1962. At that time, I switched to junior high and then to high school.

Interspersed between junior high and high school are chapters on moonlighting at the Army Education Center, Fort Sill. Earlier chapters are on prior work. AND NOW THE CHAPTER...

I was supervising the playground at Emerson when a first grade boy dashed up and tugged at my skirt. "Come quick, Teacher!" he panted. "A boy over there is taking God's name insane!"

I burst into laughter. Little folk were forever spouting gems of naivete, simplicity and misapplication, yet appropriate enough to remember. Movie makers were missing choice lines--even scenes--by not focusing on the nation's schools. Events were challenging, even when not funny or inspiring.

A few days before, for instance, Louise Scott, first-grade teacher, was discussing titles of school personnel. Every child understood Mr. Howeth, the custodian, was a man, but Mrs. and Miss puzzled them. Scott wrote the two words on the board.

"Now, Mrs. Brown, the second-grade teacher, and I are M-r-s." she pointed and spelled. "The principal



ART BY LEIGHA HELT

is Miss Collins, M-i-s-s. What is the difference?"

"I know! I know!" Rodney volunteered, waving his hand. "All right, Rodney," Scott said, "tell us." "Well," he hummed, "Miss Collins is a lady. You and Miz Brown ain't."

My children were reading silently the story of big strong "Katy Kangaroo." When they finished, I asked Tommy what he remembered about Katy.

"She was a lady kangaroo," he answered. "All right," I said. "What else?" "She had a little boy." "Yes," I nodded. "Describe her, as if she were a man." Tommy ducked his head. "She wasn't married." My delight in children's witticisms was so infectious that other teachers shared their students' gems with me, which led to a column in the school newsletter. Orvella Littlefield told of watering her house plants on the window sill, while Danny and Eddie watched.

"That one is about dead," Eddie observed. "Yes, Eddie," Littlefield agreed. "It has lived its life and is ready to die."

Danny stepped nearer. "Why don't you pray for it, Miz Littlefield?" he asked.

October 12, special recognition was being given Columbus for his

discovery of America. "I don't see what's so great about that," Steve commented. "If he hadn't, somebody else would have."

Janie, age seven, was reporting on her trip through the Crazy House at the fair. "And when the whistle blew," she giggled, "my aunt's dress tail flew over her head. But mine didn't. I had on jeans 'cause I'm proud."

A first-grade class was reading about cotton. "You know how my uncle gets cotton," Leland asked.

"How?" another student asked. "He gives his sheep a haircut; then he gets cotton." Nine-year-old Kathy was walking across the street with her mother, Rosemary Kane, a teacher, when she noticed a sign: "Look out for pedestrians."

Kathy looked up at her mother. "Why do they want us to look out for Presbyterians?" she asked.

Fay Click's first graders brought pictures of objects beginning with H. Dewayne's pictures were a hill, a horse, a head of hair, and some soldiers crawling from a trench. Click studied the soldiers for a moment and then said, "Good, Dewayne. You thought of the helmets, didn't you?"

"No," Dewayne frowned. "That's to hell and back." A first-grade boy

BASTIONS

in Bea Hoover's room approached a girl on the playground. "Will you marry me?" he asked.

The girl pursed her mouth and said, "No, I won't marry you." "Well," the boy said, skipping away, "that's one more out of my system."

Jesse, an Indian boy in my primary music class, asked to be moved. "Why do you want to move?" I asked.

"I can't sing by Tod." "Why not?" "He gets me off. He's singing dark." Tod sang off-key, once tagged monotone. Near Christmas, Virginia Siering closed the BIBLE STORY to question students. "Now, who remembers what the wise men brought to Baby Jesus?"

Jerry raised his hand. "Gold, Frankenstein, and myrrh," he said and reared back proudly.

On another occasion, Jerry grasped Siering's hand. "Did you see the ring I give Wanda?" he asked. "Me and her's goin' to get married."

"You mean I gave Wanda," Siering corrected, "and she and I are going to get married."

Jerry repeated correctly, "I gave Wanda. She and I are going to get married."

