



The Story of the Garden at School House #18

As told by Bert Truxell to Boy Scout James Miller



The following is a 2010 email correspondence between Mr. Bert Truxell, one of the founders of the School House 18 Garden, and James Miller, a Boy Scout with Marshall Troop 177. James had requested information about the Garden at School House 18 for a report he was giving to complete the Citizenship in the Community merit badge.

James,

I don't have much time this morning but I thought I'd start my thoughts on the school and garden. I probably will do this in parts and send it along to you when time runs out on each piece. Very quickly I have to take the car up for service so I only have a few minutes which I hate to waste.

I mentioned to you that it is very difficult for me to think of the garden without thinking of the school. I devoted 18 years of my retirement life to both and it was a rewarding experience indeed. I'd like you for just a minute to use your imagination and see the school not as you see it today but as it was in 1887 when it was opened. Remember, that was only 22 years after the Civil War and the physical scars and psychological trauma of that conflict still pervaded the area. The school was located where you see it today but except for the farmhouse to the north there was little else in the area. Do you wonder how the kids got to school? There was no bus, no car that mommy drove. Kids had to come by horse drawn wagon or by the power of their legs. There was no cafeteria so they had to bring lunch. There was no source of water so they had to bring a water pail. There was no toilet facility as you know it today. Alas, there were two outhouses in the back of the property where the constructed wetland is today. There was one for the girls and one for the boys. Indeed, one of them was still there when I first viewed the school. It was in deplorable condition and the only thing we managed to save was the seat. We always hoped to rebuild the outhouses so kids like you could fully appreciate what the "old days" were like. But we never quite had the time. Sorry! (Part 1)

—BGT

James,

OK, where were we? Please excuse me if I ramble and please, please excuse the typos which prove that haste makes waste.

We were in the process of looking back 123 years when the bell in the tower rang for the first time. Oh, speaking of the bell there is a story about it. The bell that rang that first day did, as far as we know, ring every day that school was open. Although I get a wee bit ahead of the story, it was removed after the school closed in 1964. It sat in the "schoolyard" for some years and then disappeared. When interest in the school was revived there was a good deal of interest in retrieving or replacing the bell. In an effort to recapture the original bell we put out the word in the community that the school was going to be restored and that the missing bell was intrinsic to telling the story of the school. We urged those who had the missing bell to return it and made assurances that there was no desire for punitive action. Miracle of miracles - the bell was returned. We believe it is the original but we did not research it to make sure.

Back to the school. If you were to see the inside of the school you would note the presence of a large, old fashioned wood stove. It is not the original, but it is from the period surrounding the early school years. Oh, air conditioning. It was provided by opening the windows. Most of the glass panes in the windows are original and only those broken over the years have been replaced.

So, the school has stood for 123 years and stood silently as the history of the times passed before it. There was a major change in 1910 when the school was relegated to black children of the country after a new school was built for their white brethren. Then there was WWI followed by the Great Depression and WW2, the wars in Korea and Vietnam and the more recent conflicts abroad. Those years took a toll not just on our nation but on this little one room schoolhouse in rural Virginia. The school was closed in 1964 as the result of political upheaval. Squatters occupied it for a while and then it sat empty. The tin roof started to rust and leak and rain water damaged the floors. The foundation started to shift. Pigeons found the holes in the roof and made their home in the loft. They left droppings ankle deep. Mice chewed at everything that would serve a purpose. The decay was noted by interested citizens; there was talk of doing something to save the school. For reasons that are lost in time nothing happened. (Part 2) It's time for lunch. Tell your mom not to worry, I am not writing a book. It just seems that way.

