Fiddletown Schoolhouse Memories

By Elaine Zorbas

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Fiddletown’s one-room schoolhouse was constructed in 1862, replacing the first schoolhouse that had been built in the mid-1850s. When the town’s name was changed to Oleta in 1878, Fiddletown School became known as Oleta School—and former students still refer to it by that name. Generations of some families attended the school. Brothers and sisters sat together in the single classroom, which covered grades one through eight. For 93 years, children were educated in this modest schoolhouse. In 1955 the school was closed when area schools were consolidated and relocated to Plymouth.

The Fiddletown Schoolhouse, owned by the Fiddletown Preservation Society, is in need of continuing preservation. In commemoration of its 150th anniversary, several former students shared their memories. This booklet summarizes and reproduces accounts of what it was like to attend Fiddletown or Oleta School. Unfortunately, there was not ample time to interview all the former students who still live in Amador County. Hopefully, this account encapsulates their experiences.

School Days: In The Classroom

The bell tolled at 8:30 and was heard throughout Fiddletown. Students had a half hour to get to class. Most kids walked to school though rain, sleet, snow, and heat. School hours were from 9:00-4:00. The first four grades got out at 2:00.

Students entered by the front door and faced the back of the room where there was a raised area for the teacher and her desk. Wood was stored in a small back area behind the classroom; the wood burning stove was on the left side of the room as you enter.

Class sizes could vary from 10 children to 40. After WWII, the student enrollment increased sufficiently to divide the classroom with a temporary horizontal partition [1946-1953], each side taught by a different teacher.

Students had a 15 minute recess to play outside. For lunch hour at 12:00 several children brought their lunch pail and ate on the porch or on the hill above the schoolhouse. Others who lived near by went home for lunch.

We had Washington's picture on one side of the blackboard and Lincoln's on the other. The ABC’s and first ten numbers were written over the blackboard. We had a world map; it had a weight to pull it up so you could bring it down and look at the map. We just thought it was the greatest thing in the world.

Dianne Deaver Frutos [1933/34-1940/41]

When there would be a funeral [cemetery directly across from the schoolhouse], we had to stay in until the funeral was over. Then we would play games for recess because we couldn't go out if there was a funeral. And believe me, it was quite often. We'd go, "Oh no, another funeral!"

Colleen Fine Randolph [1946/47-1950/51]
A classroom had a span of ages and grades. Because of farm and other chores needed by a family, in the early days some children missed school and didn’t graduate from 8th grade until they were teenagers. Not only were brothers and sisters in the same room, but some teachers had their own children as students.

The grades ahead of you, the younger kids would kind of listen to the other kids so they would learn more things. Actually it is a kind of learning process. You advanced all the time…If someone was having problems, if you finished your work, why you would help some of the little ones who didn’t understand. So everybody tried to help everybody else—that was nice.

Dianne Deaver Frutos [1933/34-1940/41]

We helped each other. If there was a student that was having a hard time, we would help him. We would go help him with whatever he was doing, with reading and all kinds of school activities. It was rewarding to me to be able to help.

Esther Murray Woolfolk [1943/44-1946-47]

My mother’s theory was that the older students are always reviewing as they hear the young ones, and the young ones are constantly being introduced to new material that a lot of them are able to pick up on.

Mary Cowan

Fiddletown was a different place. We played in the street in the evenings from [when we were] little, little kids to adults. We all played together. We played “hide and seek,” “kick the can.” We played various games. And we were like a family—all of us. It wasn’t just one or two that was left out or one or two that were special, we were all just a family of kids, even though none of us were related.

Esther Murray Woolfolk [1943/44-1946-47]

Everybody got along. Everybody knew everybody. Everybody who went to school, their parents went to school together. Everybody knew everybody in the county….

Everybody got along all the way through, from the 1st grade to the 8th grade. If you were getting picked on in the 3rd grade, you had a friend who was a couple of years older, [and] they straightened...
them out. Everybody was together. We didn’t have bullying…
everybody played together. Everybody saw each other every day.

