

MARY BUMSTEAD FRENTER RECALLS HER TIME TEACHING AT LEWIS RIVER ONE-ROOM WILDERNESS SCHOOL

Lewis River Elementary was the modern equivalent of a one-room schoolhouse. Its mail was delivered through Cougar, Washington, but the “campus” was 18 miles east of town on a dirt road that allowed 10-foot wide logging trucks. The fenced school and yard was located on this main logging road to Spirit Lake. It was surrounded by the Gifford Pinchot National Forest, high in the foothills of Mount St. Helens, before she blew!

The Stevenson School District built the school in 1965, to accommodate the children living at the Lewis River Ranger Station compound, a few hundred yards away. There were also rumors that Pacific Power and Light Company would be putting in another dam above the Ranger Station, which would bring more families to the area. Besides the Ranger Station, it included a cluster of homes, trailers and bunkhouses. Down the hill, where the Lewis River flows into Swift Reservoir, nestled nine more Forest Service homes, and one new home, right on the banks of the river, owned and built by the school district for the new teacher.

Before the school was built, the children had to be transported the 18 miles down the logging road by their parents to Cougar each day to catch the school bus for Woodland, another 27 miles of paved road away. The process was repeated in reverse at the end of each school day. The bus was not allowed to come to the ranger station to pick them up because buses could not travel on roads that allowed 10-foot-wide logging trucks. This was all accomplished dodging logging trucks, deer, elk, and the occasional bear that would lumber across the mostly one way road with turnouts, not to mention the clouds of dust on the hot days, the ruts of mud on the rainy days, and the 6 foot snow winters almost every year! Not exactly your safest way to get to and from school each day. The potholes were so large we called them “Charles Holes”, not chuck-holes.

The house-sized school building of natural wood wasn't really just one room. The “campus” included a huge playground, with swings, jungle gym and slides, an uncovered cement slab for games, a baseball field and a lighted semi-enclosed covered play area that served as a gym and

basketball court. From a large center hall opened an office, restrooms, furnace room, storeroom and kitchenette. Two other doors lead into a big double classroom with windowed walls overlooking the baseball field and woods. The electrically controlled folding partition, dividing the room, was lined with chalkboards and bulletin boards.

It was a 3-year, dream-come-true, job (1965-68) for this 21 year old, graduate, fresh from the campus of Central Washington College, who had visions of being a teacher since I was four years old. I used to organize my reluctant neighborhood buddies into “classes” to play school, which always included creating plays, complete with costumes from old rags and paper bags and scenery. One year, I think I was 9, we decorated my brother's red wagon like a float and dressing up like elves, paraded the dressed as “Miss Everett” neighbor girl, Diane, down Colby Avenue in the 4th of July Kiddies Parade. The Elves carried signs inquiring if this was the best they could do for “Miss Everett”. I had read in the Everett Daily Herald, the paper my father worked for, that the Miss Everett Pageant was having trouble getting support for a float for her.

I was hired in June 1965 by Superintendent Al Hoffman and Board Director Rudy Hegewald when they showed up at my 30x10 foot trailer at Lewis River Ranger Station where my husband was stationed. They had traveled the logging roads from Carson over Old Man's Pass for over an hour to get there. Owing to the fact that we had no phone service, I was not expecting them at all! I had just showered, had my head wrapped in a towel, was clad in my turquoise bikini, and my 6-month old son, Steve, who was just learning to walk, was standing naked holding on to the couch. After my quick explanations and apologies, they pulled out the contract, and I was officially a working teacher in the Stevenson School District, a position I held full time, part time and subbing for the next 44 years.

In those days, the district ran a 230-day contract, with teachers rotating every three years each summer taking university classes, teaching district summer school, or working on the district curriculum development committee. I was assigned to the Curriculum Development Committee which met each weekday at Stevenson High School. I would pack up 7-month old Steve each morning and head over that logging road and down Old Man's Pass into Stevenson by 9 a.m., stopping first to take Steve to my sitter. Then each day at 3, I would head back over the pass to the Ranger Station. Growing weary of this routine, I tried renting an

apartment for a couple of weeks in Stevenson, but soon decided it was too lonely and finished the summer with the sometimes treacherous drive. One time my husband commented that some loggers had stopped at the Ranger Station office complaining of “some woman in a white Chevy who nearly ran us off the road this morning!” You see, I was usually running late and put the pedal to the metal to try to get to my job on time. After that, I slowed up and drove more cautiously.