—BGT

James,

Are you getting tired of my story yet? Are you even more sorry that you asked for help? Perhaps the story is only beginning. Well, my wife has reminded me that we have company arriving this evening and we'll be gone most of tomorrow so I have things to do (of course, she means other things). Nevertheless, I think I have time for a few thoughts. I did leave an unfinished thought in my last paper. What happened to the pigeon dung? Well, we made a metal shaft from the loft to the ground out behind the school. Two guys shoveled the stuff onto the shaft and two others tried to gather it at the bottom. I positively refuse to disclose what position I occupied other than to say that I can still hear the other two guys laughing.

We made overtures to those who had previously tried to develop interest in the school project and we were delighted with the results. Three groups agreed to co-sponsor the project: the Marshall Businessmen's Assn., Keep Fauquier Clean, and the Fauquier County Master Gardeners. It is not my intent to burden you with individual names, but it is well to bear in mind the type of people who made this project possible. They included teachers, politicians, doctors, lawyers, executives, geologists, musicians, historians, & merchants. I don't list any Indian Chiefs or candlestick makers but that is probably my faulty memory. The point is that it takes all kinds of people with all kinds of backgrounds to develop and sustain a project of this nature. They must be willing not only to plan but to work - and to work at a level that could be considered beneath their station. (Shoveling dung was not left to the masses). I must point out that the Fauquier County government did not abrogate its responsibilities in this project. They were keenly interested and provided funding for a new roof on the school. The restoration of the school and the development of the garden proceeded at essentially the same time but with different planning groups. There was some overlapping of personnel to ensure proper coordination & to satisfy dual interests. (Part 3)

—BGT

James,

I'm at the point where I'll start to focus on the garden which was the object of your query. It might be a couple of days before I can get back to you so look over what I have provided and let me know if you have any questions or if there are any areas that warrant elaboration. I am here to serve.

–BGT

James,

I didn't expect to get back to this project until today but I had a couple of free hours yesterday so I just about finished what was to be Part 4. Then - - - the computer "ate" everything I had written. I suppose this is like telling the teacher that the dog ate your homework. I write this to let you know that I have not forgotten. I'll try to recover my spirits (and my memory) over the weekend and finish this for you. I hope you do not have a due date.

–Mr. Truxell

James,

Here I go again. Let's see if we can finish this for you. By the way, you might add architect and engineer to that list of professions/occupations I provided earlier. Also, it's likely that I will put these thoughts into 2 e-mails since I'm a bit wary of another computer disaster if it gets too long.

I believe it was in the spring of 1991 (you were not born yet) when the Recycling Coordinator for Fauquier County asked a couple of Master Gardeners (MGs) to join her at the #18 School. She wanted to know if the grounds could be used to house a compost demonstration site for the public. It was a nice spring day and, as we rounded the curve on Route 55 the morning sun seemed to bounce off the chipped white paint on the school. When we entered the school grounds from the convenience site we were met by a debris field. Over the years, people had used the grounds as an unofficial dump when the convenience site was closed. It was piled high with such things as tires, construction leftovers, tree stumps, broken toilets, slabs of concrete and general trash. The scene of desolation was magnified by the school which looked like a wounded warrior waiting to fall.

And yet, there was a glimmer of hope. As we looked over the piles of junk the sun seemed to offer a glimmer of gold as it waved along a row of daffodils along the side of the school. Some soul, or souls, in bygone years, had sought to bring a semblance of delight, serenity, color and beauty to the school grounds. Their long forgotten voices whispered a call for a resurrection of their intentions. They had unknowingly provided a seed for a garden surrounding the school.

The seed was indeed planted, but how do you turn trash into a treasure? More plainly, how do you turn this trash strewn dump into a garden which brings delight to those who see it? The answer was, among other things, time, hard work, persistence and dedicated people.

Projects of this nature start with the dedicated people and they, of course, start with a plan. A group of four or five people agreed to meet up to twice a week to work on the plan which would change the grounds from a dump to a garden. Where does one start? (Part IA) James, I've filled the screen so I'll go to another e-mail)

—BGT

James. Continued.

