

Sovereign Hill Education

1850s School Life

Research Notes for Primary Schools

In the 1850s children had never heard of computers, ballpoint pens, BMX's, mobile phones or television. Instead, they talked about slate boards, slate pencils, dip pens, blotting paper, Books of Lessons, the out-house, the strap, "Sir" or "Ma'am", the dunce's hat and many other things that are not familiar to us today.

What were the school buildings like?

The first classes were held in tents made of canvas. Sometimes the teacher would take his tent down and follow the miners and children to another site where gold was being found.

Some women held lessons for their own and other children in their homes that may have been tents or timber cottages. Soon classes were held in permanent wooden, brick or stone buildings. Girls sat on one side of the classroom with the boys sitting on the other side.

Who went to school?

Unlike today, school attendance was not compulsory. Parents could decide if they wanted to spend their money on school fees and which of their children would go to school. People thought it more important for boys to receive an education; girls could learn to be good wives and mothers by staying at home. Some girls did get to go to school. Most of the teachers were men.

What subjects were taught?

Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, History, Geography and Grammar were the main subjects taught. Boys were taught Drawing and girls did Sewing. Much of the work was learned by rote – "repetition is the only way to learn!" Children spent most of the school day sitting on very hard wooden seats or benches. Monitors or older children were used by the teacher to teach the younger children when the class was very big; sometimes there were up to 100 children in one classroom.

What happened to the naughty children?

Many of the boys were given the strap or cane for being naughty; for example, if they did not listen to the teacher or were lazy they were given the "cuts". Often the teacher used sarcasm with which to punish the girls.

What games did the children play?

Children had to make or invent many of the games that they played. Girls played "Jacks" and "The Graces" and boys played "Marbles". They had to use a lot of imagination to keep themselves active outside in the schoolyard and would play games such as "Leap Frog", "Peg in the Ring" (a game played with tops), "Shuttlecock" and "Drop the Handkerchief".

1850s Rules of Behaviour

- Boys and girls walk in separate lines behind their teacher.
- Girls enter and leave the room before the boys.
- A polite boy or gentleman always removes his cap when meeting a lady.
- A lady/girl must never show a bare ankle.
- Children must sit up straight at all times.
- Children are not permitted to write using their left hand.

These notes were prepared by Peter Featherston for the Sovereign Hill Education Service, 2002.

