

Teaching School in the 1890s

Abstract

These letters of a young teacher, John Fowler, give a picture of teaching in a one-room school in the 1890s. The letters tell of his relations with parents, pupils, trustees, and people in the community and describe the living arrangements of a teacher in a remote region of the United States.

Résumé

Ces lettres d'un jeune professeur, John Fowler, brossent un tableau de l'enseignement dans une école à une seule salle dans les années 1890. Ces lettres relatent les relations entre ce jeune professeur, ses parents, ses élèves, les membres du conseil d'administration et de la communauté et décrivent les conditions de vie d'un professeur vivant dans une région reculée des États-Unis.

Almost one hundred years ago a young man named John Fowler began his first year of teaching at a school called Bald Point, located in a remote, hill region of northeastern Kentucky. His letters, dated in late summer, 1898, describe the unusual problems he encountered in his relations with students, parents, school trustees, and people in the community. Although the original letters, when discovered, had been trimmed to remove all salutations, personal greetings, and the identity of the writer or recipient, it is obvious that Mr. Fowler was communicating with another teacher who was just beginning his/her teaching career.

Evidently Mr. Fowler, as well as the person to whom he wrote the letters, had attended a teachers' institute. It is not known where it was located, but it was most likely in some small town near Lexington, Kentucky, or Cincinnati, Ohio, cities that were within a short distance of the school where Fowler taught. Although the General Assembly of the state of Kentucky passed legislation

creating a Normal Department at the A & M College at Lexington in 1880, the majority of the teachers of one-room schools still received most of their basic teaching instruction at summer and spring teachers' institutes (Birdwhistell, 1990).

While these letters deal very little with such matters as educational research, curriculum development, school counselling, or second-language studies, they do give us a humorous picture and delightful insight into what it was like to teach in an isolated one-room school in that era.

**Letter One: The School House, the Boarding House,
the Trustees, and the Pupils**

July 25, 1898

. . . [I]t (your letter) was real welcome for I have been waiting to hear about your school and teach a few days before I tell you about mine. I must say you need not envy my job for it has so far been just awful to me and I am hoping things will improve. Since you want to know how I am making out teaching I will give you the whole story of the happenings the past week, both at school and here at the boarding house and then you can form your own opinion. Joe and I started from home Sunday morning about 6:30 in the buggy and as I had already arranged to board with Mr. Moore, the trustee, when I applied for the school we knew our destination.

We reached here about 1:30 in a pouring rain which had been coming down for nearly an hour. When it slacked up enough we got my luggage out of the buggy and unhitched the horse, then we sat on the porch until after five o'clock. After it ceased raining we (Joe, Mr. Moore, and I) went to the school house to look it over. The school house is built of logs and is 16 x 20 feet and is about 1/2 mile from here. It has eleven seats, two of those having desks about 8 inches wide, a small wood stove with a rusty pipe extending to the loft where it joins a stone chimney that extends thru the clapboard roof. What is intended for a blackboard is 30 inches wide by 5 feet long without any paint except around the edges. I immediately told Joe to send me some black paint.

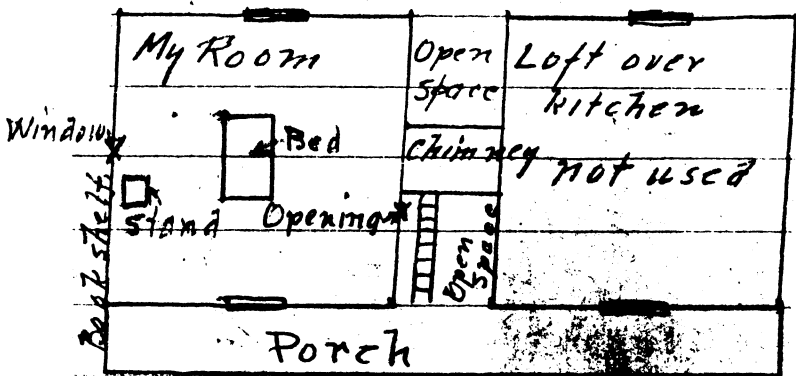
While we were in the schoolhouse, we saw two large lizards that had taken over and no doubt wondered what we were doing in their habitation. We next went outside and looked over the graveyard by the side of the schoolhouse where 35 persons have been buried. Mr. Moore pointed out to Joe where they would bury me and asked him if he did not think it would be a nice place. He no doubt meant it all as a joke but I, not being in a joking humor, did not appreciate it. After inspecting the schoolhouse we came back here to the boarding house. It is a two-room log house with a large stone chimney extending up between the two rooms. One room is the living room and bedroom combined and the other is the kitchen. There is no door connecting the two rooms so in order to get from one to the other, one must come out on the porch that extends the full length of the house.

