

Miss Hodge Enlarges the School Library in 1889

by Larry Kidder

In the late summer of 1888 on the day that the Hopewell District #1 School opened, about 29 children set out from their homes on the farms of Pleasant Valley. The children cut through the fields of their parent's and neighbor's farms, crossing rail fences and the beds of intermittent streams feeding Moore's Creek winding its way to the Delaware. Once on the narrow dirt roads their feet kicked up the dust that powdered the roads in late summer. Some of the children carried their lunch in lard pails, but some of those who lived closest to the schoolhouse would go home for lunch. Older children looked out for their younger siblings, but all talked and some teased each other as they formed small groups converging on the school house.

Miss Hodge greeted her charges as they arrived for the day's lessons. She was an eager young teacher, but the school house where she was expected to teach her pupils was old and dilapidated; a small, weather-beaten affair. Perched on the edge of Moore's Creek, it faced south with the front door virtually in Pleasant Valley Road just east of its intersection with Valley Road. The one-room school barely fit between the edge of the road and the bank of the creek. The building was a typical vernacular wood frame schoolhouse, no larger than 20' by 30' and probably somewhat smaller. Immediately across the road from the school house door the land began its steep rise up Bald Pate Mountain. There was no room for a schoolyard where the young children could play games at recess. A source of drinking water, other than the creek, and a safe location for the privies are hard to imagine, but apparently there was one privy. However, the school location fit two important criteria - it was a central location in the community it served and it was located on land not suitable for farming, or really anything else. The school house was at the southern point of the somewhat triangular shaped farm of Charles Miller. Miller had purchased his farm almost 30 years before in 1860. The farm had been built by Henry Phillips, its previous owner, about 1800 on land inherited from his father Major Henry Phillips, son of John Phillips who had begun the family dynasty in the Pleasant Valley area in the 1730s. The schoolhouse had been constructed before 1826 during the time Henry Phillips' children were growing up and he allowed it to be built on his land.

Old school houses were not the only problem encountered by young teachers like Miss Hodge. Many teachers only taught for a year or two and young women often left to get married, so a high turnover was expected. In January 1889 a correspondent from Mount Rose in Hopewell wrote a letter to the editor of the *Hopewell Herald* that expressed some of the problems faced by teachers at that time. The two areas commented on were salaries and problems in dealing with parents.

Regarding salaries, the Mount Rose correspondent commented,

There are many people who are of the opinion, and often express it as their belief, that school teaching is a very lucrative vocation, and that teachers can in no wise earn the salary they receive, and that teaching is a life of ease compared with many other vocations; but for some reason we could never agree with this idea, but have often thought if the dissatisfied ones could be persuaded to take charge of a school

of fifty scholars for sixty days, we feel quite certain that they would be prompted by the end of the term to forever after hold their peace on this subject.

These comments point to the fact that teaching in the 1880s was not a lucrative profession and therefore it attracted mostly young, single women who saw it as a temporary occupation. Some stayed with it, but it wasn't the money that kept them in teaching. Miss Hodge earned \$32.80 per month for the 1888-1889 school year.

Dealing with unruly children and difficult parents was another problem discussed by the Mount Rose letter writer.

Many mothers sigh and long for the end of vacation when they can pass the care of their unruly offspring over into the hands of their teacher, and thus be relieved of the noise, perplexing questions and the vexatious ways which many children have of vexing the souls of those who have them in charge, but when the over-taxed patience of the teacher is about worn out, and she proceeds to correct them, the mother is quite apt to discover that her children are blameless.

The writer, using the pen name Selah, was either a teacher or someone very familiar with teaching and went on to give some advice to parents.

Parents can do much toward making the school more interesting, by appreciating the teacher's efforts and instructing the children to respect them; when children become set against their teacher they will make but little progress in their studies. Children generally share their parents' views in everything, and to hear their teacher kindly spoken of instead of criticizing and finding fault with them, it would doubtless have a good effect, and we would have less trouble and dissatisfaction in our schools.

Teachers today would echo these sentiments, and Miss Hodge could undoubtedly identify with them. But, even getting children to go to school was a problem. The 29 pupils who attended the Pleasant Valley School on an average day in 1888-1889 were only about half of the 60 children in the district who were of school age and about two-thirds of the 45 enrolled. Of the 45 enrolled students, a full 25 attended less than four months of school and only six attended the full nine months the school was open. So Miss Hodge had to deal with a low salary of \$32.80 per month and children whose parents did not insist on regular school attendance.