However, that did not prevent me from getting five flat tires and having to replace two gas tanks that summer due to the terrible large rock and gravel road conditions back then. The first four times I had a flat, I was fortunate enough to have a logger stop and change the tire for me. The fifth time, Steve and I were heading home up Old Man's Pass on a Friday afternoon. The tire went flat while I was on an incline. No one came by for about 15 minutes, so I decided, I had watched them do this four times before, and could do it myself! I got the car jacked up (remembering to put stones to block the tires, so the car did not roll backwards downhill), changed the tire, and carefully screwed on the lug nuts, popped the hubcap back on and was proudly on my way. About 10 miles into the drive, I could hear some rattling from somewhere, but figured it was just rocks that got into the hubcap. I completed the drive over those bumpy roads, and the next day drove the car the 18 miles of dirt and 27 miles of paved roads to Woodland to get the tire fixed. I could still hear the rattling, but continued on my merry way. When the mechanic took the hubcap off the tire, out fell all but one lug nut! The last one was hanging loose. He said, “How far did you drive this car like this?” When I told him he exclaimed, “Lady, you must have someone really watching over you! There is no good reason why this tire remained on this car! Who changed this tire for you?” Needless to say, he highly recommended I NEVER change my own tires again, and to this day, I haven't. (Although I really know I could if I had to. I realize now you have to use that lug nut turner thingy to tighten the lug nuts, not just your fingers, as I had done.)

Sometime in early August, I was visiting the home site for our new house on the river. The stone mason who had been hired by the contractor was a “recovering” alcoholic. He had built a beautiful stone fireplace, floor to ceiling and was completing the chimney when he “fell off the wagon”. Continuing to build in that condition, he did not notice he was dropping concrete down the chimney, sealing the flue shut as he went. When I discovered it and contacted the contractor, the whole thing had to be

disassembled and redone. The contractor, a very nice man, was NOT a happy camper!! This held up the completion of the house and our move into it.

Then, there was the 6-foot cyclone fence that was to surround the house and yard. I just happened to drop by when they were digging the holes and pouring the concrete for the posts. They were locating them about three feet from the front door and all around the house that way. I suggested that the yard and driveway were about 40 feet out from the house and that this is where it made sense for the fence to go. They kindly suggested I did not know what I was talking about and proceeded to complete fencing in the house like a playpen. I persisted and asked them to at least contact the contractor to check before they wasted the materials and time (I was remembering the fireplace). But they just smiled and ignored this 21-year old Miss Know-it-all. So . . . the next day they were out there tearing out all their work of the day before and putting it 40 feet out from the house where it made sense for the fence to go!

Just days before school opened in September, we finally moved into our brand new three-bedroom house. It was amazing!! The whole riverside wall of the living room was windows with sliding glass doors that lead out to a back porch running the length of the house and overlooking the river. There was a trail that led to the river. We found an old logging dock floating loose nearby and tied it up in front of "our" property. We put a small barbeque there and spent many wonderful days picnicking, swimming, and fishing off our "dock" and lazing in the sun.

About a week before school began, I traipsed over Old Mans Pass to Stevenson to the District Warehouse to collect the things I would need for the year. As luck(?) would have it, I was to have K-8 students with about one in each grade. So, that meant textbooks for each subject for each student in each grade. I didn't know I couldn't do it, so I did it! I loaded up all the "stuff", complete with copy machine, typewriter, and other office equipment and materials, playground stuff, art stuff, tons of paper of all kinds and cleaning and kitchen stuff. It was like Christmas!! I had a ball!! Remember, once the snow flew, I was isolated up there by myself for the majority of the next nine months until it melted enough on the pass for safe travel. So, I took everything I could imagine I might need.

Years later, when I had moved to Carson and began my first year teaching at Carson Elementary, I went the first week of school to the warehouse to load up for my classroom materials. I was informed this was

not how it was generally done. When I mentioned I had been doing this for the last three years at Lewis River, Elmer Stacy, the warehouse supervisor, laughed and said, “Mary, for all these years, folks would come looking for something they had seen here before and now it was gone. I just told them that teacher at Lewis River cleaned me out and I had not seen the stuff since!”

