

Interesting People—Burt McKeachie

A Country Dominic Who, Like Lincoln, Studied As He Walked, Carved For Himself a Tiny Kingdom Too Interesting and Intriguing to Desert for Other Fields.

A lanky Kentuckian took his Blackstone with him on his jaunts about the country side as community mailman and studied it in sunny corners of a snake fence. His people made him sixteenth president of the United States.

The late Senator Woodbridge N. Ferris, his other sources of information exhausted, took up the task of wading through an unabridged dictionary between chore times and acquired the ironic tongue which withered many of his contemporaries in the senate.

Senator Ferris's protegee, Burt McKeachie, carried his Bailey's arithmetic through the woods and fields of White Lake township stopping at convenient perches to figure on particularly knotty problems, and carved for himself a tiny kingdom as dominie of White Lake School

Teaches Where He Learned

Like the senator who was once his teacher, McKeachie sandwiched his studies between chore times and teaching. Like Ferris, McKeachie's keenest interest has always been in passing on the information so painfully acquired by the shortest methods.

Since 1909 this sturdy pedagogue has taught schools in White Lake Township, and nine years ago he found himself on the dais of White Lake School at which he had fearfully gazed 30 years before. Those years had seen changes in methods, equipment and attendance, but time had failed to alter the exterior of the old building or, according to its master, the children who answered the summons of its bell.

No accurate information is available as to when the building was erected. Old residents and historians believe the bell tower echoed to the marching feet of the "Boys in Blue" and that the building nestled safely against its protective hillsides during the lean days of the Civil war.

"When I first attended the school it was the same as now," declares McKeachie. "I sometimes wondered then if it would last out each succeeding term as it echoed to the thump of leather boots and bulged with continual jars and fights."

Following his graduation from the school, its present teacher attended high school at Holly and topped off his education with a course under Ferris, then President of the Institute.

Studied during walks

"When I came back here," relates McKeachie, "I figured it would be smart to try my beginner's hand away from home far enough so if I fell down on the job the crash wouldn't be so loud among neighbors and friends."

"My first school was situated near Lake Pontiac and I walked



BURT McKEACHIE.

back and forth to the place at which I boarded three and a half miles away. In the winter I got to work in time to stoke the sheet iron stove and thaw out the frost before the first children arrived.

"In those days, it was not uncommon to find 18-year-old 'men' among the students in the grades. They took delight in 'sticking' their instructors on catch problems and were casual in their attendance. In harvest and planting time I faced rows of empty seats.

"At first, walking those three and a half miles looked like a waste of good time. Finally I figured the time could be used to study the problems for the morrow. I carried my arithmetic book and forth and often stopped to puzzle out on paper some of the tougher questions. I believe I learned more that first year than I have in any year since."

Looking for new fields to conquer, McKeachie started shopping for a job about the township at the end of the first year. In his travels he met a young woman, then in the grades, who later became his wife. Mrs. McKeachie, before her marriage, also taught school in White Lake Township. At the time the average wage for country teachers in one room schoolhouses was \$35 a month. By boarding at home and helping his father with the chores, McKeachie saved money.

Today McKeachie is a power in his community. He is township clerk and is one of the most enthusiastic backers of the country schools among the 130 such teachers now scattered over Oakland County.

A Fine Influence

"I wish more people came in contact with Mr. McKeachie," com-

menting Deputy Commissioner of Schools A. G. Leonard. "He has qualities which exert powerful influences on his students. I have rarely seen a teacher so enthusiastic about his duties or more ready to conform with new standards and new ideas.

"At one time the country school teacher was ruler of his own kingdom. He had no outside influences to affect the easy flow of his life. He made his own rules and forced others to abide by them. When we established closed connections between this office and outlying townships, we found no one more eager to cooperate with us than Mr. McKeachie."

Clad in overalls, McKeachie spends most of his spare moments on his little farm a few rods from the schoolhouse. If anywhere in the county the spirit of the country dominie, rugged and direct, still lingers, it is in the home which McKeachie built with his own hands, close to the field of his endeavors.

He scoffs at the contention that country school children have fewer opportunities for advancement or lag behind their city cousins. Individuality, he declares, is the outstanding characteristic of his pupils and the term "country jockey" or "Hay shaker" is one of honor rather than opprobrium.

"Your city youth who prides himself on his polish, on his ability to avoid embarrassing mistakes, on his conformity with conventions, is fooling himself. He has merely failed to have opportunity to express himself. Out here, every student in school is a distinct personality. Naturally they will be prolific sources of original ideas, new thoughts, in the future. Minds work interesting.

Finds Work Interesting

"Outdoor air and healthy exercises are builders of both brain and muscle. I have students who walk more than three miles to school. They are healthy, happy, normal children, satisfied with simple things, for the most part quick to learn, and are able to govern themselves to a great extent. I could ask nothing better for my three children than education in a country school for the first eight grades. My oldest son, Wilbur, is now studying at our school in the fifth grade."

McKeachie has found teaching too interesting and intriguing an adventure to ever abandon his profession for other and more remunerative occupation. To him each day is crammed with fresh experiences, contacts with youth, and his greatest pride is in development of initiative among his students.

Youth must be led

"Youth must be led" comments this man who has devoted his life to the study of just such problems. "A teacher may cram knowledge into his pupils by compulsion but it doesn't stay there. A good teacher, such as I would like to be, creates ambition in his children, creates desire for education, arouses a spirit which carries them over the

rougher spots on the bewildering road to success." No one thinks of age when talking to McKeachie. He radiates the eternal spirit of youth, renewed perhaps, in his daily relations with the sturdy youths and barefooted girls who trek to and from the old gray school house nestled against the hill.