Shortly after we got back to the house we had supper that consisted of cooked apples, mutton, and corn bread. Joe thought it real funny as he knew I did not like corn bread. After supper, we sat on the porch until bedtime. When we were ready to go to bed I found that everyone slept in the same room. There were four beds and there were 11 to sleep in that room – Mr. Moore and his wife, the five children, the hired man and the hired girl, and Joe and myself, making a total of eleven people. I decided right there that I could not live there under those conditions so the next morning I got busy to see if sleeping conditions could not be improved. I could see that there was an upstairs and I also saw an opening to the upstairs on the outside near the chimney, so I asked Mr. Moore what was in the loft. When he told me they did not use the loft I asked him if there was any objection to my sleeping up there and he said there was none if I could get up there. I assured him I could use a ladder by placing it against the chimney and crawl thru the 30 inch square hole into the loft. By having my sleeping quarters in the loft I could have my possessions out of reach of the five children all of them being under 10 years old.

After threshing out the sleeping problem and a promise that the place would be ready for me when I got home in the evening I went to help Joe hitch up and his only comment was: "You sure got a paradise."

You can take his meaning as you like. It was hard to tell him goodbye as I felt that when he was gone I would then be completely alone in my first job among strangers that would be watching the teacher's every move.

When I got home from school I went up the ladder and crawled thru the hole into the loft over the living room. When I was inside of my sleeping quarters, I was in a regular community of wasps and mud-daubers on the rafters. In order that you can get a better idea of the arrangement of my sleeping quarters I am drawing you a plan.



Copy of original drawing of
Mr. Fowler's living arrangements (1898)

My window is just an opening 14 x 20 inches without glass and my door is also just an opening with no way of closing it.

Sometime in the past the loft has been used for hanging up meat to cure, and the hickory withes provide a hanger for my clothes and hat. They have given me a small stand about 18 inches square with two drawers that serve for keeping my writing material and some small articles. My chair is the fruit box in which I brought my books and the bookshelf is on the top log where I keep my books and clock.

The ticking of the clock is real company for me. The bed is in the center of the room and is without springs or mattress.

A tick filled with corn husks rests on slats and is not too bad if the tick is frequently stirred up and since I have the job of making my own bed I can see that it is comfortable. I have said quite enough about my boarding house so will now tell you of my first week at teaching.

I might mention here that it has rained some every day the past week which has helped dampen my spirits and make it more depressing.

I started school Monday morning by going early, alone. You see I wanted to get things all ready for the pupils when they would come crowding in. I opened up the windows, then took the stub of a broom to sweep the floor and brushed down the spider webs. I next went to the nearest house for a bucket of drinking water and on my way I passed by a corn field. As I passed along the field a woman's voice called out from among the corn: "Be you the teacher?" When I told her I was, she said that her Mary would start to school as soon as the corn was laid by. I told her I thought Mary should start at the beginning but she undoubtedly felt the corn was of more importance than an education. Shortly after I got back to the school house one of the trustees came, then a little later two girls and a boy came. Before 8:30 another boy and another one of the trustees came. I opened school with four pupils and two trustees. I take it the trustees thought I needed them to help me get started. I started by reading the 10th chapter of Proverbs, then I took the names and ages of the pupils, then went ahead with the classes, although the trustees remained until recess. While there, Mr. Moore wrote out a set of rules for the pupils to follow.

The trustees were really there to see how I would do, for that night Mr. Moore said I did fine and then told me Jesse Henderson the first day got so nervous he could not finish the chapter from the Bible. Jesse did not have a pleasant time as some of the children claim they at one time saw him crying.

After the trustees left I did some checking up on what the pupils had studied. Their ages ranged from nine to fourteen years and not one of them had ever had arithmetic, geography, grammar, history, or had ever done any writing with a pen. They had only been taught reading and spelling. To get some idea

of what they knew I asked them who was the president of the United States and the oldest, who was a girl, said "Bryan" [William Jennings Bryan] and that was the same reply from the others. Now what would you say their politics is around here? At the boarding house here, they are good old Republicans and I am glad of that. The question about the president was a history question so I then tried one on geography and asked them to name the capital of the U.S. After some delay the oldest one said, "Isn't it Vanceburg?" and not one could tell me the number of letters in the alphabet. I asked them a number of simple questions and the poor kids just don't know anything.