Teachers in the 1880s might also find references to themselves in the local news columns of the gossip newspapers of the day. Three such references about teachers were made by Rachel Williamson in her Pleasant Valley columns for the *Hopewell Herald* during the year Miss Hodge taught there. On January 10, 1889 Mrs. Williamson reported, "The pleasant countenance of Miss Hodge is again seen in the Valley after a two weeks vacation in the school." This is a positive recognition of Miss Hodge both as a person and teacher. But, in February Rachel Williamson couldn't resist poking a little fun at the young female teachers in general who boarded with area families. "We think it would be advisable for the young men to shave Sunday morning instead of Saturday afternoon, when they are going to call on the school marms, for according to reports some have complained of a sore face Monday morning which shows up rather rough on the young men." (*Hopewell Herald*, Feb 14, 1889) Was Miss Hodge perhaps the "complainer?" Then, in May, Rachel made what may be an oblique reference to Miss Hodge when she admonished, "Smith that won't do! Helping the school marm

out at the window with the step ladder then leave the ladder to tell its own tale.” (*Hopewell Herald*, May 16, 1889) I am sure that Rachel’s comments were all meant kindly since she shows herself to be a very positive and friendly person in her columns, but her comments do highlight the perception that the young female teachers were only teaching temporarily until they could find a husband. And, certainly, her comments are more favorable towards the young teachers than towards the young men she is admonishing.

When the Pleasant Valley schoolhouse had been built it was in the center of what might have become a small village complex. There was a grist mill across Pleasant Valley Road a few yards east of the schoolhouse, where a tributary of Moore’s Creek provided water for the mill pond and headrace that powered the mill wheel. Just up Valley Road a stone’s toss behind the school was a blacksmith shop and home for the smith. Lewis Phillips, son of Henry Phillips, had lived in the house and run the blacksmith business from the 1830s before turning it over to his son-in-law, Francis Steward, and after an interim owner it had been run by Andrew Shearman before he gave up the blacksmith business and moved to Baltimore to open a store. In 1884 the blacksmith’s house was purchased by a retired farm couple, John and Rebecca Lawyer. The Lawyers tried to rent out the shop but by then blacksmithing was pretty much a thing of the past in Pleasant Valley.

The Pleasant Valley Road, Valley Road, Hunter Road intersection had been the focus of economic activity in the Valley for many years with the school at its center. By 1889, however, the mill had shut down and activity at the blacksmith shop was dying and operated only intermittently by tenants. Pleasant Valley, which had been a major thoroughfare for much of its early history, had been bypassed by the canal, railroad, and River Road (route 29) all running along the Delaware River on the western edge of Pleasant Valley. The old schoolhouse was all that remained active of this once busy crossroads and now it too was on the verge of disappearing.

Although it was an important building, because it served as a community center as well as the school, the school house was in poor condition and beyond repair. Miss Hodge, though, did not despair that she worked in an old school. In fact, she wanted to create interest in and improve her aging school house.

The improvement Miss Hodge had in mind was to add books to the school library, but, as was true for most school improvements, funding was a major issue. Funding for rural schools came from a combination of state aid filtered down to local districts combined with any taxes collected by the local district board. As in all times, local citizens had ambivalent attitudes towards their schools and how much money should be spent on them. They believed in the general idea of education, but disagreed over what subjects should be taught, how many years of schooling were needed, and how much they wanted to pay for it. As a result, money was tight for teachers like Miss Hodge who wanted to improve their schools.

To raise money for the new library books Miss Hodge decided on a method that was used many times in subsequent years and had most likely been used once before when the library was established in 1880. She proposed to put on an evening “exhibition” featuring presentations by her pupils. This event would provide an opportunity for Pleasant Valley families to get together socially while supporting their local school. Miss Hodge could show off the accomplishments of the students under her tutelage, students could demonstrate their talents, and parents and grandparents could take pride in their offspring.

January 1889 began well for Miss Hodge when school reopened after the two-week Christmas break, but later that month she had to close the school for a week due to the death of her grandmother. Soon after the funeral though, Rachel Williamson, reported on February 7 in the *Herald* that, “Miss Hodge is training her pupils preparatory to having an exhibition.” The word was out, even to those without children in the school, and the anticipation began.

