

A red pencil and its mark on memory

Boyd School, where I got my first eight years of formal education, served a small portion of the Canyon Springs Prairie in Weston County.

Miss J., county superintendent of schools, made sure that all rural schools had the necessary supplies.

She hauled textbooks, workbooks, pens, pencils, ink, erasers, crayons, paper, tablets, etc. — all furnished by the county — and delivered them within the first few days of school each September.

School always started the day after Labor Day.

Each student had a desk assigned, and it suited his or her physical size as nearly as possible. Large screws anchored the desks to long, smoothly planed boards.

Two rows of desks ran nearly the length of the one-room school — small desks to the front of the room and large desks to the back — situated so students and teacher could walk between the desks and the wall.

A wood-burning heater and its long stovepipe, which reached the ceiling-mounted chimney, occupied the center of the room.

Each desk served a triple purpose — a seat, a sloping work surface and open storage for books, workbooks, tablets, pencils, etc. The seat occupied by each student actually attached to the desk behind it.

A round hole in the upper right corner of the work surface held the inkwell. (Many naughty boys remember dipping the pig-tails of unsuspecting little girls into those inkwells hoping the “fun” would outweigh the punishment.)

Because of numerous spills and other accidents, inkwells usually remained empty. Pencils and pens neatly fit into a depression, slightly longer than a new pencil, near the upper edge of the work surface.

Teachers diligently encouraged thriftiness regarding school supplies, especially

writing tablets and pencils. Most children took unexplainable pride in owning a new pencil and/or a new tablet, a state of affairs somewhat at odds with the lessons of frugality.

For the first three years I attended school, we had only the Big Chief tablet and standard yellow

pencils. The Big Chief tablet sported a red cover and a design including the Big Chief name and an Indian chief's head with feathered war bonnet logo.

All tablets looked alike, and all pencils looked alike, so the appeal of getting a new one held little glory. That condition changed when tablet manufacturers introduced picture covers and pencil makers provided a choice of color.

The pencil sharpener, fastened securely to a corner of the teacher's desk, ground away many a pencil faster than necessary so a new one could replace it. More than one of my teachers during those eight years, after watching pencils needlessly reduced to shavings, did the sharpening when needed.

In November of my fourth-grade year, I had sharpened my yellow pencil so many times that little remained to provide a handhold even for my small hand.

When I brought that fact to the attention of the teacher, Miss P., she reached into one of the drawers of her desk and brought forth a handful of new pencils. She had taken them from a new pencil supply, and no yellow pencils appeared in her fist as she held it out to me saying I could have my pick of any color she offered.

My favorite color at that stage of my life

Silver Threads

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happened to be red, and she had one red pencil in her hand. What color to choose? A no-brainer for me.

She sharpened it and I proudly took it to my desk, where I admired it as I wrote in tablets, workbooks etc. I hurried in from recesses and lunch hour that day to reunite with it, and I made up my mind then and there that I

wouldn't ever chew on it or abuse it by sharpening too often.

Many students, myself included until the red one, had tooth marks all up and down those wooden pencils from nervously or absent-mindedly chewing on them.

I loved it, my prize possession. I bragged to my mother about having chosen a new red pencil. It defined me as a caring owner, a budding entrepreneur, a future wise and conservative businessman, and even Miss P. remarked at how well I took care of it (no tooth marks in its shiny red finish).

Time passed and a day came when I went to Miss P.'s desk to sharpen my pencil. It still measured a good 2 to 3 inches long, thus was still usable. I had no intention of trading it for a new one.

Miss P. thought otherwise and asked me (actually ordered me) to give it to her. I reluctantly and sadly placed it in her outstretched palm, and she put it in her middle desk drawer, reached into another drawer and presented another handful of new pencils.

A quick inspection revealed no new red one. I asked if she had a red one and, without looking, she said, “No.” I settled for second best and picked a purple one.

Life changed. The purple pencil did not

furnish the same degree of pride and satisfaction.

I couldn't get the red pencil out of my mind. One recess when the other students and Miss P. were playing games on the playground, I slipped into the schoolhouse and hurried to the teacher's desk. Sure enough, the beloved red pencil lay there in the middle drawer within my reach.

I never completed my reach because Miss P. suddenly appeared and angrily told me she had better never catch me in her desk again. Her speech ended with the admonishment that the pencil still belonged to the county, not me.

I never forgot the little red pencil.

Boyd School traditionally celebrated the last day of school each spring by having a picnic. All parents attended, and everyone participated in games before some of the fathers built a bonfire for roasting wieners and marshmallows.

The mothers opened the picnic baskets, produced casseroles, salads, desserts and other goodies and placed them on tables in the middle of the schoolyard.

While this activity proceeded, and when Miss P. busied herself in conversation with the grown-ups, I once again slipped into the schoolhouse and hurried to the teacher's desk.

The little red pencil still occupied the same position in the middle drawer. It quickly found its way into a pocket of my overalls, and no one seemed to notice me as I rejoined my classmates and others at the bonfire.

But I wonder, was I a thief? To ease my conscience, if I still had that little red pencil, I'd take it to the courthouse in Newcastle and return it to Weston County.

Silver Threads is a weekly column written by people who are involved with the Sheridan Senior Center.