Finally, the big day came. After trading my friend Joyce Harmon, my one toddler son for two of her school aged sons, I arrived at school to the huge student body of 10, (count 'em and weep,) students. And that was the most I ever had in the three years I taught there. But, oh, the fun we had. We began each day out front raising the flag, saying the pledge and singing our national anthem. Then, I would get the “Littles” going with their work (each one was in a different book for each subject) and the “Bigs” would begin independently, until they ran into a problem. I taught science and social studies together, with each child taking part as they were able on their level. We did projects and plays around our topics of study. For lunch the children and I went home, since we all lived a short 10-minute walk away. Everyone looked forward to the monthly visit from the Book Mobile all the way from the Fort Vancouver Library.

Most of the children were well disciplined and corporative. However, one day, my second grader, Randy, decided he did not want to do any work! He was rather a free spirit, loved animals (had a baby alligator living in his bathtub at home) and was a precursor to the hippie movement a few years later. After two days of coaxing, setting a timer, loosing recess, and a conference with his folks that led nowhere, I made a plan. When he showed up the third morning, his desk was empty. I told him I was giving in, and he did not have to do any work. In fact, I had removed all his books and materials so he would not be tempted. All he had to do was sit there and not disturb any of the other children. He was thrilled . . . for about 90 minutes. Then, he began getting terribly bored and decided he wanted to do some work. I told him no. He had made his decision and I was going to honor HIS decision.

The next day he came to me and asked if he could just do his math, please. I said OK, but it had to be finished within the time allowed or he had to give the book back. This went on for the next few days until he had earned all his books and materials back a piece at a time, was completing ALL his assignments and continued to do that for the rest of the year.

Teaching the 7th and 8th grade curriculums proved challenging, as I

had so many levels to keep up with for each student in each subject. I would usually be only one chapter ahead of them. What a hoot!!

We did all the things a larger school would do. In October we had our Halloween party, sponsored by our PTA, complete with a Haunted House that the costumed parents ran. There was bobbing for apples in the covered play areas and booths for fishing and ring toss. There were decorated cookies and cupcakes and cider, and parents peeking in the windows dressed as ghouls to the delighted shrieks of the children.

At Christmas, we held a Christmas Pageant with a play, carols, and a puppet musical interpretation of the birth of Jesus Christ. We would start caroling down by the river and go house to house, picking up its occupants who added to our choir, ending up with everyone at the school for the Christmas Play and party. After the program, Santa Claus (one of the fathers who was endowed to fit the part) would stop in on his rounds and deliver good wishes and sacks of candy to all the children. He would listen to their wishes for toys and then with a “Ho Ho Ho”, promise to come back the next year. There were sledding parties with a huge bonfire at the bottom of the run where roasted marshmallows were squished between graham cracker and Hershey bars for smores, and hot chocolate flowed abundantly.

An Easter Egg Hunt was held on the school grounds for the smaller children from the school and the Ranger station. The older children, however, had a Treasure Hunt in store for them. They were divided into two teams, each with a map that “an old Indian had given to me in the olden days.” He had told me there was “untold treasures” hidden in the place marked by the “X” on the maps. Each team headed in opposite directions to find their treasure, using compass directions. Following their successes, treasure chests filled with gold foil covered chocolate coins, we had the party complete with cake, candy and icecream.

Mother's Day was celebrated with a Mothers' Tea that the students planned and executed all by themselves. They made the invitations, decorated the room, set the tables, made the dessert, served the dessert, babysat the smaller children and put on a little program. They also honored the Mother of the Year, chosen by the whole community, with a corsage and a seat of honor at the tea.

As well as being used as a school, the Forest Service used the facilities for potluck Welcome or Going-away parties for the employees being transferred in and out of the Ranger Station. Since most of the

residents lived in small trailers, Tupperware parties, birthday parties, exercise classes and other social gatherings happened there. During the summer, there were 40-60 young men working part-time at the Ranger Station. Since our location was so far from a town, there was little for them to do during leisure hours, so the school opened its sport facilities for their use.