It makes me wonder what kind of teachers they had but maybe the teachers are not too much to blame as the fault could be due to the children coming irregular or not at all as there is no compulsory law for attendance. Well, I had the faithful four to come four days, then Friday, only three came. This past week has been just awful trying to put in the day as I could not form classes to fill in the time. To put in the time I walked back and forth across the room between classes until I would be completely exhausted. When I got home the first day I went directly to the loft and laid on the bed from 4:30 to 7:00, then got up and took a walk just to be alone as I was really feeling blue. They are giving me plenty to eat and I feel they want to treat me kindly but it is just plain lonesome and I have been feeling homesick but last Wednesday my spirits got a real boost. Mr. Tom Plummer, who has been teaming out here for several years, came out from Vanceburg and arrived here Wednesday evening and that was someone from home. He has a team of four mules and came out here for a load of shingles, the shingles being supplied by Mr. Moore, who has a hand-operated shingle machine. It takes all day to get out here with the empty wagon and nearly two days going back with a load. He was received with open arms as it did me so much good to just talk to him of things at home. I told him how lonesome it was out here and he said he thought it the most lonesome place he ever knew. He said that Harry Aumiller was so lonesome when he taught school here he nearly died, so you see I am not the only one who ever got lonesome here. Talking with Mr. Plummer of the happenings around home was just different to me and I felt better the remainder of the week. I have now told you all about the teaching as well as the conditions here at my boarding house and I hope I have not tired you of my woes, so will write about something else. . . .

**Letter Two: Social Life, the Pupils,
and Parental Attitudes**

August 5, 1898

I got the books Joe sent out with Mr. Plummer when he came out for a load of shingles.

I went to church Sunday night at Tar Fork, and most of the men and women came barefooted. The number of my pupils have (sic) increased and I now have enrolled 16 and am expecting more next week. They tell me I am doing real well to have that many. I have them from four to seventeen years and

all come barefooted. The oldest one is Mary that I mentioned in a former letter. I was told by the pupils and some of the parents that Mary always insisted on having her own way and ruled both teachers and pupils. She is a big, husky girl 17 years old and weighs about 160 pounds and came barefooted and wearing a homespun dress. I was told that she had roughed up two former women teachers and was accustomed to bossing the other pupils but so far Mary has been fine and I hope we do not get into an argument for I'm afraid I would get the worse of it.

In trying out the new pupils on the intelligence test on the questions of who is the president and what city is the capital of the U.S. not one has been able to give the correct answer.

I have put desks on four of the seats and am having them use pen and ink and hope they get something out of it. I have visited four of the homes where they have children school age that are not coming. Two have promised to send their children if they can get books but the other two gave me quite a different reason for not sending their children.

At one place, when I came to the house, the father was sitting in a chair leaning back against the log house whittling a stick. When I told him I was the teacher and was there to find out why his children did not come to school, he came right back with this: "I'm not sending my children to school for you to teach them a pack of lies about the world being round. Read your Bible." And he has not sent them.

At the other home, the father told me he had never gone to school a day in his life and that he had always got along and that the children could do the same and furthermore there was plenty of work for them at home and that he was not going to have them wasting their time at school, so you see there is nothing I can do as there is no law that compels them to go. I am also teaching an 18-year-old crippled boy Arithmetic at home; also, teaching the hired man here how to write and spell his own name.

The time certainly goes slow here over the weekend as there is no place to go or nothing one can find to do to put in the time, but last Sunday I had something funny to happen. I brought with me from home a hammock but did not mention it to the people here so Sunday morning I fastened the hammock to the rafters, then got a book and proceeded to make myself comfortable. We have here a 9-year-old boy that has a curiosity streak and is always wanting to know what I am doing and when I am in the loft I can see him most any time at the opening at the top of the ladder peeking in at me to see what I am doing. This time he saw me in the hammock. Well, he got down in a hurry and called for the father to come quick and see me, then went after the others. Mr. Moore came up the ladder and looked in, then called Mrs. Moore to come, as I was fastened in a spider web. Everybody, including the hired girl, came but none of them knew what the thing was, for he later asked me what it was and I heard

his wife ask him the same question. Of course, he was just joking about the spider web but it was really a curiosity to them. Mr. Stafford has had the Tar Fork School, but the larger pupils have made it so unpleasant for him, they have whipped him out, so he has traded with Edmond Sparks, who has the reputation of becoming the whipping teacher. No doubt you remember what he said at the Institute about the use of the rod in school for discipline and will no doubt carry out his method at Tar Fork.