Preparations for such an event were serious since Miss Hodge wanted to impress the members of the community and she hoped the more they were impressed the more money they would contribute to the library. Miss Hodge and her students spent a month preparing before presenting the program on a Friday evening in early March. Farmers hitched up horses to farm wagons and buggies, loaded up their families, and drove them over the frozen dirt roads to the schoolhouse where they unloaded their vehicles and tied up their teams – although space to do so was at a premium. The hard work of Miss Hodge and her students paid off and Rachel Williamson proclaimed the event a “success” in the next issue of the *Hopewell Herald* and commented that, “The house was packed to the last foot of standing room by an appreciative audience, judging by the applauding after the rendering of each piece, especially the kicking mule by master Ed Whitenac. Proceeds about seventeen dollars to go toward getting a library for the school.” (*Hopewell Herald*, March 7, 1889) The entertainment had helped Miss Hodge raise the required money and also had contributed to her reputation as a good teacher.

That Miss Hodge was a respected teacher can be inferred from the positive reaction of the community to the public entertainment given by her students, but still she may have felt a little isolated and without the support of a strong board of trustees. In fact, for a while it appears there wasn't a functioning board of trustees at all and the people of the Valley were not very involved in the education of their children. All decisions concerning hiring a teacher, curriculum, calendar, etc. were made by the community acting through their elected board of three trustees. At this time, women could vote on all local school issues with the exception of electing trustees. Curiously, women could be elected to the board, but only through the votes of men. On March 21, 1889, just three weeks after the entertainment, Rachel Williamson reported that, “the voters of this school district held a meeting at the school house on Tuesday evening for the election of a new board of Trustees, the terms of the old board having expired, without any reelections by the board, on account of the nonattendance at the meetings of those that should be interested in the education of the children.” So, for some time, there had been no board of trustees because not enough people, or at least men, attended meetings on school matters.

The new board was elected at that meeting and it was going to have important questions to consider very soon. Miss Hodge could raise money for books for her library, but what about the future of the obsolete building where it was located? At a subsequent meeting the people of the district voted to build a new schoolhouse. While not everyone wanted a new schoolhouse, most people probably felt as Rachel did that the children and teachers needed a better facility, including space for the library, and the community needed a more comfortable community center for programs, such as entertainments put on by school children to raise funds.

The 1888-1889 school year was a significant one for Pleasant Valley and was apparently a very successful year for Miss Hodge who provided the school with an addition to the library. By the time books were collected, work was beginning on a new schoolhouse in which to use them. In the years after 1889 succeeding teachers held more evening entertainments to raise money to continue to enlarge the library improved by Miss Hodge.

But, who was “Miss Hodge” and what happened to her after the 1888-1889 school year? We don’t know if she continued the next year and opened the new school house, although the slightly increased salary paid a female teacher in 1889-1890 could indicate her continuation there. The references to her in the *Hopewell Herald* don’t tell us much about her personally except that her grandmother died in late January 1889. We don’t know precisely who she was but the most likely candidate seems to be Margaret Hodge, born about 1869; the 19 year old daughter of Presbyterian clergyman Edward B. Hodge of Burlington, New Jersey. E.B. Hodge was the son of Hugh L. and Margaret E. Hodge. Grandmother Hodge would have been in her late 70s in 1889. Further research may help us positively identify her. And, what of her students? Missing from Rachel Williamson’s columns is any reference to specific children of Pleasant Valley except for Nettie Case, whose eye disease caused great worry, and Ed Whitenac, of the kicking mule routine at the evening program that raised money for the library. In 1889 Ed Whitenac was 14 years old and the son of Alfred and Ann Whitenac who lived in the house still standing on the corner of Barry Road and Pleasant Valley Road. No other record of Nettie Case has been found as yet.

So, Miss Hodge was the last teacher in the old Pleasant Valley Schoolhouse and perhaps the first teacher in the new schoolhouse of 1889. She taught at a pivotal time in Pleasant Valley during the waning years of local school district control of education, during the years that female teachers dominated the profession and wanted better preparation for their duties, and when local communities were deciding that the old, neglected schoolhouses by the roadside were no longer acceptable, and more sophisticated structures were needed to serve the combined education and community center functions of the community.

Sources:

Annual Reports of the State Superintendent of Schools 1880 to 1889

Hopewell Herald various issues 1888-1889.