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Miss M

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PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Evidently Miss M had her own brand of effectiveness.

MISS

M

by Elsie Lang

Have you ever heard of anyone who didn't worship his/her first-grade teacher? It seems that no matter how old, how ugly, or how mean she might have been, we all, at age six, thought she was terrific. As I look back on this year from an adult perspective, however, I see a slightly different picture of my first-grade teacher.

Miss M was rather plump and motherly looking. She was an old maid, as female teachers usually were in those days, but being a spinster was not her idea. In fact, rumor had it that she had followed the bachelor coach to our town with matrimony in mind. But the two of them never married—at least not during the six years they taught together in our school.

Our school was a small rural one, and discipline was not a problem, especially in the lower grades, for our parents taught us to respect our elders and to obey orders without questioning their fairness. In fact, I, for one, was promised another spanking at home if I got one at school, and this promise was made good the one time it happened.

But just in case our parents hadn't frightened us into submission, Miss M finished the job. I remember her telling us that if we were bad, she would send us to the "Office." This threat alone was chilling, for we were terrified of our superintendent. When he visited our classroom, the first hint of his presence was his long black slippers turning in at our door. Then we looked up into a face that wore a perpetual frown. This frown always convinced me that I had done something wrong and he had come after me. Furthermore, Miss M told us that if we were really bad, we would be put in a big box that was kept in the "Office" for this express purpose, and there we would stay without food or water for several days. It never occurred to me that this might be cruel and unusual punishment or that my parents might quiet my fears if I but told them of these threats.

This fear served, in my case anyway, as a deterrent to any planned misbehavior, but the sins that were punishable, according to Miss M, were legion. For

example, one day I found a gypsum rock on the playground, and since we had little playground equipment with which to amuse ourselves, I began to draw a hopscotch game on the sidewalk with the rock. My creative endeavor was labeled as willful defacement of school property, and my knuckles were soundly rapped with Miss M's ruler. Needless to say, this episode ended hopscotch games on our playground.

Not only did Miss M rule our conduct with her fear tactics; she also used threats as an incentive to learning. For example, we "learned" our reading lesson for the next day by taking our book home each afternoon, and with the help of a parent or older sibling, we memorized the assignment. This arrangement worked beautifully until the afternoon I left my reader on the school bus by mistake. I begged my parents to take me to the bus driver's house so I could get my book and learn my lesson, but they, not knowing how worried I was about being put in that pine box in the "Office," told me that my cousin, who rode the same bus, could help me during the ride to school the next morning. That night I promised God perpetual perfection if He would make sure that Clara, my cousin, would be on the bus the next day. Fortunately, she was, and with her help and my fear of failure, I read my page to Miss M without pausing or stumbling over a word. I even received rare words of praise from Miss M, but I had truly learned my lesson. I never left another book on the school bus.

Even though Miss M's teaching methods seem unorthodox by today's standards, they were effective. We all respected our teacher, and we all learned to read. Recently we celebrated our thirtieth class reunion, and out of the original class of twenty-two, there are several successful farmers and ranchers; a Wichita, Kansas, Police Chief; a United Airlines executive; an air traffic controller; a university professor; and an Atomic Energy research scientist. Perhaps we should give Miss M some credit for our successes.