



The Last Leaf

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Before the Singing Ended

IN QUITMAN COUNTY, the school building was only a few years old and the teachers were not yet finished with celebrating its completion. One of the most common means of expressing their appreciation for the new building was to promote singing in the first thru seventh grade classrooms. As a new student I was too young to question the practice, I just enjoyed it along with the other students. Years later I grew to suspect that the singing was begun by the young teachers, but was such a hit with the parents that it became a tradition and lasted long after my transfer to another school almost six years later.

It was common to begin the class each day by singing. Solo performances were encouraged and soon no student was embarrassed to stand before the class and sing. Aside from raising the confidence level of the entire class, those few minutes of singing helped to overcome the fear that often plagued new students. Teachers would encourage the most introverted class members to stand before the group and to lead the singing. This is what drew me out of a shell of shyness during my first year of school.

Shortly after I began the second grade, our teacher, Miss Balkcom, decided to produce an operetta. It was entitled "Little Red Riding Hood" and every student in the first and second grades would have a singing part. Strangely enough, I was given the role of the wicked wolf. I think it may have been because I didn't mind singing loudly. There were no sound systems or amplifiers in those days and a tiny voice did not reach even the third row of seats in the big auditorium.

We practiced for weeks; there were three acts with several scenes and musical numbers in each act. There were almost sixty students in the two grades, so the two teachers had their hands full in coordinating rehearsals as well as keeping up the regular classwork every day. Of course, parents were urged to help in making at least one costume; sometimes more. It was a

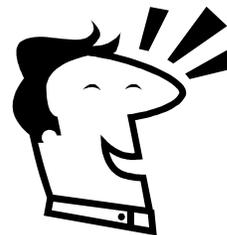
huge project for a small school. I have no doubt that our teachers often asked themselves why a production of such complexity was ever begun. But they persisted and eventually the big night arrived.

As usual, the school auditorium was filled to overflowing whenever a student activity was scheduled. There were no empty spaces when the curtain went up, and backstage was equally packed with kids in colorful costumes. I could not see well thru the eyes of my wolfhead mask, but my determination to sing well and loudly was apparent as I belted out the opening song. I remember seeing the look of approval on the face of my teacher, who was the pianist. That same look of approval brought out the best in every student that night, singing and dancing as spirited as any professional players.

Needless to say, our operetta was the subject of conversation for months afterward; parents making it a point to express their appreciation to the two teachers who had pulled off such an amazing accomplishment. To the first and second graders, it was old hat in a week, as we went back to our daily routine of learning and singing new songs every morning.

I moved away from my first school during the spring of 1942. My new school was much larger and singing was limited to the twice-weekly classes of our music teacher. It was about this time that my voice began to change, and the squeaks and squawks that I could not control made singing an ordeal unless it was at the weekly assembly where such discord would not be noticed among the large student body. I must admit that my adolescent voice never was to equal that of my younger years, and for the most part, my singing in school ended.

I wonder if those teachers, Miss Balkcom and Mrs. Griffin, ever realized what effect they had on their students by teaching them to sing. The self-esteem and confidence that each class had gained was a priceless asset that added much to the lives of their students. While we are deep into today's technology and advances in teaching methods, there is still an undeniable value in the more simple approach of earlier years. #



Life is a song; sing it well, sing it long.