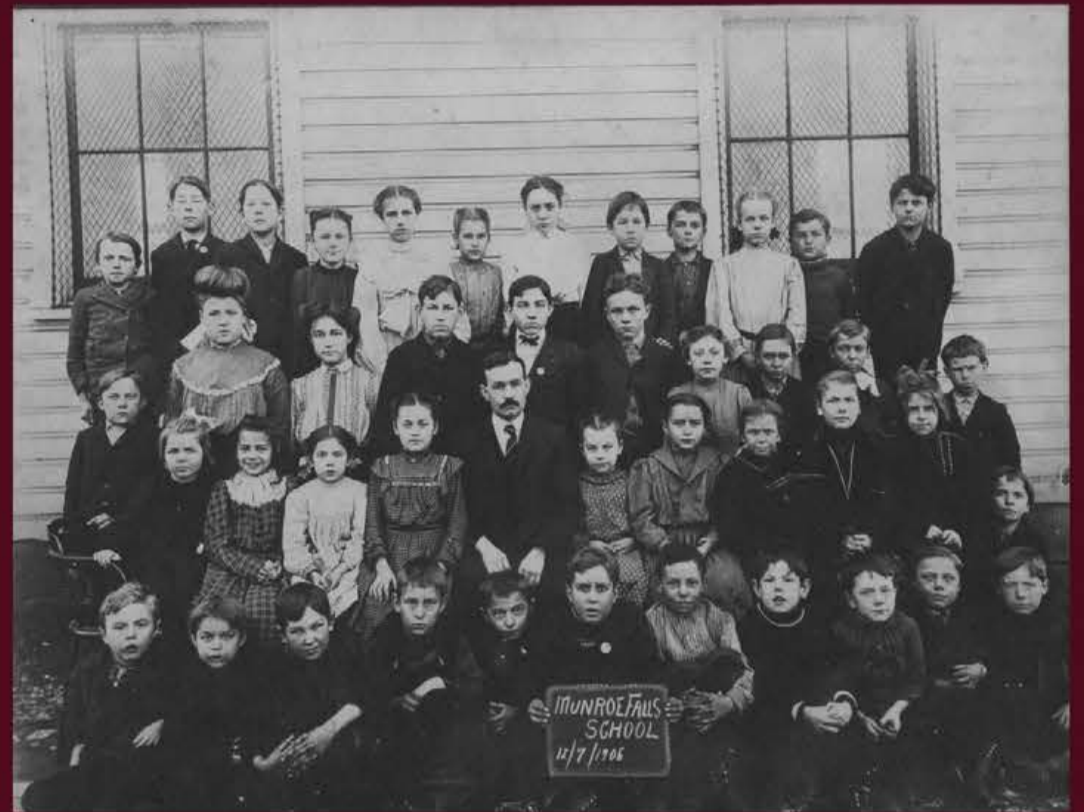


Learning Their Lessons

Instruction in one-room schools began with the well-known “three r’s:” reading, writing, and arithmetic. After mastering these basic subjects, students learned about history, geography, grammar, spelling, personal hygiene, and, in many rural schools, agriculture. Most nineteenth-century American teachers relied heavily on requiring students to memorize material and recite it on command. As a result, many children learned to read in a mechanical way with little attention to the meaning of what they were reading. Yet most children who attended one-room schools for several years or more did at least pick up the basics of literacy, however limited their comprehension.



A teacher and her class outside of their one-room school in Stow Township in 1893. (Image courtesy of Fred Long)



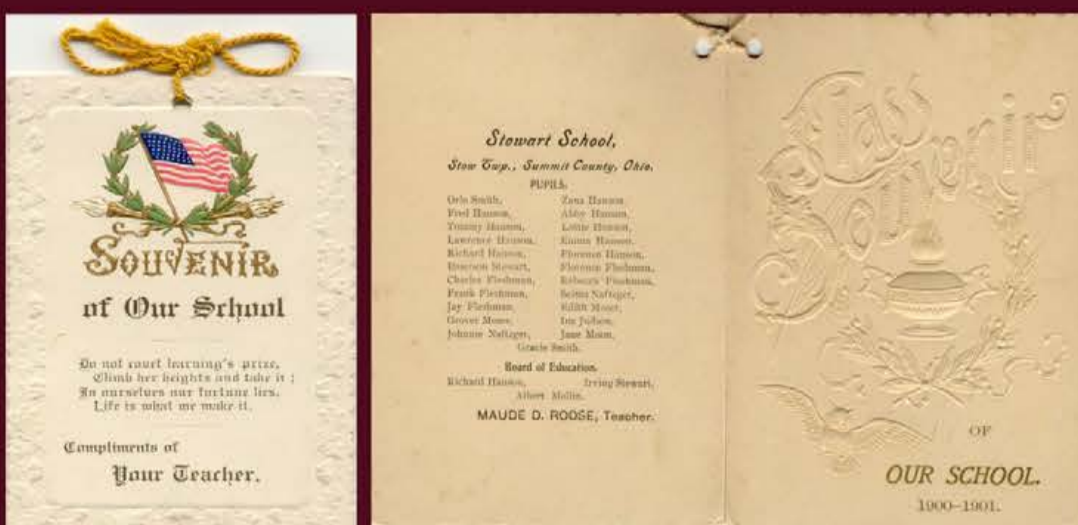
These students, photographed with their teacher, attended Munroe Falls School in 1906. (Image courtesy of Munroe Falls Historical Society)

Students in one-room schools engaged in frequent competitions to test their learning. Spelling bees were especially common, as Stow resident Sarah Amlung remembered. Both adults and children participated in the bees. The status of “champion speller,” Amlung recalled, was a very prestigious one.

Although instruction in one-room schools focused largely on secular, or non-religious, subjects, they were not entirely nonsectarian. Teachers taught Protestant morality, and students frequently used the Protestant Bible as a textbook. As a result, many Catholics felt uncomfortable with the education their children received in the schools. In order to ensure that their children obtained instruction in their own faith, they founded parochial schools associated with their local parishes.

Nineteenth-century American one-room schools also encouraged patriotism in their students. After Francis Bellamy penned the Pledge of Allegiance in 1892, it became a daily ritual in schools across the country. As large numbers of immigrants entered the nation in the mid- to late nineteenth century, one-room schools helped immigrant children adjust to their new country, although sometimes at the expense of their native languages and traditions.

Many who attended one-room schools recalled not just what they learned, but also the pranks they played on fellow students. Despite the merriment with which these students remembered their misbehavior, they did sometimes receive punishment. Whippings were common in one-room schools, as were more creative punishments such as making a misbehaving boy sit with the girls.



Students at Stewart School received these souvenir booklets from their teacher for the school years of 1900-1901 and 1904-1905. (Images courtesy of the Hanson family and Stow-Munroe Falls Public Library)

“A girl that I particularly disliked...sat across the aisle from me...She would smile at me and write me nice notes which I promptly made into spit balls and fired them at her when I got the chance...while she was reciting I bent a pin and put it on her seat. When she sat on it the effect was electrical. She arose quickly and yelled, ‘I don’t think you are much of a gentleman.’ Probably she was right but it cured her of any affection she had for me.”

- Frank Green, remembering the one-room school he attended in Stow

Teachers in nineteenth-century one-room schools often achieved success in providing children with basic literacy skills, but found it more difficult to teach critical thinking and higher branches of knowledge.

How are teaching methods today like or unlike the memorization and recitation practiced in one-room schoolhouses?