

TEACHERS

By Brian Walsh (2006)

(A supplement to Allen Walsh's memoirs in 2006)

North West Brunswick State (Primary) School

I followed Nancy and Allen, in consecutive Years, up to Grade 6 at the North West Brunswick State (Primary) School, but with one exception – my first year.

As my birthday is in February, I was still under 5 years old when I began in 1934, so was put into what was known as the “Bub’s” class, which must have been like a Kindergarten. Our teacher was Miss Baker, a young woman, but I couldn’t describe her as Allen has done with many of our other teachers. I can’t remember anything particular about that class.

The following year, instead of going into grade 1, I was jumped up into Grade 2, which meant that I was one of the youngest in the class, and that age difference continued up to my 3rd year at the Tech. My teacher in Grade 2 was Miss Weber. I’ve always thought that she began to rap the knuckles of my left hand, to force me to change over to writing with my right hand.

But, if Allen is right, and we didn’t begin to use pen and ink until Grade 3, then I’ve maligned Miss Weber all these years and must shift all of the blame onto Miss Roland in Grade 3. Using my left hand, I smudged the ink before it dried, so Miss Rowland took great pains to make me change over to the right hand (but the great pain was in my knuckles being rapped with a ruler!). Even a few tears didn’t deter her.

I presume that Mum and Dad agreed to this torture, but I don’t recall ever asking them about it in later years.

Many years after my time, kids were not forced to change hands, as some pundits claimed that it caused all sorts of psychological problems, including St.-Stam-Stammering, but it never affected me. Although my writing was never very good in later years, the change gave me the benefit of becoming ambidextrous.

When I began work as a junior draughtsman (as we spelt it then), in 1943, I tried drawing with both hands (one at a time) and found that I was more natural with the left hand.

So, for more than 60 years, I’ve drawn and lettered with my left hand, and written with my right. I never saw Miss Rowland in later years to tell her about that.

Nancy said recently that she had never known where Allen’s and my left-handedness in writing came from. I’ve always assumed it came from Grandpa Matthews, who was left-handed when using tools. Dad used to say how awkward he looked when using a saw or hammer with his left hand. I don’t remember ever seeing him write, but he must have used his left hand? So, he’s one ancestor at least who passed on some left-handed genes.

(Playing Sherlock Holmes, I've just had a look at the Matthews family portrait, and Grandpa is standing there with a whip in his right hand. Was it only for the photo – or does it not mean anything?)

In Grade 4, my teacher was Miss Legge. I can only recall that she was young, but Nancy has told me that Miss Legge wore long dresses and wide belts. Obviously, I was more interested in schoolwork than teachers' fashions.

Grade 5 is a bit of a blank to me regarding teachers. I know that Miss Rowland didn't have me in Grade 5, as she did Allen. The name of Miss Teague comes from the depths, and I think she taught us for most of Grade 5, at least. Apparently, some of the teachers switched classes at times, and there were student teachers coming and going, so that's why Nancy, Allen and I had different teachers in the same grades.

One fixture, though, was Mr. Alan Seers in Grade 6 (1939 in my case). He was a good teacher, strict as good teachers were, and never stood any nonsense. I fell foul of him on occasions and got the strap – my main failing being talking when I should have been paying attention!

In Grades 5 and 6, at least, the best students (graded by the teacher and previous results, I suppose), were seated at the back of the class, with the others, according to aptitude, towards the front, with the "Dunces" in the front row. We sat 2 to each desk. And that system was mostly to blame for my lapses!

In Grade 6, I sat in the second back row, alongside Max Adam. Behind us were a couple of fairly bright girls – Glen Hill and Eunice Woodward. They were also chatterboxes, often nattering to and/or teasing Max and me, and if we turned to give a riposte to them, it was clear to Mr. Seers that we weren't paying attention to him.

Max Adam lived in Culloden St. opposite the school, and I used to go to his place occasionally after school, where we would play in the backyard with toy cars and soldiers. His father was the famous 'Bluey' Adam, one of the top detectives in the vice squad, who was involved in most of the murky murder cases in Melbourne in the 1930s and 1940s, including the 1942 'Brownout' murders, for which the American soldier, Leonski, was hanged. Max's dad would sometimes come home while I was there and in response to our 'hellos', he would just give a grunt and go inside. Maybe he still had work on his mind. Unfortunately, in later years, he apparently ran foul of the law himself, being involved in some corruption, and left the force.