Recognizing that the project would be long term, the planning group made a proposal that the Fauquier County Master Gardener Assn. (FCMGA) support the project with personnel and expertise.
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James,

As you can see I am not skilled at the computer and I somehow sent that last part unwittingly. I continue.

The proposal was approved and became the first long term project entered into by that organization. With long term personnel support assured, attention turned to clearing the school grounds of debris. The amount and weight of the junk on the site precluded using the pickup trucks available to the MGs. The county responded to this need by arranging for two dump trucks. The MGs held an all hands "workday" and managed to get all the junk onto the trucks and to the county dump. Once again mother earth could be seen and trod upon at the school site.

Clearing the grounds was, of course, a huge accomplishment. But, other objectives remained. There was no source of water on the property. How can you have a prospering garden without water? Conversely, the lay of the land produced too much water on parts of the site. Heavy rains caused "puddles" of 6 to 8 inches in several areas. The land would have to be drained and several spots elevated. We naturally write of things one at a time, but they are frequently done in concert. That was certainly the case here. The planning group continued to meet, continued to identify problems and requirements and continued to finalize plans for what a garden would look like.

There is the adage about not being able to get water out of a stone. The water for the garden might not have appeared out of a stone but its prospects appeared out of the blue. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) had issued a request for grant proposals for small projects making a positive impact on the environment and/or conservation/ A proposal was submitted for the garden project as a demonstration garden representing " A Garden With A Message" The proposal was accepted and the EPA awarded us \$4,995.00. Those funds allowed us to sink a well and purchase a shed to house garden equipment and tools.

While this was going on, the grounds were surveyed, property lines reestablished, trees inspected, poison ivy patches eradicated and drainage installed. Reconstructed soil was trucked in to fill low areas and raise areas designated for raised beds. The planning group was also busy determining the garden

layout. There would be a shade bed, an annual bed, a perennial bed, a compost area and a bed for plants with "wet feet"

(James, I've filled the screen again so I'll send this & continue on a new E-mail) (Part 4B)

–BGT

James,

Back again. This could be the last page - hang in there.

The interesting, if not magical, thing about gardens is that they change as well as renew. In this case, the garden plan changed even before implementation was even begun. The "wet feet" bed was programmed near the entry gate since that was a repository for natural water runoff. Alas, it was not to be. VDOT appeared one day and informed us that as a public facility the school grounds required a parking lot. The "wet feet" bed was scrapped and replaced with a plan for a small pond with circulating water moving over two small water falls. The pit for the pond was later dug by "trustees" supplied by the county.

A formal plan for the garden area was completed and ready for gradual implementation. Up to this point, significant progress had been made without expenditure of funds. But, it was obvious that a public garden could not be developed and maintained without a source of money. Persons associated with both the MGs and KFC (Keep Fauquier Clean) made a funding support request to the latter organization. The request was approved along with a commitment for continued fiscal support as long as funding was available.

So, a year after "the glimmer of hope" appeared the first plants were ever so carefully placed into the soils of "the garden with a message." Gardens are not unlike people in that they live, they grow and they change. There were many up and downs with the garden, many disappointments and even more frustrations. There were uncommon delays as the result of the constructed wetland project. There was unparalleled anger at the theft of a new tractor and other garden equipment. There was annoyance at the lack of rain and anxiety over too much rain. But all of these negatives pale in comparison to the unfettered sense of pride and accomplishment in resurrecting a "wounded warrior" and surrounding it with a parcel of peace and serenity.

So you ask, what happened to the daffodils that led to the seed for the garden? The very first action in what was to become the garden was to lovingly remove the daffodils from the sides of the school and just as lovingly replant them outside the fence along Rte. 622. They reappear each year to trumpet the arrival of spring and add warmth to the memory of those who planted them so long ago.

James, That is it kid. Any questions? If you send me your address I'll send you a pamphlet on #18 Schoolhouse. Again, my profound apology for my technical ineptitude.

–Mr. Truxell