Each winter we had tons of snow. Twice it reached the 6-foot mark. Roofs were shoveled and children were walked to school up the trails, through the woods to the school where they would climb DOWN into the school over the mounds of snow. We could not get our car out of the driveway unless the plow had just been by, so I walked to school in my fishing hip boots and ski clothes. It was also too dangerous for the children to hike home for lunch, so they brought sandwiches and I fixed hot soup for everyone in our little kitchen.

The school and teacher's house were run by a separate generator from the rest of the Ranger Station. When Harvey, the maintenance guy for the ranger station generator, was working on it, only our power would go out. Steve was about 18 months when it went out one time. He was frightened. I told him, "It's Ok, honey, it's just Harvey." Of course, he did not know who Harvey was, but he trusted me. A few years later when we lived at the Wind River Ranger Station and the power really did go out, I complained about it. Steve said, "It's OK, mom, it's just Harvey!" From then on, Harvey became our in residence ghost wherever we lived when the power went out or we heard a strange noise.

But, I digress . . . One deep snow winter, the generator for the school and our house broke down. Harvey could not fix it. The men who could were underground somewhere in Colorado fixing a generator for a big corporation. So, after freezing in class for two day, I shut the school down for a week until they could get to us. Meanwhile, back at the ranch . . . we had no electricity. Fortunately, we had lots of firewood, a "twice-built" fireplace, and a gas hot water heater and stove. So, we were cozy. We had snow so deep outside our windows . . ."how deep was it?" . . . that we could stand on the snow and walk onto our roof, literally!! I dug a little hole in the God-provided outdoor "fridge" to keep our milk and other refrigerator items cold. At night, we would light old-fashioned oil lamps and fall asleep in sleeping bags in front of the glowing fireplace. Neat!!

Because of the deep snow that winter, the forest animals were coming near our homes looking for food. Elk were "nesting" right on the

road leading to Cougar, which was kept open, sort of, with snow plows. It was a one lane road in the best of times, but now it was REALLY a one lane road. They plowed a few turnouts in the 18 mile trek, but these were fast becoming the nesting places for elk, looking to escape the impassable woods. So, we began taking carrots and other elk-type food with us when we went to town. When we came to a turnout, we would open our window and an elk head would appear for its breakfast, lunch or dinner as the case may be, eating right out of our hands. Once I had a dental appointment in Woodland. While I was there, a huge snowstorm hit. Going home, it was snowing so hard, I could not even see the road in front of me. Hours later, I finally made it to Cougar to find they had closed the roads to the Ranger Station. I went to the store, called on the radio phone to the Ranger Station for help, and waited while they sent the snow plow the 18 miles down to Cougar. It was pretty neat having a snow plow escort all the way back home.

Like any school, ours was enriched by studies of the community and its surrounding. Forest Service personnel helped with units on conservation and animal and forest lore. Field trips involved studying the flora and fauna of the woods, the river and its inhabitants, ecosystems, and nearby logging operations. We couldn't go to the zoo very often but learned a lot just looking out our classroom windows when deer, elk and an occasional fox or cougar wandered by. And, of course, rainbows were always an occasion to stop everything, run to the windows or outside, and enjoy. Once, one of the Forest Service folk helped us catch a chipmunk in a live trap. Dubbed Chipper, it became the object of our study in a student built cage, which did not please him at all! One day when he was being fed, he decided to move. However, we would always catch him again in the live trap and put him back. Sometimes, we would let him out in the classroom to romp, because he always returned to the food in the cage, where the door was shut each night. That is, all except one night. Apparently someone forgot to shut the cage door. When we returned in the morning, he was gone. In spite of our efforts to catch him again with the live trap, he didn't come back. We assumed he had somehow gotten out of the building. The cage was pushed to the back of the classroom, and life resumed for the next five months as usual.

One morning in March, we came to school and heard this weird rustling somewhere up in the tracks of the electronically controlled folding door that separated the two classrooms, but was almost never

closed. I thought it was mice. The next day when I arrive, there was Chipper, sitting in the open cage eating the food we had not removed the previous fall. Turns out he had built a nest up in the tracks and had hibernated up there all winter!! We were delighted. We set out the live traps, caught him, and let him go.

