

Reminiscence: Andover Girls High School

The following interview was conducted with Dorothy Whitney Fenton of Laconia by Bertha Fenton, her sister-in-law, for the Andover Historical Society's on-going Oral History project. It was recently transcribed by Joanna Sumner.

Dorothy taught in Andover's first high school in 1931, at which time it was called Andover Girls High School. This interview takes place in Bertha Fenton's home on May 25, 1985.

If there is anyone out there with a computer and good typing skills who is inspired to help the Historical Society transcribe our growing library of interviews, we can provide a transcription machine and some good listening!

Call Susan Norris at 735-5369.

DF: I was Dorothy Whitney when I came here to Andover to teach school. I was born in Henniker, New Hampshire in 1910. My parents soon moved to Lakeport and in 1927 I graduated from Laconia High School and went from there to Keene. I was in the first class in Keene to receive a degree for four years of teacher preparation and that was during the depths of the Depression.

For a number of years I had been working as a waitress at Kennebunk, Maine, and I started out the summer with no job [for the fall] in sight. Just before time for the hotel to close on Labor Day, I had a call from Earl Freeze, su-

perintendent of schools for Bristol and Andover, asking for an interview.

My boss at the hotel was very agreeable to my interviewing Mr. Freeze in one of his private rooms. He came down to the beach to see me.

It seems that Proctor Academy had decided somewhat late that they would phase out girls as a part of the student body. They had decided that the girls who would be juniors and seniors could continue.

The town had thought at first that they would send the girls to Franklin, but that meant that they left on the early morning train and after school closed in the afternoon they would have to wait in Franklin for what they used to call The Peanut, which was the train that came in about 10:30 at night.

(Ella Carr explained once where they got the name The Peanut. It was from the old Latin expression for the next-to-the-last of anything: the "penult." The people in town called it The Peanut.)

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This did not please many of the parents. Then someone found out at the time school law in New Hampshire said that girls must be educated at home through the 10th grade. Which meant, if they didn't want the girls to go to Franklin, they had to find someplace in Andover for that little group of girls. So they decided that they would try to have

a two-year high school for girls.

[Added by Polly Richardson Richards – At Town Meeting the year the town needed to make the decision to build a high school, some gentleman got up and said that things should be left as they were. Ella Carr stood up and thumped her cane on the floor and said, "And what are you going to do with the girls? Drown them at birth like they do in China?" The vote passed.]

My interview was pretty exciting because I had not expected to have any kind of work at all and believe me I jumped at the chance to be the principal and the whole faculty for a two-year school. I helped close up the hotel dining room on Labor Day and that evening came to Andover because school was going to begin the next day.

Ella Carr was chairman of the school board, and because her brothers had not wanted her to live alone in that big house, she had decided she would board the new teacher. So I arrived at her house that evening, and she explained some of the local situation to me but not by half of what it was going to be involved.

The next morning when it was time for school to begin, Ella walked me around the corner to the old fire station. I thought I looked pretty nice for that walk because one of the last things I did before I left the beach was to buy a new outfit – white pleated skirt and a blouse with a blue bolero jacket – but I had quite a summer tan. I found out later that a number of people in the village said to Ella later, "Have you really hired a negro?"

When we got around the corner, there were several cars parked in the dooryard of the fire station. Parents had brought children to school. Ella unlocked the door, we went up the stairs followed by several girls and their fathers. Up on the second floor of the fire station was the fireman's club room. The pool table was still up. There were several card tables and a lot of folding chairs, a package of history books, some paper and some pencils, and a flag. And that was the new high school.

The fathers helped dismantle the pool table and lean it up against the wall and

opened up enough card tables for the girls who were there. There were 16 or 18 girls, I think, in the ninth and tenth grades. There was a desk which I was told I could use. The first time I opened the drawer, I discovered it was full of playing cards and other little goodies that the firemen had had for their club meetings.

How we ever had school for three or four days with history books and pencils and paper, I don't know. In a few days supplies began to come in.

That first year I taught English, two years of English really at the same time, and world history and algebra and a very nifty course called Art in Everyday Life, which the state board said could be used as an elective.

We were rather informal in those days. For example, everyone brought her lunch, but in the winter one of the famous past times was jumping out of the window into the snow bank, which of course was fun, but we came back rather soggy sometimes.

The fire truck and the hose were down stairs, and the toilet facilities were down stairs. By the way, there was no running water in the building, so we weren't terribly sanitary. But if there were a fire and the hose was spread out to dry afterward we had a lot of hopping to do over the wet hose to get to the toilet, but the girls always managed.

That year was interesting because one of the neighbors had a corn field that came right up to the edge of the building, and he hadn't harvested all the corn, and the pheasants came to eat the corn. So every day we had a lot of bird watching to do, which didn't do a bit of harm, but the pheasants came, six or eight of them at a time, right out beside the school house.

Of course the Currier children, who lived right across the street, were very interested in our coming and going. I remember once when Clyde Currier, I think, opened the door and shooed in their cat – a white-faced cat on which he had drawn facial features with somebody's lipstick. I remember, too, that Florence Mackenzie's dog use to be a regular attendant and very often slept under my desk through a whole session.

The activities that we had were very informal. We weren't very social. I was pretty naïve. I was rather young, too.

Ella Carr, of course, being very active politically, insisted that I should register to vote. So when I became 21, I went down to the Town Hall to register, and Ed Hamp and some other jokers in charge of the list of voters insisted that I had to prove that I could read and write.

They gave me the opening paragraph, I think, of the Declaration of Independence to prove that I could read. Of course, they knew that I should be able to, but I had to do it in front of a whole group of local politicians.

Watch for more of this interview in a future issue of the Beacon.



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