

# You think you had it rough at school?

Sure, today some schools are dilapidated, mold factories, but a whole lot of other schools are the public school equivalent of the Taj Mahal.

Much of the luxury found in our public schools (and even colleges) is justified by arguing that it will improve student learning. The next time there is a local levy, check how much of the spending is going to buildings. Really.

But how new and fancy do schools need to be for kids to learn? I got to consider that question while reading *These Happy Golden Years* with my daughter. Now, if you're familiar with the Laura Ingalls Wilder series of books, you know that there are some liberties taken with the timing and some of the accounts aren't as accurate as they should be – usually, the books err on portraying the happy life of settling the prairie, rather than acknowledging just how hard it could be. There is an upbeat tone that runs through most of the books. Nonetheless, there are plenty of accounts of suffering, whether from weather, locusts, people, or just bad luck.

The accounts of the one-room school house in a prairie settlement by De Smet, South Dakota found in *These Happy Golden Years* really emphasize the hardness of the settlers and the brutal conditions of the prairie.

These days if a classroom lacks air conditioning it's as if we're sending the students to a penal colony. Sweating a bit in class has nothing on nearly freezing to death in the depth of a South Dakota or Minnesota winter.

First, let's start with the sleeping arrangements for the teacher, Laura Ingalls. She shared a shanty with the Brewster family. Her "room" consisted of a few sheets hanging from rope

to give her privacy. The start of her first day of school was ... "biting cold":

"All at once, Laura threw back the covers. The air was biting cold. Her teeth chattered and her fingers were so stiff that she could not button her shoes.

The kitchen was not so cold. Mrs. Brewster had broken the ice in the water pail and was filling the teakettle, and she replied pleasantly to Laura's 'Good morning.' Laura filled the wash basin and washed her hands and face at the bench by the door. The icy water made her cheeks tingle, and her whole face was rosy and glowing in the looking glass above the bench while she combed her hair before it."

As for her school, the walls weren't even secure and it was heated by a coal stove.

"The board walls were not battened. Streaks of sunshine streamed through the cracks upon a row of six homemade seats and desks that arched down the middle of the room. Beyond them on the studding of the opposite wall, a square of boards had been nailed and painted black, to make a blackboard.

In front of the seats stood a big heating stove. Its round sides and top were cherry-red from the heat of the fire, and standing around it were the scholars that Laura must teach. They all looked at Laura. There were five of them, and two boys and one girl were taller than she was.

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'It is cold this morning, isn't it?' she heard herself say; then without waiting for an answer, 'Do you think you can keep warm in the seats away from the stove?'

One of the tall boys said quickly, 'I'll sit in the back seat; it's the coldest.'

It's worth mentioning, too, that some of the students, like

the tall boy, were actually *older* than Laura who herself was just a teenager.

As for those cold conditions? They could get much worse as the book recounts when the temperature really started to drop:

“The wind was blowing fiercely. Fortunately it was not a blizzard wind, but it scoured hard particles of snow from the frozen drifts and drove them through every crack in the shanty’s north and west walls. From all sides the cold came in. The big coal heater seemed to make no impression on that cold.

Laura called the school to order. Though she was near the stove, her feet were numb and her fingers could not grip a pencil. She knew that it was colder in the seats.

‘Better put your coats on again,’ she said, ‘and all of you come to the fire. You may take turns sitting in the front seat or standing by the stove to get warm. Study as best you can.’

All day the snow was blown low across the prairie, and through the schoolroom’s walls. Ice froze thick on the water pail, and at noon they set their dinner pails on the stove to thaw the frozen food before they ate it. The wind was steadily growing colder.

It cheered Laura to see how well every pupil behaved. Not one took advantage of the disorder to be idle or unruly. No one whispered. They all stood by the stove, studying, and quietly turning about to warm their backs, and all their recitations were good. Charles and Clarence took turns going out into the wind to get coal from the bin and keep up the fire.

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At half past three they were all so cold that she thought of dismissing school early. The mile that Martha and Charles must walk, worried her. On the other hand, she should not cut short

the pupils' opportunity for learning, and this was not a blizzard."

Back then, Americans were made of tough stuff. I can't say how well I or my kids would weather such a challenge. However modern Americans would do confronting a similar situation, the story itself tells us that there is more to education than nice buildings and comfortable surroundings.

Disciplined students desiring to learn in the face of adversity speaks to deeper cultural traditions and the character of the people. Will that fire to learn and push through adversity ever be lit again?