One of the 'victims' of Mr. Seers' sharp tongue was a boy named Evans. He was as small as me, always untidy, and wore thick glasses. Perhaps due to his poor eyesight, his books were messy, with ink all over the place. Early in the year, Mr. Seers told him "you're a grub, Evans, nothing but a grub". The name stuck, and we called the poor kid 'grub' thereafter. And so did Mr. Seers. I've sometimes since wondered what became of 'grub' Evans. He might have turned out a millionaire.

I can vouch for Allen's recollection of his run-off with Gordon Webster for a place in the school sports. It is still quite clear to me, including Mr. Seers' acid comments in comparing them to a couple of draught horses!

BRUNSWICK TECHNICAL SCHOOL

I followed Allen – one year behind – through the 1st, 2nd and 3rd years, from 1940 to 1942, and had most of the same teachers as he had. Allen was in forms 1A, 2A and 3A, while I went through 1A, 2A and 3B. There was virtually no difference between 3A and 3B, as we had the same teachers and did the same subjects. There were about 6 classes, from 3A to 3F.

I fancied that I was a reasonably apt pupil but, as I had some sidelines to distract me, like sports and gymnastics, I probably didn't apply all my brains to study, being satisfied with good passes in most subjects. And that's why I ran afoul of a few teachers. Allen omitted to mention in his memoirs that he was the Dux of his first, second and third years at the tech, and usually had an average in or near the 90s.

If I hadn't had a somewhat casual attitude to school work, I could have finished up with a large inferiority complex, but fortunately that didn't eventuate. From 'Johnny' Noonan (1st year form master) through to Mr. Green (3rd year), I was often reminded that I could do better if I tried harder, with comments like "you're not as good as you brother, Walshie".

I usually did ok, in Maths and English, my favorite subjects, and still remember arguing over a grammar question with Mr. Green after he had given me 'only' 19 out of 20 in a test. I even referred the question to Dad, hoping for support, but he agreed with Mr. Green so I had to be satisfied with the 19 result.

Allen remembers Mr. Green's acting, and his pointing out some personal features of Shylock. It's odd how some things stick in one's mind, as I've always remembered his going through Marc Antony's oration in 'Julius Caesar', and pointing out how crafty Antony was in having 'two bob each way' with Brutus and the crowd.

'Johnny' Noonan was our 1st year form master – a very good teacher who didn't stand any nonsense. He was a solidly-built man, but not tall, and had played football with Coburg. One day in maths class, I spoke up and said that I couldn't grasp what he had written on the blackboard. (Dad had drummed into us to admit it if we didn't know something. "The man who doesn't know today, and asks a question, is the man who knows tomorrow" was one of his maxims.) Anyway, Johnny must have been a bit frustrated, because he marched down to my desk, picked me up by the scruff of the neck and the seat of my pants, carried me up to the board, ran my nose along the chalk and said something like "that and that equals that – now do you see it, Walshie?" I couldn't help but see it! It didn't do me any harm, apart from acute embarrassment in front of the class, and I never held a grudge against Mr. Noonan.

Allen mentioned the new library that opened in 1938. The floor covering was a thick laminated rubber, light green on top. Some teachers got hold of some off-cuts and turned them into straps, which were wielded with varying degrees of cunning and enthusiasm. (I think the lino and straps are mentioned in the book on the history of Brunswick, so we are

not the only ones who remember that). Some of the boys, including me, who were fairly experienced in getting the odd one of two 'cuts', worked out that if you let your hand drop a bit as the strap came down, the impact was lessened and the sting was reduced quite a bit. (We were probably following what previous generations of schoolboys had also found). But 'Joey' Barberis, the science master, applied his knowledge of Physics to that problem, and made a boy hold out both arms in front of himself, with one hand under the other, which made it much more difficult to 'ride the punch' as it were. Also, as Allen wrote, he had a narrower strap, so we paid much more attention to 'Joey', to minimize the chances of getting the 'cuts'.

While on corporal punishment (or 'abuse', as some do-gooders might call it these days) we suffered at times at the hands of Mr. Gerrard who, among other duties, supervised the Phys. Education classes, including swimming at the Brunswick Pool. He was a large, cheerful bloke, but didn't stand for any skylarking. When we were getting changed after a swim, if anyone played up, or was slow off the mark, 'Gerrardy' would stir things up by flicking any bare legs and bottoms with a wet towel. It stung a bit, but didn't cause any damage. All this punishment was part of being educated at the time.

