FOUR thousand years ago a Chinese philosopher wrote, “All pursuits are mean in comparison with learning,” and time has not changed the worth of his words. It was in a little red school house at Brownlee's Mills, in the southwestern corner of Potter County, Pennsylvania, that the writer taught school in the fall of 1885 and the winter of 1886. The one-room school house, built during the Civil War, occupied a site donated by Capt. John Brownlee, for years a director of this Portage township school district. The nearest post office was Costello, two miles to the south, named for P. C. Costello, founder of the town. As the new teacher lacked some months of being eighteen years of age, a provisional certificate was issued for the interim. In preparation for teaching, he had attended a teacher’s summer school in Cameron County.

The school house stood between the valley highway and Freeman Run, facing the dark woods that covered the mountain slope to the east. A living spring of sparkling water bubbled from a rocky bed at the base of the mountain. The pupils gathered at the spring at lunch time and at recess to drink the pure, clear water.

The interior of the school house was equipped with pine desks, benches, blackboard, teacher's desk, and a wood stove. Soon after the term began the windows were made attractive by white muslin curtains trimmed with red, and by inspirational mottoes on the walls. In October, when the maple leaves turned to scarlet and the birch to gold, the older girls brought a flat iron and bees-wax and waxed the bright-colored leaves to frame the mottoes. The

*Dr. John P. Herrick, although he gave up school teaching in 1885 to enter an active career that brought him distinction as a newspaper editor and publisher, banker, real estate operator, insurance executive, and oilman (he is President Emeritus of the New York State Oil Producers' Association), has never lost interest in the profession in which he started. He has endowed twenty-nine perpetual free scholarships at colleges and universities, with one or two more in the offing. He is the author of *Founding a County Newspaper* (1938), *Empire Oil* (1950), and *Bolivar, New York—Pioneer Oil Town* (1952).
work of beautifying the interior was in charge of Sarah Brownlee
and Elizabeth Young, two ambitious and industrious pupils who
took pride in the appearance of the schoolroom and swept the
floor each morning before the teacher came. Willing boys kept the
wood box filled.

The first quarter of the school hour each morning was devoted
to opening exercises. These consisted of singing patriotic songs,
reading from the Scriptures, reciting familiar maxims by pupils,
and the relating of timely anecdotes by the teacher. The subjects
taught were reading, writing, spelling, geography and arithmetic.

Of the twenty-three Brownlee school pupils enrolled, ranging in
age from six to sixteen years, boys were in the majority. Many of
the pupils carried their lunches to school in tin pails. Before heavy
frosts, some of the small boys came to school barefooted from
choice. Teachers seem to agree that the secret of harmonious rela-
tions with school boys and girls is to keep them busy. The writer
could not have asked for a more cooperative and eager-to-learn

group of pupils. Now and then there were fist fights among the
boys on the school grounds during recess, and snowball battles in
winter, but no eyes were blackened.

Rural school teachers of that day did not “spare the rod and
spoil the child.” When a pupil had earned a whipping, it was given
without delay. A beech switch, cut on the creek bank, was used on
the third day of school to punish three boys, but there was no
further need of it. One of the boys punished was the teacher’s
younger brother, Frank A. Herrick. Of the three switched, one
became a farm consultant for the State of Maryland, one a country
editor, and one a railroad conductor.

There were no classes on Friday afternoons. The time was
devoted either to a special program or to nature study. The special
programs consisted of the reading of original compositions written
by the pupils, the singing of songs, recitations, essays, and often a
spelling bee. Examples of the recitation selections by the pupils
were Longfellow’s “The Ride of Paul Revere” and “The Village
Blacksmith,” Whittier’s “The Barefoot Boy” and “School Days,”
Tennyson’s “Charge of the Light Brigade” and “The Brook,”
Moore’s “The Light of Other Days,” Hunt’s “Abou Ben Adhem,”
Mrs. Norton’s “The Arab’s Farewell to His Steed,” and Mrs.
Alexander’s “The Burial of Moses.”
Every other Friday afternoon from September to October was spent by teacher and pupils in nature study, rambling through the surrounding woods, identifying trees, shrubs, bushes, vines, ferns, and wild flowers. Trees were identified by the bark, leaves, and nuts. No two leaves on a tree are ever alike. The younger boys and girls were taught how to tell sassafras from sumac, cherry from ash, hickory from elm, birch from beech, butternut from chestnut, poplar from basswood, pine from hemlock, red oak from white, sarsaparilla from ginseng, boneset from smartweed, spearmint from watercress, blueberries from high bush huckleberries, and other lore of the woods. It was revealing to the younger pupils to learn that the tall trees grew out of small seeds. One boy became so interested that he collected sixty specimens of different woods, varnished and mounted them, and was awarded a prize at a teacher's institute.

