



7-15-1982

## Amen, Mr. Garlow

Inez Whitney

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview>

---

### Recommended Citation

Whitney, Inez (1982) "Amen, Mr. Garlow," *Westview*: Vol. 1: Iss. 4, Article 8.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol1/iss4/8>

This Nonfiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Westview by an authorized administrator of SWOSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).





# AMEN, MR. GARLOW

— Inez Whitney

Mr. John Garlow was going through hell when he decided to build a heaven in his one-room country school. He had been at Prairie View, District 56, in Custer County, Oklahoma, exactly one month. He knew something had to be done. His plans just weren't working out. When he was hired, what was expected was made very clear.

"We are determined to have an orderly school," the chairman of the School Board told him. "Oklahoma is a new state — only five years old. These boys and girls will run Oklahoma in a few years. They must get an education. No more foolishness. Fighting and playing hooky must stop."

How well I remember my first look at Mr. Garlow. I was seven years old and in the second grade. Although early in the morning, the hot Oklahoma sun had already pushed the thermometer near a hundred. With more than fifty other children, my friend Edna and I were waiting in front of the one-room white frame schoolhouse that stood on the corner of my father's farm. The boys wore straw hats, homemade shirts, and blue bib overalls. The girls were in colorful print dresses and sunbonnets. All were barefoot. Since the first eight grades were taught at Prairie View, the pupils' ages ranged from six well into the teens.

All were gazing impatiently down the red dirt road. It was the opening day of school, and the new teacher was expected momentarily.

I whispered to Edna, "I hope we can be seatmates again." It was fun to choose a friend to sit with you in a double desk.

"So do I", she said. "I just hope my brothers and the other big boys won't fight with this teacher like they did with Mr. Varner last year."

A cloud of dust appeared. Soon a horse and buggy was distinguishable traveling at a good clip. As the buggy wheeled into the schoolyard, the new teacher pulled up short. He placed his whip in the holder, hopped out of the buggy, and tied the horse to a hitching post.

He was a tall slender man, perhaps in his early thirties. He had dark hair and eyes and a small, neatly trimmed mustache. Tipping his hat he said only, "Good morning," and walked briskly into the schoolhouse. Very soon he reappeared at the door vigorously ringing an old brass handbell.

"Hurry, hurry," I said and grabbing Edna's hand dashed through the door. The three long rows of double and triple desks were bolted securely to the floor. Pushed aside by the big boys in a rush for the coveted back seats, we sank quickly into a double desk on the front row.

"I don't care," Edna whispered. "Anyway we are seatmates."

A stillness fell over the room. The army awaited the

first move of the enemy.

Standing by the battered desk with a hand on the captain's chair, the teacher began to speak.

"My name is Mr. Garlow. As I am a God-fearing man, we will open the day with prayer and Bible reading. I am sure you are accustomed to this, but we will also begin our afternoon the same way. There will be other times during the day when we will need to seek the guidance of our Lord."

It was soon evident that Mr. Garlow was not like the usual run of teachers. He had many new and startling ideas. Pupils were allowed unheard-of freedom. Small groups were sent out in the yard to study. All were encouraged to go through textbooks as rapidly as possible. This made for complications. The eight grades, large number of students, and limited supply of textbooks made it impossible to carry out his ideas effectively.

Recitations took place in a haphazard manner. Assignments were not very definite. Many students did little or no studying. Mr. Garlow's prayers became more frequent and began to include appeals for the self-improvement of his charges. As matters worsened, he began to cast about for something to hold their interest. That was when the idea of a heaven at Prairie View occurred to him. This just might solve his problem. The next day he put forward his plan.

"Students, I have in mind something both interesting and worthwhile. Tomorrow bring any lumber or old boards your parents will let you have, along with hammer and nails. We'll have a good time together. I think you will be pleased with what I have in mind."

This challenged the curiosity of the older boys, and the response was more than satisfactory. After morning devotions the girls and small boys were sent outside to play. Under the direction of Mr. Garlow, the boys went to work with alacrity. Within a few days a platform was completed midway between the floor and ceiling at the front of the room.

One afternoon just before dismissal everyone was called together. When we were finally settled in our seats, Mr. Garlow began speaking with great seriousness.

"I know you have thought of heaven as a faraway place and so it is, but we are going to have our own heaven right here in this room. Those who are diligent and prepare their lessons will be called to mount this platform, our own heaven right here on earth. In heaven you will be free to read, write stories, work arithmetic, study history and geography."

He then proceeded to affix a neatly lettered sign "Heaven" to the platform.

The captain's chair was placed to the side of the platform with Webster's unabridged Dictionary in the seat. The older students could reach heaven easily, but smaller ones like me had to be pulled up by the older boys.

Heaven was an instant success. Interest ran high. Mr. Garlow began sending news items to the local paper, The Custer Courier. I still have some of the clippings my mother pasted in her scrapbook.

One reads, "We are proud to say a few of our pupils are not ashamed to be seen studying their Bibles. They are looking for a quotation from Paul's writing, a part of which is 'Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed'."