Mitch Lubenko [1952/53-1954]

I wanted to go to school so bad when I was five that Mary Ann
Voloder or Laura [Whaley] took me to school to visit. I wanted to stay
so…bad. That didn’t happen.

I knew all the kids from the area—it was kind of a big family-
type thing. We all intermingled.

Peggy Germolis Denton [1952/53-1954]

Teachers Remembered

Teachers often boarded with local families
or lived in town and walked to school,
just like the kids. Many former students
recall Julia Farnham, who taught from
1944-1950, more years than any other
teacher in the recorded history of the
school.

Miss Farnham was a very good teacher, but
she was ornery….It was her birthday and I
knew it. So my mom baked her a cake. Nancy
[Schoonover] and I, and Delores [Glavich],
we walked down to get the cake and my
mother drives us [back] up. And we walk
in with the cake, and she [Mrs. Farnham]
says, “You’re late. Now get in the corner.” I thought that was mean!
Finally she said, “OK, we’ll cut it up and pass it around.” She passes
it around to all of the kids. My mom says, “Julia, I think it is kind of
mean of you to make them stand in the corner. The only reason they
are late is because of your birthday cake!”

Colleen Fine Randolph [1946/47-1950/51]

Elizabeth Deaver: She was firm but not rigid. She knew when to
laugh, she was very patient, amazingly patient. She just loved being in
the classroom with the students.

Mary Cowan

We had some wonderful teachers and they cared about us. They did
not just go to school to get their paycheck; they cared about us. And
we knew it. We just loved some of them; we liked the others…Daisy E.
Duvall [1943-44] was wonderful. She was so sweet. I could not get
fractions—and the teacher that I had at the time—she was smart,
she knew how—but she couldn’t put it across to me. So Mama and
Daddy took me to Placerville. Miss Duvall had gone to Placerville
School, and in nothing flat, I understood. She just made it so I
understood and I got it. That was wonderful because I needed help.

Esther Murray Woolfolk [1943/44-1946-47]

My favorite teacher was Alice DeCartret [1940-1942]. She was in
the post office when I came to get the mail and Mrs. Schoonover said,
“Oh, Dianne wants to be a nurse.” Well, she [Miss DeCartret] was a
nurse. And so she never forgot that, and we were friends until she died.

Dianne Deaver Frutos [1933/34-1940/41]
Reading Writing And Arithmetic

Teachers at Fiddletown School taught the basics plus history, grammar, geography.

She [Mrs. Farnham] had the books and she let us take them home. We could do our homework and bring them back for her to grade. I wasn’t a very good speller and I’m still not. If we had a spelling bee, if I missed a word, she would write it down. Then on the weekend, I had to write the word ten times or so—and then I had to take it back! If I had anything to do on the weekend, I had to be sure that I wrote the word as many times as she said. So I learned to spell, and I was a pretty good reader. When we came in from lunch, she’d read us a story. I got all the different stories like “Heidi”; she’d continue everyday until she finished the book.

Coleen Farnham Randolph [1946/47-1950/51]

I liked geography, because there was always something new about a new area.

Dianne Deaver Frutos [1933/34-1940/41]

The teacher would stand up and give the spelling. She would give words 1st grade through 8th, one after the other. I used to write them down, my own words and the other words too, because I liked spelling.

Esther Murray Woolfolk [1943/44-1946-47]

Math was easy for me; spelling would give me a pain. [The teacher] would work with each grade. There was a blackboard. The most math was in 7th and 8th grade; math then was like you get in college now. Some of it was very tough.

George Woolfolk [1937/38-1944/45]

I can remember reciting the alphabet backwards—for somebody. The two teachers looked at each other and said, “How did she do that?” Because the alphabet was up in the other room on top of the blackboard. Mr. Neal [1952-53] knew that he could do it, but I caught him looking up [at the blackboard]. He cheated, and I didn’t have to cheat!

