

# One Room School Houses

*This really happened. I was asked to speak about literacy to a women's church group in a neighboring town last fall, and the events that took place that night left such an impression on me that I decided to write about them.*

**I**

never liked driving at night to a place I'd never been before, so I left with lots of time to spare. It was a beautiful night — September, harvest time, combines in full swing, and a big moon coming up.

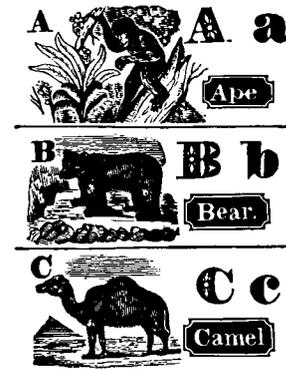
I arrived a little early, found my way to the basement of the eighty-year-old church, and sat quietly while the women finished the “new business” on their agenda. I watched and listened, trying to get a feel for the group, as they talked about the recent tornado in Edmonton and how they might be of help to those in need.

There were twelve women, the youngest perhaps forty-five, the oldest in her eighties. I noticed they were all wearing dresses and was grateful I had had the sense to wear one as well! The ladies seemed to lack a little humour, but they were involved and dedicated and I liked them immediately.

The business meeting was over. I was introduced and welcomed; the women were sitting in a semicircle with quiet expectancy.

I cheerfully started into my usual run-down of how the Cam-

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rose Adult Read and Write Program operates, talking about statistics and the problems of illiteracy in our society. They were listening, but I wasn't sure they were taking in what I was saying. Then one woman asked, “What exactly does illiterate mean?” It was a good question. I talked about “functional illiteracy,” those with less than a grade nine education who are unable to function to their full potential in our print-oriented society, and so on. I looked to the woman who had asked the question. She was staring at me with a cold look that I wasn't sure how to interpret. She asked where and how I had come up with that definition.

I thought quickly to myself that she was probably a retired school teacher and I was being challenged because of my youth and lack of experience. I was mentally mounting a defense, when she turned to the other women and asked how far they had gone in school. The answers came...grade nine, grade six, grade eight, grade nine, one after another. Only the youngest women had gone to grade eleven (with some grade twelve credits). The oldest of the group said that she had gone to a one room country school in that very town seventy-five years ago, and never for a

BY DEBORAH MARTIN

second thought of herself as illiterate. The others echoed their agreement. Not one of them felt they couldn't "function" in society. I was at a loss for words. They then went on to assure me that illiteracy may be a problem in Camrose, but certainly not in their community! Everyone was talking at once and I felt a sinking feeling in my stomach.

There was, however, one woman sitting to my left, who had been very quiet

founded. They had known this man for years and never imagined or guessed that he wasn't able to read or write. Shirley continued to cry and her friends crowded around her, offering her their concern and their support, openly, freely, as I imagined they had done for each other many times before.

I had a sudden urge to slip out the side door; I was an outsider. I took a deep breath and decided that no, this situation was too incredible to walk away from.

I asked everyone to sit down again. As the ladies gathered themselves together, I noticed an odd noise and realized that the water was dripping from the ceiling into old pots strategically placed at the corners of the basement where the ceiling leaked. It had started to rain. I wondered (especially being in a church) if it was God's way of providing some much needed comic relief!

We started to talk of illiteracy and how and why it happens. Shirley spoke of her husband's

haps they could be considered "functionally illiterate." My previous definition, they decided, was too general and unfair. I sat back, exhausted, and agreed.

It was 10:00 p.m. The rain had stopped and as I drove home, I watched the harvest moon slink through the clouds, and the grain elevators loom up in front of me one and two at a time, and I cried. I cried most of the way home. I realized I had learned more in one night than I had learned in a whole year as a Program Coordinator.

I thought about how universal the problem of illiteracy is, but also how personal it is. I thought how next time I'm asked to speak, I'll be a lot more careful with my definitions, prepared speeches and pat answers. I started to feel better as I neared home, safer and again secure. Just as I turned into my driveway and felt the warmth of the porch light greet me, I remembered the eighty-year-old woman saying, "I was born here, I went to school here, and raised my family here. I've lived a good life." It seemed so simple and uncomplicated and I really believed that she was happy.

Before I went inside, I leaned against the porch door, and wondered out loud: "Yes, but if you'd had the opportunity to further your education, would you have done things differently? Would you have travelled? Would your life have been the same? Could it have been happier? I felt a sadness at knowing I'd never know the answers to those questions, and neither would she.

I pushed open the door, took a last look at the moon, and quietly turned off the light.

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throughout all the discussion. Whenever I looked at her, she looked away. At one point I thought I saw her eyes well up with tears and then I looked away. I was desperately wondering how I was going to survive the mess I was in, when the tears got the better of her, and she openly started to cry. Her name was Shirley.

After an uncomfortable silence, Shirley began to tell the story of her husband of thirty-eight years who had always depended on her because he couldn't read the newspaper or fill out a deposit slip. The women in the group were dumb-

dismal few years at school: living far from the school, having to help on the farm, and never being able to catch up. Many of the ladies remembered now, that indeed, he hadn't gone much past grade five.

I described some of the students in my program and how unique, special, capable, and creative they each are. When discussion opened up again, the women decided together, that if a person feels handicapped or limited because their education (be it grade five or grade twelve) isn't serving them adequately, then per-