I don't recall ever being unjustly chastised (unless you could call the Johnny Noonan episode a bit over the top) and I doubt if any of the students suffered any ill effects in the long run. Allen mentioned an unnamed teacher with a foreign accent, who taught science. This may have been Mr. Joseph (perhaps his first name) who taught my 3rd year social studies class. Because the boys thought social studies a less important subject, and it was a bit of relief to get a less strict teacher, some of them played up a bit and those classes became more like 'playtime'.

Mr. Joseph didn't use the strap himself, so his only sanction was to send any culprits to the headmaster, Mr. Jordan, who was pretty good with the strap, in or out of class. I must have been a good boy, because I don't recall ever having to knock on Mr. Jordan's door!

For woodwork classes in 3rd year, I'm fairly sure that we had 'Tichy' Brown. (In those days, anyone who was vertically challenged was quickly named 'Tichy'). I wore the name 'Tichy' Walsh for many years while growing up. Allen wrote that he thought Mr. Brown taught history. Quite likely, but as many teachers were versatile, Mr. Brown could well have taken woodwork also. In woodwork, he wore a brown dustcoat.

My main memory of woodwork is a project in making a breadboard. We started with a board of pine about 10 inches (250mm) square and 1 ¼ inches (32mm) thick. We first cut the corners to make an octagon, and then began to plane the top surface to a smooth – and supposedly flat-surface. My problem, typical of some left-handers, was that I could plane the board flat in one direction, but it would have a convex surface when checked with a straightedge at 90degrees. I planed away in every period for week after week, but Mr. Brown was never satisfied. Eventually, when the board was down to nearly half its original thickness, I either got it right, or Tichy Brown gave up in despair, and we called it a day!

It was probably the thinnest breadboard ever made at Brunswick tech., but mum used it for many years.

Like Allen, I also well remember Mr. Iverson's musical 'social hours', when he toiled to instill some appreciation for music into a bunch of tone-deaf students. The war was in full swing in 1942 and patriotic songs were all the go. As there were no Australian patriotic songs, we sang "There'll always be an England" and others that Allen mentioned.

One exception was "Waltzing Matilda", and Mr. Iverson tried to get the boys to put some feeling into its various verses. Robust with the squatter and troopers, but then we all had to almost whisper "and his ghost may be heard as you pass by that billabong", while Mr. Iverson slowly waved his baton and said "sshhh".

One of my highlights at the tech. was in becoming a bit of a star turn at gymnastics and horizontal bar work. Mr. Gerrard supervised the gym. Classes and a young teacher, Mr. Simmonds, helped him at times. Mr. Simmonds was reputed to be a top-class gymnast, including work on the horizontal bar, and to be one of the few who could do the 'frontaway' off the bar. One common way for experts to leave the bar is by doing the 'backaway', by swinging down at full arm length, letting go, and then doing a back somersault before landing on one's feet. The 'frontaway' is the reverse, and much more difficult. You let go on the back swing, and then do a front somersault before landing.

Although the 'backaway' was easy to me by 3rd year, I was never game to try the 'frontaway' on my own, but did it occasionally when Mr. Simmonds 'padded' me (i.e. gave partial support to prevent a cropper).

A few of us were keen on bar work and spent every spare minute at recesses and lunchtime honing our skills. A couple of us became top dogs and finished up with various records for the number of turns around the bar in various exercises. At one time, my record was about 350 turns on one type. We didn't get giddy, as we had got used to doing so many revolutions. But – the bigger they are, the harder they fall!

Early in my 3rd year, some of the new boys were learning some basic tricks on the bar at lunch time. To me, they were elementary, like swinging up with one leg on the bar, then cocking the rear leg over, and jumping down.

So, big-head Walshie thought he'd show the newcomers how to do it with an extra flourish. Alas! My rear leg caught on the bar and I took a nosedive onto the ground. At the time, there was very little sand under the bar and I landed on a stone which took a lump of flesh off my right kneecap, about the size of a shilling (10cents). There was no skin to stitch together, so I was bandaged up and left to heal. I still have a white scar on my knee after 65 years, but the injury was nothing compared to the damage to my pride!

At the annual speech nights at the Brunswick Town Hall, some of us would put on a display of gymnastics and bar work. And while Allen and others would get prizes and applause for their scholastic results, I was quite happy to bask in the plaudits for our gym work. Perhaps that was the genesis of the amateur theatricals in later years.

We were fortunate in having so many good teachers during our Junior School years, with many of them making an impression which we can still clearly recall now, and that solid grounding no doubt stood us in good stead in later years.