When Steve was about two, I was fixing lunch one day, watching him through the kitchen window as he played with our dog, Zeke, in the front yard. I turned to get some milk out of the fridge, came back to the window, and he had disappeared from my sight. I figured he had gone around the house, remember, it was surrounded by a 6-foot cyclone fence, finished making his sandwich and went outside. He really was gone! I looked everywhere. Finally, I called the Ranger Station and everyone was called into service to look for him. Three hours later, he emerged from the woods near the Eagle Creek Bridge, following Zeke, had crossed the logging road and was heading back down the ditch on the other side into the woods, when the Rangers found him. I have never been more terrified in my life before or since. Somehow he had managed to escape from our yard and had wandered down an old overgrown logging road in the woods in front of our house.

Then two of my students got lost in the woods within two months, so I decided we needed a unit on Forest Survival and how to Hug a Tree. Keith Fagerberg from the Forest Service came to help. We learned how to make a survival kit to take with us whenever we went for a jaunt in the woods. We learned you NEVER go alone and ALWAYS tell someone where you are headed. We learned how to follow the trail of someone, looking for clues they may have left and how to mark a trail if we were lost. And we learned that when you discover you are lost, you STAY PUT, make a shelter, and wait for help. Of course, we needed to practice all this, so with our survival kits in hand, we headed out one day to find our “lost” friend, Keith, who had left all sorts of markers for us along the trail. After much looking and shouts of “Here's another marker!” we found him “sleeping” in a dug out rotten log, covered with tree branches. We built a safe fire pit and, using our survival kits, made lunch. Of course, the best part was making smores for dessert, a most important survival skill!!

Sex Education came to Lewis River in a most unexpected way. Donated magazines collected for a collage project accidentally got mixed up with some Playboy magazines on the way to our classroom. I had gathered the donated magazines (without checking what was in the sack)

with the materials for their collages on the project table. I was helping the “Littles” while the older children began. Soon, I heard muffled giggles coming from the project table. I went over, discovered Miss January in all her glory, and thinking quickly, said, “Isn't the human body beautiful”, and closed the project down until further sorting of the materials could be done!! That night I contacted all the parents to explain what had happened. They were very understanding and suggested we should all meet to plan a Sex Education program for the kids. No one told me we did not teach Sex Education in this school district in 1966, so I agreed. I sent to the state for a curriculum guide and away we went! When I moved over the mountain to teach in Carson and Stevenson, the district had a meeting to begin the process of planning a Sex Education program. I said, you mean we don't have one? When I told them my story, I was appointed to head the committee!

For two hours on Tuesdays and Thursdays during the school year and in the summer, we had a very successful preschool run by the mothers for the birth to 4-year olds. The 2-4 year olds enjoyed stories, movies, painting, coloring, puzzles and games, while the “crawlers” were penned in a large matted area with toys of their interest level.

The summer of my second year at Lewis River School, 1967, I found out I would have a deaf student, Laura, in September. Fortunately, this was my summer to go back to school. So. I was able to take classes in teaching the deaf at the University of Washington. They helped me so much with Laura over the next two years. We all learned some signing and even visited the Deaf School in Vancouver as a class.

In the summer of 1968, I was pregnant with our second child, Guy. This was my third summer at Lewis River School and it was my turn to teach summer school. The district decided to use “my” school for a summer camp, and thus I did not have to travel the miles to Stevenson each day to teach. Yahoo!! Chuck and Diane Waiste, teachers at Stevenson Elementary and Stevenson High School, were enlisted to be my co-teachers for this adventure. We had so much fun, which was, of course, the object! We had several one week groups. They slept in the covered play area and used the school for meals and classes in forest lore. There was swimming in the river each day, games and relays invented by the wonderful “Mind of Chuck” and the campfire each night with skits, plays and of course, ghost stories. Our program also included literature, poetry drama, arts and crafts and a wonderful hayride down to Amboy to the

Chief Lalushka Wigwam for a real Indian Powwow. It was a magical time.

At the end of that summer, I said a sad goodbye to my little school in the woods and to my Forest Service friends, moving with my husband to the Wind River Ranger Station where he had been transferred. The blessing was, I could still work for the school district, but now it would be teaching only second grade in Carson.

As I began writing this missal for Myrna DeBolt, I wondered how much I would remember. But, not to worry! It flowed so easily and quickly, one memory leading to another and so on. I treasure the wonderful opportunity I was given to teach in what was even then, a disappearing type of institution, my little “One Room Wilderness School at Lewis River”.