The Brownlee school was midway between Costello and Austin,
and nine miles from Keating Summit, nearest railroad station and telegraph office, elevation 1881 feet, 681 feet higher than Costello. West of the Summit water flowed into the Gulf of Mexico and to the east into Chesapeake Bay. The grade of the dirt road from Austin to Keating Summit was 77 feet to the mile. At an open space in the woods near the mountain top, was Lookout, where travellers stopped to enjoy the wonderful view of far mountains, wide sky, and endless dark green forests.

A variety of highway traffic passed the school: in summer, staked wagons piled high with hemlock bark, on their way to the largest tannery in the world at Costello; in winter, bob sleds loaded with logs bound for the Sinnemahoning Creek banking ground, just below Costello to wait for spring floods. The year around, strings of teams transported sole leather in canvas covered wagons from the tannery to the railhead for shipment to Boston warehouses. Teams and wagons, later in the day, returned to Costello loaded with ill smelling steer hides from South America for the tannery vats. Six days a week, a rolling stage carried mail pouches from the railhead to post offices at Austin and Costello and gathered mail for delivery to the railroad mail clerk on the return trip.

No automobiles passed the school house to frighten horses and cause runaways, for there were none in Potter County. It was twelve years later before the registration of automobiles in the United States totalled eight hundred. Travel was by horse and buggy—speed, less than four miles an hour.

The director who engaged the writer to teach the school was Capt. John Brownlee, a hardy, bearded Scotchman who spoke with a burr. He settled on a wilderness farm in the Freeman Run valley in 1856 and, in turn, built a sawmill, grist mill, planing mill, and shingle mill at the junction of Portage Creek and Freeman Run.

He was born in the British Isles, was well educated, and a man of integrity. His home was noted for its hospitality and good cheer. The Captain enjoyed deer hunting in season. One night he invited the writer to go with him and sit in a "blind" to wait for deer to come to his "salt lick." A wind from the wrong direction carried our scent to the deer that were heard stomping in the woods, so that none came within range of our guns.

On one of his visits to the school Capt. Brownlee urged the pupils to study hard and obey the teacher. Invited to write some
words of advice on the blackboard, he took a piece of chalk and in a bold hand wrote: "Be kind to all, be intimate with few and may that few be well chosen," and signed it "Capt. John Brownlee." And that is what he later wrote in an autograph album that is still preserved.

Capt. Brownlee met death suddenly on February 19, 1900, while on his way from the mill to his home in answer to the summons of a dinner horn. Searchers found his lifeless body beside the path. The family had celebrated the seventy-third birthday of the good man only a few days before.

It was during the term of the Brownlee school that the writer made his first contribution to a newspaper. At the suggestion of W. W. Thompson, publisher of the Potter County Enterprise at Coudersport, he wrote a weekly news letter recording the events of interest in Costello and vicinity for the Enterprise. The only other newspapers published in the county at that time were the Potter County Journal at Coudersport, edited by a pioneer newspaper publisher, Edwin Haskell, and the Sentinel, at Ulysses, edited by Seth Lewis, a former school teacher.

The Potter County Teacher's Institute held at Ulysses that year was conducted by the County Superintendent, Miss Anna Buckbee, a woman whose ability and graciousness endeared her to all. One of the Institute speakers was Charles Hastings Dodd, a brilliant young Baptist preacher, with whom the writer formed a friendship that remained constant for half a century. He was one of those rare souls who sought no further praise or reward for the fine things he did than the inner satisfaction of having done them. The tall cross that rises above his grave in the Coudersport cemetery is symbolic of his faith and his earnestness as a servant of the Master.

In tribute to his memory, the Charles Hastings Dodd Free Scholarship for Potter County students in need of a helping hand was established at Alfred University, Alfred, New York, soon after his death, by a devoted friend. The perpetual scholarship provides a grant of $600 a year, or $2,400 for four years.

The average monthly salary of teachers of rural schools in Potter County in 1885 was, for men, $26.71, for women, $24.10. In contrast, the average salary of rural school teachers in Potter County in 1953 was $2,650 a year. The salary received by the
writer for the seven months spent as a teacher in 1885 was $31 per month. What the extra dollar was for he never found out.

In one rural district, the teacher received a salary of $6 a week, and "boarded round," a week with one family, the next week with another, until the circle was completed. This custom, later abolished, gave the teacher a chance to see how each family lived, learn the point of view of the parents, and come to know his pupils better.

In the home of a broad-shouldered citizen with red sideburns and a heavy mustache, a brusque, opinionated man with little schooling, the teacher on arrival was asked, "Do you teach my children that the world is round?"

"It seems to be the opinion of the authors of schoolbooks that the world is round, and I follow my textbook in that respect," was the reply.

