

Becoming a Rural Schoolteacher in 1856

Clarinda Rhodes Hazelton wasn't famous or outstanding, but her story is the story of the average rural schoolteacher of nearly 150 years ago in St. Lawrence County. She began teaching in a house on State Highway 58 in the town of Fowler. The family who lived in the house wanted their children to be able to have an education, so offered half of their rectangle shaped house for a schoolroom and partitioned off a section for that purpose. In 2003 the property belongs to the Littebrant family, but the house burned a number of years ago.

In 1856 "Clarindy", as she was called, was a girl not quite sixteen, who had finished her formal schooling, and expected to work at home until she married, as was the custom in those days. She had attended the country school in her district where she had progressed through the readers, not grades. The "3R's" - readin', ritin', and 'rithmetic', naturally were the subjects taught, and these readers numbered about five. When a pupil had learned them all, he or she was finished school, as a rule. However, Mr. Allen Wight, who was also the School Commissioner, held a "Select School", which Clarinda attended at least one year to extend her education.



VanBuren and Clarinda Rhodes Hazelton in their older years.
Photo taken at J. K. Cunningham studio, Gouverneur, NY

Now, Mr. Hale, trustee of the district in which Clarinda Rhodes lived, was in search of a new teacher for the coming school year. One day in late summer when he came into Little York to do his "trading", he drove his horse and wagon on out to the Rhodes log cabin. (The log cabin was located at the foot of Popple Hill in the town of Fowler). When he had greeted the family, he approached the daughter with, "Clarindy, how would you like to teach school in our district this fall?" Well, Clarinda, being taken by surprise, assured him she wasn't qualified to teach, to which Mr. Hale replied, "I thought of that, so I stopped in to see Allen Wight and he said for you to come around to see him and he'd give you a test.

After having mulled it over in her mind, Clarinda started out walking one rainy day, to take the test from Allen Wight. As she trudged along getting wetter and muddier, the thought, "Who do I think I am that I can teach?" kept running through her mind, but soon she reached Mr. Wight's home and because it was rainy, he was in.

As a starter for the requirements, he handed her a feather and a penknife with which she was asked to make a pen - all teachers "worth their salt" had to be able to make their own pens - then he had her copy a paragraph, which he selected from a book. Next he gave her words to spell orally, asked her a few questions on history and geography; gave her some arithmetic examples to do and for the final test had her read a selection from one of the classics. These she passed with flying colors and he gave her a paper "certifying that Clarinda Rhodes was qualified to teach any rural school in his district".

Then came the beginning of school - the teacher of a century and a half ago had to contend with wood burning stoves in which she was expected to build the fire for which she had chopped the wood, unless it was in winter when the older boys would have extra time from farm work so could come to school, and they cut the wood. She also was faced with doing her own janitor work and keeping in line a large classroom with all age groups. Clarinda Rhodes was no exception, and, remember she was only a girl who had just turned sixteen the past summer.

The first year she had it relatively easy because she boarded with Mr. Hale and his family, but thereafter, following the accepted practice, she "boarded around", which meant living a week or more with each family according to the number of children they had in school. So, if a family had two school-aged children, she stayed two weeks, or if they had seven children, it meant seven weeks. As was so often true, those with the largest families had the dirtiest houses - but that was out of the hands of the teacher, she was expected to stay anyway.

The starting salary for a teacher in 1856 was \$.75 a week. In addition to this very generous offering, she was supposed to do whatever the lady of the house asked her to do after school and evenings - mend, knit, help with supper and dishes and mind the baby.

Of course, an experienced teacher commanded more remuneration, but no relenting of the "boarding around" custom. Clarinda Rhodes was advanced to \$1.50 a week during her six years of teaching rural school around the Fowler and Gouverneur area before she retired at age 22 years to marry Martin VanBuren Hazelton, raise a family and eventually become part of the past.

*****Hazel Bancroft Freeman told the foregoing article to her daughter-in-law in the 1960's as part of passing on family history. Clarinda Rhodes Hazelton was Mrs. Freeman's maternal grandmother and accounts for the first name "Hazel" given to the granddaughter. To those who knew Hazel B. Freeman personally, the wording of many of the phrases will seem familiar, as they were her way of speaking.

LaVerne H. Freeman (the daughter-in-law)

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