Another: Inez Schneider (I) has read her second reader through five times; she brings the third reader to school and occasionally conducts the second reader lessons and reads to the class from the third reader while the teacher does personal work among the more advanced students."

My reading ability was due to my mother's help at home. She insisted that I read to her each night page by page through the book with no skipping here and there as many of the pupils did.

In retrospect I have fond memories of the happy hours I spent in heaven, but they didn't last long. The novelty of heaven soon wore off. Too many of us were never able to attain its heights.

One morning when the pupils arrived, the platform was gone. Mr. Garlow stood holding a short black leather strap in his hand. From that day on the strap was his constant companion. He wielded it frequently but ineffectively as he was a kind man and hated the thought of inflicting pain. By now it was evident he was no disciplinarian.

The weather was still warm; and very often a culprit, who saw Mr. Garlow bearing down upon him, strap in hand, jumped out of one of the long open windows with Mr. Garlow close behind. Then came the chase. In and out of the windows leaped the pupil with Mr. Garlow in close pursuit. Mr. Garlow, short of breath, usually played out and went back to his captain's chair. The guilty one, after staying outside for sometime, would cautiously creep in through the most distant window. He was either totally ignored or a prayer was offered with a petition that the pupil realize the error of his ways.

The school was very close to our house. My mother said, "Things are coming to a pretty pass. No one can tell whether it is recess or if they are supposed to be having school. Children are running around the yard and in and out all day long."

Talk got about among the parents as children went home with tales of the day's happenings. These were a few of the incidents that made the parents begin to question Mr. Garlow's ability.

Doyle Coatney, a second grader, was promised punishment if he came to school one more time with his work not finished. As usual, he hadn't studied, but he had made one preparation. To soften the sting of Mr. Garlow's strap, he came to school with a thin square board in the seat of his britches. Along with the other second graders, I sat on the long recitation bench waiting expectantly to see what would happen. With downcast eyes Doyle confessed that he had come unprepared once more. Mr. Garlow said sorrowfully, "Doyle, I'll have to carry out my promise. You must learn to do your work."

Looking up, Doyle said with a pleading voice, "Teacher, won't you pray for me?"

Always reluctant to mete out punishment, Mr. Garlow quickly replied, "Indeed I will, son. I know you are truly sorry." He then offered up a prayer for the erring boy. What a letdown! We had expected fireworks.

Prayers became a mockery. The larger boys began kneeling and shouting as the parishioners were wont to do in the little country church. As long as the shouts were confined to conventional ones like "Amen" and "Hallelulah," nothing happened; but one afternoon when one of the boys bellowed "Can't you shout a little louder over there, Sister?" and then "Amen, ole settin' hen," Mr. Garlow could restrain himself no longer. He started down the aisle with his strap. The chase ended with a scuffle on top of a double desk. The boy was knocked to the floor and went home with a knot on his head.

One day Mr. Agan, a member of the school board, was on his way to town. As he passed a culvert near his home, he was amazed to hear loud talking and raucous laughter. Stopping his buggy, he got out, and leaned down, and peered into the culvert. To his surprise he found nine of the older boys from Prairie View within. He drove on to school and knocked on the door; when Mr. Garlow opened it asked, "Do you have any pupils missing?"

"Only one," Mr. Garlow answered, "and I've sent some others out to find him. I'm sure they'll be along soon."

This incident sparked several visits by the school board members. They found the situation even worse than they had feared and set about to oust the teacher. Mr. Garlow stood his ground. The contract was declared legal as long as he reported for duty every day.

An epidemic of measles broke out. As children recovered, parents just didn't bother to send them back since there was yet no compulsory attendance law in Oklahoma. One by one they dropped out until Mr. Garlow was left with one lone pupil for the remainder of the school term.

My schooling that year must have ended sometime in December since I still have my report card which has grades for only the first three months.

My parents were quite upset. My mother said, "This year has been a waste of time for every pupil." To me it had been both pleasurable and exciting. Mr. Garlow had been kind, patient, and understanding. He was a sincere person who had a vision impossible of accomplishment in his situation. He was unable to cope with a group of teenagers who were out of hand before his arrival. I never saw or heard of him again but if I could only meet him I would say, "God bless you, Mr. Garlow, Amen."

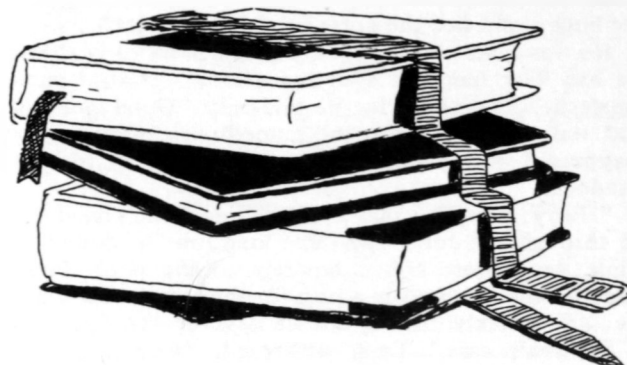


ILLUSTRATION BY TONI TAYLOR