"By Jehoshaphat, I am not going to have my children brought up atheists," the big man roared. "The Bible refers to the four corners of the earth, and anything that has four corners can't be round."

The previous year he had taken his children out of school because the teacher taught that the world was round. As there was no compulsory attendance law in force at that time, nothing could be done about it. The soft answer of the young teacher tempered the father's wrath and his children remained in school to the end of the term.

There were in 1885 thirty-six men teachers and 104 women, with an average of nineteen pupils in each of the one-room schools. Mr. A. P. Akely, the present efficient County Superintendent of Schools, said recently that in 1953 there were only six one-room school houses in Potter County, and that in the following year there would not be more than two, perhaps only one. During the past twenty years a number of rural school houses have been sold to non-residents and to residents, for hunting lodges. They are carefully taken down and rebuilt on new locations.

There were select schools in Potter County before school houses were built. Potter County's first school dates back 139 years. In the winter of 1816 and 1817, Harley Knickerbocker taught a select school by subscription on Ayers Hill in Sweden township, the first school in the county. It continued for three months and was attended by about a dozen pupils. Not long after this, Israel Merrick taught a similar school about half a mile east of Lymansville
and later one in Coudersport. In 1826, Miss Delila Kibbe taught a small class of paying pupils in a barn on the Truman Stevens farm in Bingham township.

The early subscription schools, with few exceptions, were taught by schoolmasters. The branches taught were reading, writing, spelling and arithmetic. With few exceptions, punishment was inflicted with the rod. It is recorded in the J. H. Beers *History of Potter County* that in the winter of 1842-43, F. A. Allen taught a school on Crandall Hill. When examined for a teacher's certificate he was only required to make a pen from a goose quill, to write with it, and sign his name.

There are no positive records of the date of the building of the first school house in Potter County, but tradition says that it was erected on the old State Road in Bingham township between North Bingham and Genesee. The date given is between 1826 and 1830. As sawmills had preceded the need for school building, lumber was used in their construction. The only log school house of which there is any record was built in the East Fork district at an early date and abandoned in the 1880's. Potter County's one-room school houses were not all painted red. For more than sixty years school houses have been painted either white or a light color.

Among the ambitious young teachers the writer met at the Institute at Ulysses and came to count as a friend, was Otis A. Kilbourne of Hector Township, who later served for ten years as Superintendent of Schools for Potter County. The two young men planned to attend Edinboro State Normal School, then under the direction of Professor J. A. Cooper, one of the great educators of the state. Mr. Kilbourne intended to follow teaching and the writer to prepare for entrance to, and work his way through, a medical school.

The two friends were to leave for Edinboro on a Monday morning, but plans were changed by an unexpected letter received on Saturday night. It contained the acceptance of an offer the writer had made for a defunct newspaper plant at Shinglehouse. So, instead of going to Edinboro with his friend on that fateful Monday, he journeyed to Shinglehouse, then five miles from a railroad, there to assume the duties of a country editor, and in time forget a boyhood ambition to become a member of the medical profession.
One of the textbooks the writer took with him from the Brownlee School to Shinglehouse when he began publication of the Sharon Leader, later renamed the Oswayo Valley Mail, was a copy of Dr. Albert W. Raub's Normal Fifth Reader, a volume prized for its choice selections of prose and verse. This book was loaned to a member of the senior class of the school in Shinglehouse. The borrower graduated, taught school, married, and moved away, but failed to return the book. Years passed and the incident was forgotten by the writer. Imagine his surprise, more than fifty years later, when the borrower's daughter, living in New Jersey, returned the book.

"Just before mother passed away," the daughter said, "she asked me to deliver the Fifth Reader to you and to say that she had planned many times to do so, but for some reason never did. 'Do not worry about it,' my mother said. 'He will understand and forgive me for the long delay.'"

The long slumbering Freeman Run Valley was awakened in 1887 by the sharp blasts of locomotive whistles which echoed and re-echoed among the surrounding hills, announcing the invasion of the dark woods by the Goodyear Lumber Company's railroad and the erection of giant sawmills. The Brownlee School House was abandoned for school purposes in 1892 and the pupils transferred to the township school at Costello. The building and site were purchased by Thomas Brownlee, who owned an adjoining farm. The little red school house was carried away and wrecked by the great flood that swept down the Freeman Run Valley on Saturday, September 11, 1911, following the bursting of a dam at the Bayliss Paper Mill in the narrow valley above Austin. Eighty-eight persons lost their lives in the flood waters, and the property loss was enormous. The wall of water rolled down the valley with the speed of a race horse, leaving a wide path of destruction.

The months spent as a teacher at the Brownlee School were busy and happy ones, and remain a pleasant memory. As this final sentence is written, the little red school house seems very far away.