

The Snyderville Schoolhouse

EDUCATION IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

BY JIM BENTON

Jim Benton is the Research Librarian at the Barbara P. Rielly Library. His grandfather, great uncle and two great aunts all attended the Snyderville Schoolhouse

A goodly number of 19th century schoolhouses are scattered around Columbia County. Almost all of them are located in villages or hamlets. A few, however, stand miles away from any apparent center of population and by their existence today ask the question: “why is this school so far from anywhere?”

A fine example of the lonesome academy is the Snyderville School, placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2004. It stands near the north edge of County Route 8 at the very western edge of the town of Gallatin. There are no houses, churches, or even signs of settlement anywhere nearby.

The school was built in the early 1860s on land donated by Henry Younghanse, a prosperous local farmer. When completed, it was formally known as the Gallatin District # 1 School, and served first through eighth grades. The average number of students through the 1920s was in the low-twenties. Teachers were primarily young women who boarded with local families as a part of their contract. There was, however, at least one male teacher, as can be seen from the 1905-06 Souvenir Book.

By the 1940s, the total number of students dwindled to three. The school closed for good in June of 1942, and the three students were thereafter transported by car to the Germantown Central School. Transportation was provided by Charles P. Benton, Jr. in his Nash Tourer. (A bus was not necessary until after 1945.) The

building passed through a number of owners over the years, who used it primarily as storage. It continues to be owned by a local farm family. While the outside of the school has been stabilized, the interior was gutted down to the studs years ago, and sadly, the school bell disappeared at some point in time. That the building still stands in close to original condition has a lot to do with its remote location rather than any interest in preservation.

“A school in the middle of nowhere seems a very apt modern metaphor.”

So why was, and is, there a schoolhouse in the middle of nowhere? The easy answer is that in the 1860s, when the school was built, there was a village, or at least a hamlet, very nearby. Weaver Hollow, now called Snyderville, was about a half-mile west of the school and had a post office, a hotel, two mills, a blacksmith, a cider house and a number of homes. The largest house was called “White Hall” and was so well known that some local deeds reference “the road to White Hall” in their property descriptions. East of the school was Stove Pipe Alley, which was a settlement of some of the oldest inhabitants of the area. In addition, the West Gallatin Methodist Church was directly across from the road from the school. (The 1900s photo of the school was likely taken from the lawn of the church.) All of these settlements and hamlets, and even the church are gone now, victims of a declining



population caused by war, industrialization, agricultural price failures and economic panic, and depression in general.

In 1860 the population of the Town of Gallatin was 1,533. Exactly two-thirds of the 1860 population was gone in



seventy years with the 1930 population a paltry 511. (It took 150 years for the population of Gallatin to recover to its 1860 level, finally topping 1,600 in 2010.)

Snyderville/Weaver Hollow was no longer a place. Mills were closed, post offices were relocated and houses, farms, and even churches were abandoned. As noted above, the school persevered until 1942, and remains today the only surviving “public” building for miles around.

The structure stands today, a symbol of a time, now gone, when education was an important civil right, an obligation, and a path for children to exceed the accomplishments of their parents. A school in the middle of nowhere seems a very apt modern metaphor.

AT TOP: Snyderville School c.2004.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Mrs. Joan Benton Burger, on the right, was one of the last three students at the Snyderville School. Picture from the dedication of the National Register historic marker, 2004.



METZWOOD
INSURANCE

A policy of doing more.

Home • Auto • Life • Business
Kinderhook • Chatham
518-392-5161 • metzwood.com

Locally owned since 1913.