

The Pleasant Valley School: A Living History Project

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“I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”¹ So started each morning session of the Pleasant Valley School (grades 1-8), District 15, in 1899.



David Buckner, November 2009

A docent goes over the day's lessons with 4th grade students from the Jenks Public School District, in Oklahoma.

The Pleasant Valley School, located in Stillwater, Oklahoma, is now a living history project where contemporary 4th grade students throughout Oklahoma have the opportunity to spend a day as students did in a turn of the century one-room schoolhouse, complete with coal heating, ink wells, and *McGuffey Readers*. It is here, in this one-room school that students say a Pledge of Allegiance to start the day that differs from the one with which they are familiar.

Established in 1899 and open until 1941, the Pleasant Valley School was typical of most one-room schools where the teacher arrived early, started a fire in the coal stove, and provided sound edu-

cational principles and subjects for grades 1-8. This one-room school was built with wooden floors stained brown, and plaster walls painted green. Furnishings included a teacher's desk, benches for instruction and recitation, double desks, and a single bookcase containing the entire school library. The number of students ranged from a handful up to 50—age 5 through 20. State accredited, the Pleasant Valley School was open for nine months of the year, and teachers were usually high school graduates whose monthly salaries varied from less than \$50 in 1899 to \$100 in the 1940s. During the school's early years, teachers often lived with one of the families in the school district, and

either rode a horse or drove a buggy to the school each day.²

Slated for relocation or destruction in the 1980s, the one-room school was saved by concerned citizens, including former students who initiated a restoration project and ultimately restored the school as close to its original form as possible. In 1991, Pleasant Valley School received both state and national recognition when it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places and received the State Historic Preservation Officer's Citation of Merit.³ As part of its charter, the Pleasant Valley School Foundation developed a professional relationship with Oklahoma State University, where faculty members from the College of Education maintain a continuous and active seat on the school's Board of Trustees. Shortly after its restoration, Pleasant Valley School District 15 opened its doors to 4th graders throughout Oklahoma, where docents devote their time to teaching today's students what school life was like on the prairie in turn of the twentieth-century Territorial Oklahoma. During the last 20 years of operation, in accordance with Oklahoma Priority Academic Student Skills, this living history project has hosted more than 22,000 students from 22 school districts, six private schools, five home schools, and one middle school.⁴

Each morning a group of students, often dressed in appropriate period clothing, arrives at the school. They are greeted by their teacher of the day, who rings a bell to call them into the building. The students place their lunch buckets



Students prepare for a sack race.

and coats on the shelf provided and enter the classroom where they are introduced to a school room quite different from the one they normally attend. Boys and girls sit on different sides of the classroom, separated by a potbellied coal burning stove which was used both to heat the school and as a heat source for the teacher and students to make hot soup for lunch. The writing materials for the day, including a workbook, a slate board, and chalk, rest on each of the desks.

Class begins with the Pledge of Allegiance as recited in 1889, and the singing of “America.” The students then open their *McGuffey* readers, practice penmanship on their slate boards, study arithmetic, and write their lessons using quill pens and inkwells. Repetition was a key method of the time to help students understand new concepts, and so visiting students write their vocabulary words over and over until they finally get them right.

Ed Glover, a long-time member of the Pleasant Valley School Foundation board who attended the Pleasant Valley School as a child, tells about his early school days when his teacher, Mrs. Virginia Lee, led the class in reciting the Lord’s Prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance. Each

student then participated in recitations, with the students answering the teacher’s questions about the previous day’s lessons. Recitations lasted from 9:00AM to 10:00AM, at which point students were allowed to go outside and play games such as “Annie, Annie Over,” rolling a metal hoop with a stick of wood, and gunny sack races.

The Pleasant Valley School was also at the center of many community activities. Emma Petty, who attended between 1931 and 1940, recounted that church services and community clubs, including Endeavor and Literary, were held after hours in the school building. Carrie Jacob Shirley, a student in the 1930s, tells of pie and box suppers where the girls would prepare special pies and box lunches for the boys to buy. Ms. Shirley recalled that politicians attended the suppers during election years, where they could be counted upon to buy many of the pies and box lunches in a very public display of community support.

Monthly spelling bees and math matches were held on Fridays, and while these activities were fun for the students, nothing else could compete with the annual Christmas program during which all of the students sang songs, recited poetry, and presented a Christmas play.

After the Christmas program, sleigh bells would peal outside, and Santa Claus made his entrance. Each student received a small sack containing one apple, one orange, some hard ribbon candy, an English walnut, and one or two large pecans: Christmas treasures every one.

The Pleasant Valley School living history project stands as a historical marker for past, present, and future students within the state of Oklahoma. It provides 4th grade students with a face-to-face representation of school life during Oklahoma’s territorial and early state history, and will continue to do so for years to come. 📖

Notes

1. The Pledge of Allegiance, 1892, Historic Documents, www.ushistory.org/documents/pledge.htm
2. Pleasant Valley School Foundation, Inc., *Pleasant Valley School District #15* (1999), Stillwater, Oklahoma.
3. Ibid.
4. Oklahoma State Department of Education. *Priority Academic Student Skills Grades 1-5*(Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Printing Services, 2005).

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