

School Days Remembered By Gertrude Kenney Blais

I was born in 1919, the middle of three daughters of John and Gertrude (Jacobs) Kenney. We lived at 24 Oriole Street, which was the first of three houses my grandfather built on Oriole St. My grandfather, Charles J. Jacobs, ("Duke") was a contractor who built many houses in the area. In the early 1920's he purchased land along Oriole St. and Wren St. to build houses and he laid out Gertrude Rd., named for me. I don't remember much about my early childhood before attending school. Going to school in the twenties and thirties in West Roxbury was quite an adventure for me.

It was 1924 and Gertrude was ready for school! The nearest school to Oriole St. was the Richard Onley School on Hasting St. My older sister, Catherine, was then in the third grade and she was responsible to take my friend Virginia and me to school. We crossed Centre St. at Hasting St. where Police Station 17 was so that we would have a policeman to cross us. It was half-day session and our teacher was Miss. Flagg. I don't remember much about the room or our activities except for the big sandbox which we played around. I also remember taking class trips along Centre St. and stop by Mr. McKenna's Blacksmith Shop to watch him shoe the horses. It was located next to the Firehouse, which was another popular place to visit.

In the spring of 1924 my grandfather Jacobs took me to the orchards on Wren St. and asked me if I would like a school built there so I wouldn't have to walk so far? I told him I didn't think it was a good idea, as we wouldn't have the fruits to eat or the trees to climb. He didn't agree with me, so he purchased the land and then resold the land to the City of Boston to build the Randall G. Morris Elementary School.

I was now in the first grade at the Onley and Miss. Allen was my teacher. Miss. Allen lived on Wren St. with her sister, a French teacher at the RG Shaw School, and Miss. Meyhew who also taught at the Shaw School. My grandfather was determined that I would not have to walk that far to school so he rented to the city his first floor apartment at 70 Wren St. as a temporary school for the neighborhood first graders. We called it the "House School" and a very young teacher, Miss. Phee, was hired to teach us. The "new school" was still under construction and would not be ready for opening in the fall of 1926. This meant we had to go back to the Onley School for the second grade. As I recall I had Miss. Moller, a very nice teacher who reminded me of my grandmother because she always had "sore piggies".

My younger sister Charlotte was now in Kindergarten along with Virginia's brother Larry (we called him Sonny). Catherine would lead us on our walks back and forth twice a day in all types of weather. Sometimes when we arrived home for lunch we would have to change because we were soaking wet. In the winter, Mother would always have a hot lunch to warm us up for the return trip to school. Lunch was an hour and half to make sure we had enough time to make it back and forth to school.

The Morris School was finished in 1927 in time for us to start the third grade. Miss. Allen, our first grade teacher, transferred to the new school as our third grade teacher. I wondered how can she teach third grade when she is a first grade teacher? It worked out fine. I remember having Spelling Bees, which I disliked and even if I could spell the word I would deliberately misspell it so I could sit down. But, when it came to

Arithmetic I had no problems with giving the correct answer. When we were learning the multiplication tables I won many peppermint patties for getting the correct answer first. To this day I have trouble with spelling and can do numbers with no problem at all.

In the fourth grade we had Miss. Donahue. She was very young and pretty. It was in this grade that we were introduced to Sewing. We learned all the basics, basting, hemming, running stitch, backstitch, over-cast and embroidering. We made pink and white sewing bags using all the types of stitches we had learned. This bag was to be used for the next two years to hold all our sewing equipment. We also had a music teacher once a week that taught us how to make “pear shaped tones”, we didn’t sound very good but it was fun. And once a week we had a visiting art instructor.

We always had before schoolwork, mostly practicing our penmanship. The Palmer Method was taught and some of us earned pins for completing the penmanship requirements. The day always began with the “Pledge Allegiance” and singing “America” followed by sit up exercises.

In spite of my concerns of loosing the orchards it was fun going to the Morris. We had all our neighborhood friends near by and you were home to lunch and after school in no time giving us more time to play. Speaking of playing, they had a playground in the schoolyard during the summer months. They had many activities for us such as swings, sandboxes, squash balls, dodge ball, jump rope and sometimes we did hand crafts. The instructors were young woman that were attending or graduated from Boston Teachers College and were awaiting teaching appointments.

My sister Charlotte, who was one year behind me went to the House School for the first grade and had Miss. Cassidy. Her second grade teacher at the Morris School was Miss. Catherine Linehan, her third grade teacher was Miss. Allen and she had Miss. Sullivan in the fourth grade. Miss. Sullivan would later teach the sixth grade and serve as principal.

The first Kindergarten teacher was Miss. Morris, the daughter of Randall George Morris for whom the school was named. They lived on Bellevue St. at the corner of Maxfield Street. Some of the other teachers that lived in our neighborhood were the second grade teacher Miss. Linehan, Miss. Allen, third grade teacher and Miss. Sullivan the fourth grade teacher, who went to Boston’s Girls High School with my mother.

