

OUR NEIGHBORHOOD

Muncie Star 7/17/95

Recent comments in Our Neighborhood about Bethel School west of Muncie were of interest to Sarah Ann Myers Voyles of Alexandria.

Mentioned several weeks ago was a small embossed card, postcard size, of uncertain vintage, listing the students and teachers at the school, which served District 6 in Harrison Township.

The schoolhouse was located north of the community of Bethel, whose post office name was Stout because another Bethel existed elsewhere in Indiana. The post office was discontinued many decades ago, with the advent of rural free mail delivery throughout the nation.

Listed on the card was a sixth-year student named Stella Besser. Later Stella Myers, she was Sarah Ann Voyles's mother, born in 1887; she died in 1935. "Another student, Della Besser [Reed], 1885-1918, was my aunt," Voyles writes. "[She] died as a young mother during the flu epidemic of World War I, at Summitville."

She continued, "I have in my possession a similar card . . . for the 1894-95 year at Bethel School. My mother was in the second grade that year. She had written her name with Stout, Indiana, as the address. The teacher was J.M. Quick, the county superintendent was J.O. Lewellen and G.W. Boxell was trustee.

"My mother also kept a small folder made of black construction paper with four pictures pasted in it. On the front is a picture of the Bethel School in its glory days. At that time it was a two-story structure with a tower in the northeast corner of the building. A hand water pump is situated in the

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front school yard. The U.S. flag flies not from a flagpole but from a gable of the roof. Inside the folder are pictures of a man and woman. I presume they are the teachers you mentioned [in Our Neighborhood May 25], Howard Drumm and Pearl Newman. On the back is a group picture of pupils. I think I can distinguish my mother."

Sarah Ann Voyles says her maternal great-grandparents, Christian and Delilah Besser, and her grandparents, Albert and Ann Pitser Besser, lived on land purchased from the J.A. Quick family, about a mile north of Bethel School. Besser descendants still live there, five or six generations later, she says. Two generations of Bessers are buried in Bethel Cemetery.

She also tells of hearing about the Beech Grove school from her father, Petit B. Myers, who died in 1983 in his tenth decade. He entered first grade in Beech Grove in 1898 and the school was financed by subscription, the teacher being paid not from township funds but by individuals who lived in the area. His first teacher was Bell Tappan. The ruins of the brick schoolhouse, abandoned several decades ago, can be seen east of Interstate 69 north of Ind. 28.

Her letter mentions John O. Lewellen as county superintendent of schools. This was a post created in the late 19th century by Indiana law, and the individual supervised all of the schools operated by township trustees (as opposed to those operated by municipal school systems). This included the hundreds of one- and two-room country schools in the state until waves of consolidations eliminated them in the early years of the 20th century. After consolidations in the years 1900-1950, trustees still ran many of the schools, and there were county superintendents as late as the 1970s in some counties.

John O. Lewellen was a legend in his own time, a

businessman as well as an educator. After serving as school superintendent, he was president at the turn of the century of the Citizens National Life Insurance Association, a Muncie-based insurance company. He was also engaged in the practice of law, sold real estate and ran a lending business from an upstairs office on the northeast corner of Main and Walnut streets. His namesake grandson followed in the field of education, serving as swimming coach and professor of physical education at Ball State University before retirement. The younger Lewellen lives in Muncie.

The name of J.M. Quick, who was a teacher at Bethel 1894-95, aroused curiosity. Could this be the same J.M. Quick who later practiced medicine in Muncie or perhaps some kin? It would not be unusual for a man wishing to become a physician to have taught for a while in order to gain funds to attend medical school. Clay Adra Ball, a longtime Muncie physician through eight decades earlier in the 20th century and native of Monroe Township, taught in a country school before pursuing his medical education, and there have undoubtedly been others.

An 1890s biographical volume in the library of The Muncie Star tends to confirm this. It says Joseph A. Quick and his wife Mary E. Love Quick had four children: "Lizzie Josephine, deceased; John C., a physician in Muncie [and Muncie mayor for a four-year term in the 1920s], Nettie J., a teacher living at home; James M., a teacher of this county."

In 1893-94 the Muncie city directory shows Joseph Quick as a landowner in Harrison Township; the 1890 biography says he exchanged the Madison County farm of his parents, where he farmed for a year, in 1886 for 240 acres in Harrison Township, putting up an additional \$2,400. A

1899-1900 city directory shows J.M. Quick as a physician in Muncie with an office on Charles Street and "boarding" nearby, which might indicate he was then a young man new in the city. So the time would be right.

A 1915-16 Muncie city directory shows J.M. Quick still in a medical practice in downtown Muncie and the list of rural mail patrons in the same directory shows him and his wife Mary as owner of 160 acres in Harrison Township. That was probably the Quick family farm, less amounts sold Bessers and perhaps others. The original 240 acres was on both sides of Langdom Road (County Road 775-W) north of the small community of Bethel.

A remnant of the last Bethel School, built in 1898, still stands at the intersection with CR 500-N, on the southeast corner. Some parts have been removed, including the top floor, and the brick structure is now a residence.

Finally, a note about "subscription schools." they were not uncommon in the 19th century but were generally replaced by tax-supported schools statewide. An eighth-grade education was then the standard.

As rural populations dwindled because people were moving to cities and towns (in some cases so their kids could get more education, and the moves were made possible by the existence of better roads), some district schools were closed and students sent to nearby ones. And in some cases, people in a neighborhood might want their school reopened, and would be told in effect by the township trustee, "you can have the building if you'll provide the teacher." Thus in the days before early 20th century consolidations, there were a few subscription schools.

■ **Wiley W. (Bill) Spurgeon is a contributing writer to Our Neighborhood.**