Peggy Germolis Denton [1952/53-1954]

Water And Utilities

Fiddletown School had no running water. Water was fetched from wells on Main Street and carried up the hill in big milk containers from the local dairy.

Me and Marvin [Vose] would get on either side of the five gallon milk can and we’d carry it from the corner up to the schoolhouse. It wasn’t too heavy with two guys carrying the one can. We’d stop and take a rest, then go, stop and go. I got $5.00 a month for carrying water. I saved up and bought a bicycle.…

In the morning, we had to build the fires [for the wood stove], and sweep the room after school. The room was kept nice and warm in winter.

Delbert Glavich [1934/35-1942/43]

There were two outhouses, one for boys and one for girls. Boys had to go way up on the hill—just had a two-seater. The girls had five or six seats, and were closer to the school. It worked—that is the way it was.

George Woolfolk [1937/38-1944/45]

We tipped the girl’s toilet over a lot of times on Halloween.

Delbert Glavich [1934/35-1942/43]
Fun And Games

The empty lot adjoining the schoolhouse was a play area where the kids could go at recess and lunch to play marbles, baseball, and other games.

We had these rings at the end of the school yard, that you hold onto and you run. When you get going, you start flying. We played baseball all the time. We didn’t have basketball. All the boys built sleds and slid down the hill on the pine needles. Us girls wouldn’t do it. We would make pine needle houses, and they’d fly through our houses.

Coleen Fine Randolph [1946/47-1950/51]

We had a game with two sides—drew a line, get caught and you went in jail. It was fun. Girls and boys played together, same games, even kids of different ages. Whether you were a toddler or 8th grader, we played together. We helped each other. There was competition between the two sides in the game, but as soon as the game was over, the competition was over.

Esther Murray Woolfolk [1943/44-1946-47]

Girls were baseball players, they were hunters, fishermen. They were tomboys; there were very few who were just girls. That was the way of life. We had some girls who were better baseball players than the boys. [Girls always wore dresses.]

Mitch Lubenko [1952/53-1954]

Halloween, they cut logs, and we’d save all the papers and save pine cones & pine needles and dump that all in. And then on Halloween, we’d set it all on fire in the center of the playground. And after it all burned down to ashes, then we could roast our marshmallows. And they would have wash tubs and put water in it and we’d dunk for apples. They made all kinds of funny costumes.

Dianne Deaver Frutos [1933/34-1940/41]

We always had a party [for Christmas], and we put on a play and everyone sang songs, some read poetry. And then they danced, everybody brought food and then at midnight at the Oddfellows Hall we’d go down and have our dinner. And after dinner they picked up—three or four women would wash the dishes and the rest would go upstairs and dance. Sometimes you danced until three or five in the morning.

Dianne Deaver Frutos [1933/34-1940/41]

KIDS WILL BE KIDS: MISCHIEF AND DISCIPLINE

Discipline was not an issue. Pranks and mischief did occur, and some teachers ruled with an iron fist, reinforced by a ruler. Teachers and parents cooperated together to set standards of behavior.

If you got in trouble in school, you were in trouble when you got home. If you got in trouble for anything at school, you really didn’t...
Esther Murray Woolfolk [1943/44-1946-47]

We’d be late for school, me and Marvin [Vose]. Sometimes we were an hour late or so. They’d send us down to the Trustees. “Oh, you boys ought to know better than that!” and [they’d] let us go and we’d do it over again.

[Another time] we had skunks in the trap and put them under the schoolhouse and she [Miss DeCartret] had to let school out, it stunk so bad. They sent us to the Trustees and they just laughed at us “You guys know better than that. Don’t do it next time. Get out of here!”

Delbert Glavich [1934/35-1942/43]

I never got hit, but she [the teacher] would pop people on the head with a ruler. I think someone told her, “I think you can do the hand, but no more head.”