Letter Three: A Visit at Home and Comments on the School and Community

September 2, 1898

. . . I was at home the 19th of last month for the second time and I had to walk which was the worst of it – 26 miles.

I will give you a little description of my trip. I commenced school nearly an hour earlier than usual and dismissed the school at three in the afternoon and started immediately for home. I went by way of Ruggles, which place I came just at dark and, of course, I met Fultz with Miss Cooper swinging on his arm. He wanted me to stay all night with him but I refused for I was too far from home to make a stop, for it was twelve miles yet until I could reach home. I had the railroad four miles and I went along very well but when I came to where I had to turn up Kinney [Kinniconick Creek] I had to take the wagon road and then I ran into the mud holes. I then tried to borrow a lantern at a house just before I came to the Tannery Schoolhouse and, of course, they refused me and neither did they offer to ask me to stay all night, but I was determined to not go home that night without a lantern, but when I found I could not get a lantern I started ahead for an idea came in my head while I was talking to the people. It was nearly nine o'clock and at least six miles from home and I had already walked more than twenty miles. As I said before, I started ahead but I did not go very far, for when I came to the Tannery Schoolhouse, I began to look for a way to get in. The door was locked and the shutters were all fastened, but after a time I got one of the latches of shutters unfastened and then I was fixed all right for the windows were already up, and I just threw my bundle in and followed it. I then struck a match and as good luck would have it, there was a lamp in there with oil in it and after lighting the lamp I arranged the recitation seats so as to have a bed. I used my macintosh as a cover and my coat as a pillow; then I was asleep in less than five minutes and remained so until nearly daylight.

As soon as it was light enough to see, I started for home where I arrived between five and six, just in time for breakfast.

I have stayed all night at two of the pupils' homes since I commenced and called on nearly all of them, and I have enrolled 24 which is lacking one of having as many as has ever come here to school, and when they had that number it was a second class school.

I have made desks to all the seats and also one for myself, and I made another blackboard some larger than the one that was there when I came. I have two pupils coming to me that went to John Goddard and by them coming to me it has brought John and I (sic) in communication with each other, for I write a note to him and my pupils give the notes to one of his and by that way we have passed two notes.

This is the settlement where the Underwood war [Underwood-Stamper feud] went on and there have been three persons killed in this house and lots of people say it is haunted, but the only haunts I have seen are the B.B.'s [bed bugs] that I suppose will continue to haunt it.

The people that lived here when that war went on were horse thieves and you can see the place up the holler from the house where they kept the horses.

I went to Soldier [Rowan Co., Ky.] Sat. the 27th. I had not heard from the office for over a week and I thought sure that there would be a letter from you, and I knew that it would be worth the walk of twenty miles if I got one, but I had the walk and did not get any mail at all, but I got back here before dark.

There was a rattlesnake killed near here a few days ago and I took off the skin and dried it and it looks like ribbon. It is three and one-half feet long and if I thought you would have wanted it I would have sent it to you.

When I was home I was telling Joe of my bed friends and I said they would soon leave when cold weather came, but he tries to convince me that I am mistaken by sending me these few lines which he saw:

"The June bug comes in the last of June,
The lightning bug in May.
But the bed bug takes his hat right off
And says I've come to stay."

I expect he is right. . . .

Comments

While the author is able to provide the historical explanation of almost all of the places, people, and events mentioned in these letters, it is not the purpose of this account. The letters are published here to show the dedication of this young teacher to his chosen profession. Not only did he clean and repair the school house, but he constructed desks and teaching aids. He brought his personal library to share with the children.

It is of interest to read how Mr. Fowler administered his "diagnostic" test, or his test of "general intelligence," and how he proceeded to introduce the children to a world of learning beyond simple reading and spelling.

Like the true teacher, his teaching went beyond the walls of the school where he tutored a physically handicapped boy in arithmetic and taught the hired man to write his name.

His letters leave one with the impression that this was a bright, creative young man with keen observations of the world around him and possessed an eagerness to share his knowledge with anyone who wished to learn. His ability to write with clarity and depth of feeling is impressive. He leaves us, though, with so many questions we would like to have answered.

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William M. Talley is director of the Counselling Program at McGill University and editor of the *McGill Journal of Education*. He has published numerous articles on the history and genealogy of Kentucky.

William M. Talley est directeur du programme de counselling à l'Université McGill et rédacteur en chef de *McGill Journal of Education*. Il a publié de nombreux articles sur l'histoire et la généalogie du Kentucky.