"That's better," Siering said, "but you and Wanda are going to have to do your courting away from school."

"Courting?" Jerry asked. "What's courting?" Glendell, who was listening nearby, guffawed, "Goll-ll-lee. You in the second grade and don't know what courting is?"

My students were discussing problems of the handicapped. "If blind people can't see," I asked, "how do they read?" "I know, I know!" Jack sputtered. "Their books have bumps on them."

The spelling lesson had the word kill in it. "Kill," Paul repeated. "That's easy. . . d-e-a-d."

Paul had a habit of yelling, "What page?" every time his group gathered for recitation. He never listened when I announced it.

Neither did he look at the board, where it was written. One day I kept him in at recess.

"You stand here," I said, indicating the blackboard, "and say what page until we come back inside. Maybe that will remind you to pay closer attention."

I left and in a few moments looked in at a window. Paul was chanting, "What page, what page, what page. . ." I smiled and walked away.

Paul refrained from yelling What page several days; then habit overcame discipline. He sat down in the reading circle and began flipping through the book. "What page?" he yelled, then gasped, slapped his hand over his mouth, and looked guilty. I clenched my teeth, tightened my lips, and pretended not to hear.

Joanne's mother wrote a note about the child's absence. "A swing in the park hit her on the head, requiring a shot and three stitches on her ear."

Thinking that Joanne would like to talk about her experience during SHOW AND TELL, I asked, "Joanne,

***"What makes thunder?"
Pat asked. "It's God,"
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heavy load across the
sky."***

what bad thing happened to you this week?"

"My daddy had to go to France," she said. "I didn't know that," I sympathized. "I'm sorry. What else happened to you?"

"My mother came home with a new baby." "I'd think that would be good," I said. Frowning, Joanne glared at me, and I called on another student.

Melody was engrossed in an encyclopedia. "Mrs. Brown," she called, "is a whale a mammal?"

"Yes," I answered. Melody turned the encyclopedia upside down. "I don't see how it can be," she said. "I can't find its milker."

A third-grade music class was studying composers. "Jimmy," Mrs. Southern asked, "what have you learned about Haydn?"

"I remember he wrote 104 sympathies," Jimmy replied.

The words girl and girls were on a second-grade spelling lesson. A small boy from across the tracks wrote gal and gals.

Every child knew "Mary's Little Lamb," but Mamie Giles' first grade at Will Rogers met its cousin. Settled for a morning of work, the children were divided into three groups: two busy at their desks and one in a reading circle up front.

Suddenly, someone shouted, "A billy goat! A billy goat!" Children jumped into their chairs; others got under tables.

A few brave ones started toward the goat. The disturbance drew other classes into the hall.

By then, Mamie was weaving toward the animal, swishing the tail of her dress, as if she were shooin' chickens. The custodian appeared, grabbed the goat's tail and ordered him to "hoof it away from here!" The children had big news when they arrived home that evening.

My class was reading about skyscrapers, far from Lawton's three- and four-storied buildings.

"What's a skyscraper?" one of them asked.

"It's what they use to clean the sky," Charles blurted. "You're dumb," Sherry said in disgust. "No," I interceded, "just mistaken. If you know, Sherry, tell him."

She did, and then the discussion changed to thunder. "What makes thunder?" Pat asked. "It's God," Tommy said, "dragging a heavy load across the sky."

The science lesson was "How Animal Mothers Protect Their Young." Choosing an animal in the picture, I asked Mike, "How does a skunk protect her young?"

Mike ducked his head and looked up from beneath his brows.

Well, when anything gets near the babies, she sprays it with disinfectant perfume."

George volunteered, "She goes to the bathroom on it." Victor, Aline Lowry's third-grade boy, was talking across the aisle to Rosemary.

"Victor," Lowry said, "do you need some help?"

"No," Victor answered. "Then get your work finished," Lowry said; "it's almost recess."

In a few minutes, Victor was talking again. "What do you want?" Lowry asked.

"I want Rosemary to go to the show with me," he answered.

"Aren't you a little young," Lowry asked, "to be making a date with a girl?"