Coleen Fine Randolph [1946/47-1950/51]

If there was any trouble, the teachers took care of it or got to your parents and you didn’t want that. The teachers could spank you. They weren’t scared; they had permission from your parents. That was it! You knew what you could get away with. There was always people pulling jokes on people, everybody did that [a little mischief] in those days.

Mitch Lubenko [1952/53-1954]

When I think of Fiddletown School, I think of “Little House on the Prairie.” All the kids were in the same class. The little ones had their things. You are sitting right there. There is no way that you can sit there and not absorb, unless you completely plug your ears.

Peggy Germolis Denton [1952/53-1954]

If any one thinks we are in a wasteland just because we live in the rural areas—this isn’t true. There are wonderfully talented people—and many professional people come out of our one-room schools and may be all the better for having a well-rounded education. Being exposed to all the curriculum, all the different people, all the different ages—more like a family, as my mother used to say. In a one-room school, it’s more like a family, instead of being in just with your own age group only.

Mary Cowan

Value Of A One-Room School

I think you learned more. You heard what they heard. The next grade would be easier if you paid attention. The older you were, the more you could learn if you could retain. It was a good thing.

Mitch Lubenko [1952/53-1954]
There were other one-room schoolhouses in the vicinity that at one time accommodated children living on Fiddletown’s scattered farms and ranches: Gilmore School was located just east of Hale Road and Bridgeport School (also known as Evening Shade) stood at the end of Tyler Road. These schoolhouses are long gone.

The Fiddletown Preservation Society (FPS) came into being in 1964 over the issue of saving the Fiddletown Schoolhouse. Because the property had not been used as a school since 1955, the Oro Madre School District intended to put it up for sale. There was a possibility that the school would be demolished and turned into a parking lot. With strong interest from the FPS, the school district changed course and deeded the Fiddletown Schoolhouse and property to the new organization.

Starting in 1994, the Fiddletown Preservation Society prepares an annual Buffet Breakfast & Bake Sale to benefit the Schoolhouse Restoration Fund. This all-you-can-eat breakfast attracts people from the area and former students, friends, and families are reunited.

Over the years, many repairs have been made by dedicated community volunteers to address deterioration and renovate the interior. More improvements which require funding remain to be accomplished before the Schoolhouse can be reopened for public use.

Your donation to the Fiddletown Schoolhouse Restoration Fund will ensure that it continues to stand as reminder of the past and a community meeting place for the future.

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Teachers listed starting 1880, when Oleta was formed as a school district. The names and years are itemized below, starting with the 1900s.

- T.A. Bell 1900-01
- Vanne McLaughlin 1901-03
- Nellie Robeson 1903-04
- Margaret Schilling 1904-07
- Ethel Berry 1907-8
- Nettie L. Armstead 1908-9
- J.P. Confer 1909-10
- Inez Lawrence 1910-14
- Mary Billalon 1914-16
- Cora Brown 1917-1920
- Florence Maddox 1920-21
- Clara Benners 1921-22
- A.B. Simons 1922-23
- Catharine Northrop 1922-23
- Elizabeth Deaver 1923-26
- Florence Brown 1926-27
- Ethel Farnham 1927-28
- Helen Carr 1928-29
- Olive C. Holtz 1929-30
- Frances Otter 1930-31
- Evelyn Hartman 1931-32
- Doris M. Bryan 1932-33
- Anthony Noia 1933-36
- Dorothy Yager 1937-38
- Mayme Lubenko 1937-39
- Muriel Garrison 1939-40
- Alice DeCartret 1940-42
- Eva Bliss 1942-43
- Daisy Duvall 1943-44
- Julia Farnham 1944-50
- Eunice Goodall 1946-47
- Verl Pugmire 1947-48
- Mary Sacher 1948-49
- Eva Shackleton 1949-51
- Gladys Buck 1950-53
- Helen Vineyard 1951-52
- William Neal 1952-54
- Patricia Murphy 1954-55