The first custodian was Mr. Sullivan, from Summer St. West Roxbury. Because of the long walk he often spent winter nights at the school to make sure the coal furnace stayed on so the pipes wouldn’t freeze and the school would be warm. He also had to shovel the walkways and stairs before we arrived to school. Mr. Al Callahan, who lived at the corner of Park St. and Boxford Terr, replaced Mr. Sullivan. Boxford Terr. dead-ended in the back of the schoolyard so he had to walk around to the school. He must have gotten tired of this because he built a stairway up and over the fence.

Unfortunately the Morris only went to the fourth grade, which meant going back to the Onley. Miss. Reardon was the fifth grade teacher. The classrooms were larger with more pupils. Some of them had been in my kindergarten and first grade classes. The routine was about the same except now we had history, geography and science. We learned to sew on a sewing machine and made a skirt that we proudly wore. The school offered music lessons but I was already taking piano lessons from Mrs. Rollins. She taught piano at her house at 8 Rutledge St. She had many pupils after school and

Saturdays. We had recitals every year that our parents and other relatives attended. Mrs. Rollins formed a small orchestra to play for the residents of the Home for Aged Woman in Jamaica Plain. Mrs. Rollins had a large barn in back of the house where she would hold her annual Halloween Party for her students. I took lessons for about five years until I went to high school, sorry to say I can't play a note.

Miss. Martha Johnson, the principal of the Onley School, would stand in the middle of Hastings St. with a large bell that she would ring loudly when she wanted the children to cross the street. You didn't dare move until the bell rang.

In September of 1930 I began the sixth grade. Our teacher was Miss. Houghton, a pretty blond woman, who was very nice to her students. The big difference this year was classes were held in a portable classroom building in the schoolyard. This was necessary because of the increased number of students. The routine was pretty much the same as the year before except this year in sewing we made an apron for Cooking Classes that we would take next year at the R.G. Shaw School.

While the girls took sewing the boys had Manual Training where they learned to make different gadgets to bring home to their mothers. We continued to walk back and forth to school twice a day but now it took us longer because we stopped at friends house and played games along the way. If we had an extra penny we would go to Lane and Jacobs', it was located where Steve Slyn's is today, to buy a peppermint candy. If you got a pink peppermint then you received another one free. On a really hot day, and if you were lucky enough to have four cents, you could buy a pineapple sherbet cone at Morgan's' near Park St.

I graduated from the Richard Onley School in June 1931 and would be going to the Robert Gould Shaw School on Mt. Vernon St.. Life as I knew it was coming to an end. In the fall I would be going to "Junior High" where everything was different. I was one of the big kids now!

In September 1931 I began the seventh grade. I would leave home in the morning a little before eight o'clock and not return until about three o'clock. We took our lunch or on a very rare occasion bought lunch in the cafeteria. Another big change was we had a homeroom where attendance was taken, notes were turned in and any changes in the daily schedule were given. We changed classes for each subject when the bell rang and we would move quietly through the halls, you needed to be to your next class before the next bell.

We were able to pick our courses, College Course where you had a language such as Latin or French, Algebra and World History as well as all the other subjects. The General Course, which I took, you had no language, US History, cooking and sewing for the girls and trade shops for the boys and all the other courses every one had to take. We also had art, music and gym once a week.

I looked forward to sewing and cooking classes. Miss. Shane was the sewing teacher, she taught us how to make skirts, blouses, dresses and how to make embroidered pillows. Miss. Shane was instrumental in my sister Catherine becoming a sewing teacher when she suggested that she attend Roxbury Memorial School for Girls.

The cooking teachers were Miss. Cox, who lived on Corey St. and Miss. Trainor, who later married Mr. Corlis and they rented an apartment from my grandfather on Gertrude Rd.. The cooking classes were very enjoyable, we learned how to plan a meal,

buy the groceries, cook a meal, set a table, be a good hostess and of course to clean up afterwards. On a prearranged Friday we would serve the teachers a hot lunch for fifty cents. The class was broken into pairs and assigned a task. The girls that were doing the shopping would collect the money and then go down Centre St. to the different stores to buy the groceries. We would get fish from the fish store, I forget its name, Morris Fruits for fruits and vegetables, Morgan's for milk and cream and Kennedy's for butter and eggs. After finishing shopping we would have to go back to school figure out how much was spent and how much each meal cost. Any left over funds were returned to the kitty.

The other pairs of girls would take over from here and complete their task in time for the teachers to have a nice hot lunch. It was a wonderful training experience and I'm sure I continue to do many of these things to this day.

The girls had gym were we did calisthenics, gymnastics and played ball. The boys had Military Training were they learned drills and had to wear a uniform. Every so often they would have inspection and would be graded on their appearances. Once a year they had a School Boy Parade in-town Boston. The whole city would shut down to see hundreds of boys marching. There was a reviewing stand and each school would be graded on their appearance and performance. It was a day off for us, we would get all dressed up to watch them march. Some of the girls would meet their boyfriends after the activities to walk around the city.