Victor leaned forward and scowled, "Well, I'm nine!" At Roosevelt School, a first-grade patron approached speech therapist Clarice McMillion on the playground and asked, "Can you direct me to Mrs. Sheep?"

Puzzled, McMillion answered, "We don't have a Mrs. Sheep here."

"Oh yes," the man insisted; "she's my child's teacher."

"We have a Mrs. Lamb," McMillion told him. The man blushed, then grinned. "That's probably it," he said. "Jackie must have got the name confused."

Seven-year-old Jerry was playing Mr. McGregor in the story "Peter Rabbit." His only dialogue was, "Stop, Thief!"

Dressed in overalls and a straw hat, Jerry came on stage to hoe his "garden," which was rows of little girls hunkered on the stage and wearing fluffy, green-crepe-paper dresses. Timothy, in a white suit that had long, floppy ears, was the rabbit. He nibbled at a cabbage. Jerry raised his hoe and then looked out into the auditorium filled with students, teachers, and patrons. He froze.

The rabbit continued to hop and nibble. Jerry looked at his teacher

in an opening of the curtain. She nodded, smiled, and whispered, "Stop, Thief!"

He frowned and turned his head sideways for her to repeat. She motioned for him to go ahead. He raised his hoe and started after the rabbit. They raced across the stage several times, and then Jerry's hat fell off. When he stopped to pick it up, the rabbit disappeared behind the curtain.

Jerry threw his hoe at the place the rabbit had disappeared, shook his fist, and shouted, "I'll get you next time, you robber!"

The audience exploded with applause and laughter. After the program, Eva Seigler complimented Jerry on his performance. "Over at that other school," he beamed, "I played Dopey in SNOW WHITE AND THE SEVEN MIDGETS!"

One day, when I was not on duty at recess, I sat at my desk grading papers. Ronald and Tommy dashed in. "You know what Tommy just said?" Ronald asked.

"No," I answered. "What did Tommy say?" "He said he's going to marry you." "She's my pal," Tommy laughed in spite of his blush.

"Tommy had better wait," I suggested, "and marry my daughter."

His gray eyes negated the idea. "You don't have a daughter."

"Maybe I'll adopt one," I said, "just for you." Tommy kissed my hand, and the boys skipped out. Sometimes, little folk spat gems, which didn't mold into anecdotes. Examples: If a hen isn't married, she won't lay. A date cake is a cake you take on a date. Is it against the law to kiss a girl? How does nature know how to give some people one child and some eight or ten?

I had amonia last night, and if I go out in the cold today, I'll get amonia again.

Linda is better. She let her fever down last night.

I'm bleeding. I'm not

minstrating. I just cut myself.

My mother doesn't work. She's just a plain woman.

If chickens don't have hair, why do they have combs?

I put my money from the tooth fairy in the plate at church. I thought Jesus needed it.

That bird is cackling.

There's a gorilla in my apple.

Rain comes out of the clouds when it knocks on their doors.

You hear thunder when the clouds run into something. It lightens when God strikes a match.

Will you enroll me out?

Don't have a fight with Friday.

I picked eggs on the farm and got cackleburs in my hair.

She's wearing a skinny (checked) plaid dress.

To stop a fight, just shout, "At ease! Crime doesn't pay!"

I was tardy because I had to get a hairshot.

I'm one-fourteenth Cherokee. I'm about a pint Indian blood.

He undigged a hole.

Was that a missnake?

If just one of the Chinese brothers took the whole ocean in his mouth, looks like he'd pee the bed.

I ain't learned my bowels (vowels) yet.

Dale can't write. His paper's too tough. (His pencil had hard lead.)


D is for Danny, Daddy, dog, and damn.

When I say my ses plain, a whistle comes out.

Hey, Sarah, quick up your reading. He didn't drop off his reading when he came to that cliff (period).

I'm sick. I swallowed up my breakfast.

When my daddy snores, he sounds like a lawn mower.

I went to the country, and guess what I saw--a calf gnawing (sucking) on a cow. 

(OPAL HARTSELL BROWN now lives and writes near Davis and continues to serve as encouragement to all other writers with whom she has communication.)