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Five Pupils and One Teacher

“Undercrowded” School Thrives Beside Curituck Lighthouse

By James. E Mays

Parents, attention.

Are you disgusted with our schools?

Are you fed up with split shifts, school constructions delays and political procrastination?

Would you like to see more attention paid to teaching fundamentals, less attention to Methods (with a capital “M”)?

Seek no further, for your educational Utopia has been found. Fact is, it was right in your backyard all the time.

They don’t call it Utopia though. They call the place Corolla, N.C. and (miracle of miracles!) Corolla has an UNDERCROWDED SCHOOL!

There are only five pupils in the school… five pupils (count ‘em) and a kindly, graying teacher who wishes there were more children for her to teach.

Mrs. Grace Leward, the teacher, spoke with just a trace of wistfulness in her voice a few days ago when she stood in the screened (against mosquitoes) doorway of Corolla’s white frame schoolhouse and discussed her teaching problem.

“I’d sure like to have more pupils,” she said, “especially in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. It would be easier for them to study if there were two to a class.

No Problem at All

From that point of view, Mrs. Leward’s third grade is no problem at all. It has two members and if a third-grade class of two members still sounds a bit small the Corollans can still at least take comfort in the fact that things weren’t always this way.

Time was when Corolla, now dozing remotely in the shadow of the Currituck Lighthouse on the Virginia-North Carolina sand barrier reef, was a busting hunting and fishing village. Some 27 families lived in the village then, tending their nets in the ocean at the front door and in Currituck Sound at their back door.

And in the Fall the wildfowl came…millions upon millions of ducks and geese winging their way southward along the Atlantic Flyway stopped to feed on Currituck Sound’s aquatic plants, thereby coming within range of the guns of the Corollans and the sportsmen who hired the Corollans as guides.

One thing was lacking however.

Corolla had no school. The nearest one was several miles across the sound which presented obvious difficulties of water transportation and safety. To travel by land to the nearest school would necessitate a daily round trip of 70 miles.

So the watermen of Corolla built a school of their own.

They got a donation of land on which to build it from a wealthy sportsman, Currituck County did its part, and education, grades one through eight, came to Corolla. Parents desiring to give their children high school education sent them across the sound, boarding them in Currituck County’s mainland homes.

Once Had 46 Pupils

At its peak, Corolla School had 46 pupils enrolled.

But the old order changed, giving place to new, and Corolla’s people began to drift away to seek greener, if illusory, fields of the mainland and the city.

Said Corolla’s postmaster and school bus driver John W. Austin:

“Everything has left around here, and it’s left me holding the bag!”

But not quite everyone has left:

Six families remain in Corolla and the school also serves Penny’s Hill, a village of 12 families up the beach.

Austin’s school “bus” is a Willys station wagon with four-wheel drive, and his school bus “customers” are the thre (sic) children from Penny’s Hill who are of school age.

Beach Serves as Road

The road the bus travels is the beach itself, firm and smooth near the water’s edge at low tide; tricky and requiring frequent use of the four-wheel drive when Austin makes the trip though the soft sand above the high tide mark:

“The trip takes a little over an hour, depending on the tides,” said Austin.

Once the three children who come by bus from Penny’s Hill are joined by the two children from Corolla who walk, Mrs. Lewark begins the day’s work She hears all classes in all subjects, 2- recitations a day, and there is a certain amount of eavesdropping.

“My third graders are very interested in others’ recitations,” she said. “They listen to one of the others’ lesson and they like to look at the lesson in the book after they have heard the recitation.

“they get a good deal out of listening in on the others.”

Corolla’s pupils bring their lunch to school and after lunch is eaten they may engage in a game of volleyball (their current enthusiasm) or swinging on the playground equipment (perennial enthusiasm).

School is out at 2:30, which leaves the Penny’s Hill three and the Corolla two plenty of time for such chores as they may have, plus the ever-present possibility of fishing…or maybe, at this time of the year, watching the waterfowl wing in from the north…or maybe just building castles, amid the dunes and the isolation, in the sand of the great barrier reef.

And they have the aging red brick spire of the lighthouse to watch over them and the sea.