When a holiday was approaching we would have an assembly, usually on Friday, where all the classes would gather in the auditorium. There was an opening prayer, the Pledge Allegiance, sing "America" or the "Stars Spangle Banner" and then a proclamation from the President or the Governor would be read. Sometimes we would have entertainment such as a glass blower, a magician, musician or a slide presentation on some subject. There was a school orchestra that played at some assemblies and once a year they performed for the students and parents. It was an enjoyable three years we grew a lot and had made many new friends from around West Roxbury.

Next came "High School"! Where should we go? What do you want to become? So many choices; Boston Latin, Girls Latin, English High, High School of Commerce, Mechanic Arts, Roxbury Memorial for Girls and all the different neighborhood High Schools. I chose Jamaica Plan High were I took the College Course. This was a co-ed school unlike many of the specialty schools.

It was now 1934, the nation was in the mitts of a depression and I was going to High School! The school was crowded and we had no assigned desks to keep our books so we had to carry them everywhere or go back to our lockers to drop off some and get others we needed. I now met students from other parts of the city who, like me, had to travel a distance to get to school. We would walk down to the corner of Belgrade Ave. and Centre St. where we would get a bus that went to Jamaica Plain by way of Centre Street. Because I took public transportation I didn't join many after school activities because I would get home to late. I was more interested in seeing my neighborhood friends and didn't do much socializing in school.

In order to get into college then you had to have a "B" average or better in all subjects. There were many students in the school that were "PG's", Post Graduates, who were trying to get a better grades in a subject that they had not done well enough in, kind of a prep school. They always sat up front and got the teachers attention and time.

After one year I decided I was not college bound, so I transferred to the commercial course, which consisted of typing, stenography and bookkeeping. Going to a larger school further away from home was not as enjoyable for me and I don't have many memories about the school. But lucky for me they were opening Roslindale High School in time for my senior year. If you lived in Roslindale or West Roxbury you had to transfer there unless your parent wrote a note or you were taking specialty courses such as the Agriculture course at JP High.

It was nice to get back to a smaller school with a friendlier atmosphere and not have to spend so much time traveling back and forth. It wasn't a new building it had been the Washington Irving Junior High before they built the new one on Cummins Highway, I have never understood why they did that.

The Headmaster was Ambrose B. Warren a very pleasant man who was always there to say "Good Morning" to us. The teachers, of course, had transferred from other schools in the system, most were local residents that wanted to be nearer to home. This made for a friendlier atmosphere that I liked.

After about the first week of classes the Business Machine class had to be closed. A sound proof ceiling had been installed to reduce the noise from the equipment, but apparently they didn't do such a good job because ceiling tiles began to fall. It was felt that the room was unsafe and had to be closed until the problem was corrected which took a while to complete so we had study class instead.

Many organizations and clubs were formed that first year with some success. The Baseball Team got off to a good start by betting the highly favored Latin School team 9 to 6; this set us up for a winning year.

The Class of '37 was now ready to move on. It was a small class of about 200 students. Many of us went on to higher education because there were few jobs to find and some went to work to help their families. There were signs that the Depression was slipping but still there were few jobs.

Many of us girls went to Boston Clerical School on Warren St. Roxbury. That was an experience for us! We had to take a streetcar to Forest Hills, then the "El" to Dudley St. and then another streetcar up Warren St. to the school. Because of over crowding they had double sessions to accommodate the many girls that were looking for skills to help them find good paying jobs.

Boston Clerical was a business school for young woman after high school. There were three courses Secretarial, Stenography and Bookkeeping. You had to get a 90% or better to move on to the next level. There were no time limits and you could take the test as often as you wanted. Many of the girls left because they were able to find employment. Many of the girls left to work for the government in Washington as the government began to gear up for the inevitable war. This is the beginning of woman leaving home for a career.

I stuck it out, it wasn't always easy, and graduated in 1941. I had a part time job summer and winter doing the Bookkeeping at my father's gas station, which was located where the Police Station is now located. I went to work at a stock firm located on Milk Street for six years and then went to work for a surgical supply company, it was here that I met my husband, Arthur, and we got married in 1950.

Before Roslindale High closed in 19?? I'm pleased to say my three daughters graduated from there. They went on to be teachers and an engineer as well as good wives and mothers. I'm sure their good formal public education helped.

In 1987 we had our fiftieth class reunion and in 1992 we had a fifty-fifth reunion. Both were successful and I enjoyed working on the committee. But we decided not to have a sixtieth reunion because the numbers were getting smaller and the medical problems were getting larger. We had some money left in the treasury so several of us went down to Roslindale House and donated the money. They were grateful and put it in their refreshment fund. We were given a tour of the building. They have done a wonderful job converting it to apartments for elderly, who knows we may end up there!

Much has changed since then, The Morris and Onley schools have been torn down to make way for housing. The Shaw closed this year to be replaced by the Lynden Charter School. JP High has been converted into condos. Roslindale High is now Roslindale House, housing for the elderly. Boston Clerical School moved to Brighton before it went out of existence. Though they may be gone they are not forgot for this "West Roxbury Girl".

NOTE: