

Teaching Stories - Burgy High School

by Anne Sabo {Belck} Warner

I graduated from Burgy High in 1950. At that time there were 100 students in all four grades, 20 in my graduating class. It was a "regional school", with students (myself included) bussed in from Goshen, Chesterfield, Cummington and Haydenville. This small school gave me the background and skills I needed to get into college and hold my own with fellow students from much larger and more sophisticated high schools.

I graduated from Bates College in 1954, and became a teacher because I needed a job -- the worst of reasons. At New Britain High School in Connecticut I tried to teach inner-city kids *Silas Marner* and *The Idylls of the King* and reached the conclusion after one year that I had no idea what I was doing. So I decided that teaching was not for me.

Fast Forward: 1956. Once again I needed a job. The Baby Boomers were beginning to overload the school systems, and there was a shortage of teachers. Superintendent L.A. Merritt called and asked if I wanted to teach science at Burgy High. I protested that I was an English major. "That's O.K.," he said. "You've had some courses at Bates, and you'll catch up." I was flattered by his faith in me, and I had always loved science, so I said yes. Once again I had no idea what I was doing, but this was very different from New Britain. I had spent four years at Burgy High, as had my sisters before me. We knew everybody and everybody knew us. I would be teaching relatives, friends, and sometimes the youngest in a family whose oldest had gone to school with me. Add to that the teachers who had been my support system who were still teaching at Burgy High-- Frances Grinnell, Bob Branch, Earl Tonet, et al. (Sadly, two of my mentors - Anne Dunphy and Turk Foster- had passed away.)

There had been major changes in the six years since I had graduated. In 1950 the entire high school was housed on the second floor of the Helen E. James building. The rest of the building was occupied by the lower grades, including a room in the basement for some of the elementary students. (Haydenville, at the time, had its own elementary school.) One large room in the basement was the lunch room, where we brown-bagged it, usually proctored by Turk Foster. There was no gym (no Phys Ed); boys' basketball was in the Town Hall. In the early 50's class sizes were small, but by the time I started teaching the numbers were going up -- there were 36 students in my first General Science class. Fortunately the Anne T. Dunphy School had been built, which now housed the lower grades, and a cafeteria and gymnasium that could be used by all. Helen E. James still used the second floor for the high school, and the first floor was for the junior high.

The basement lunchroom became a study hall. But the old science lab where I was to teach, hadn't changed at all. There was still the lab bench with its row of porcelain kitchen sinks that backed up in tandem whenever there was a blockage (which was often). There was a large homemade fume hood in the corner, and cupboards along the wall crammed with a tangle of physics equipment and an amazing assortment of chemicals, many of them in old cardboard containers with rusty metal lids. Biology supplies were pitiful. As I often joked, one microscope and a pickled earthworm.

There was, of course, no money to buy anything. There was some strong sentiment against dissection since, rumor had it, that the previous teacher had had students bring in their own cats. I dismissed this as very unlikely, and assured everyone that we would be using preserved specimens. Eventually I was able to get a small budget for science supplies, but that first year my students decided to buy their own. Ralmon Black brought in a beaver that had died of natural causes, which was interesting close-up, but also smelled close-up, so it was turned down as a specimen. We had some live mascots--a frog that escaped the aquarium tank where we kept it and was never found--perhaps even now mummified in some crack or crevice in the refurbished building. One of my neighbors contributed a mother mouse and babies found in her linen closet. They lived in the old aquarium for a time until disaster struck--the mother ate the babies, and later escaped, also never to be found (although the papers in the bottom drawer of my desk were thoroughly shredded during a long weekend).

As for "catching up", I was very fortunate that Sputnik went shooting into space, and the drive was on to catch up with the Russians! The National Science Foundation was eager to train teachers like me in science and math. UMass became my second home; I spent summers, weekends, and weeknights building an academic background in science. I needed a Physics course - fast - and found a correspondence course offered by the University of California, the equivalent of today's online courses, but much, much slower. The second semester of Physics I took at UMass one summer, and learned some nuclear physics courtesy of PBS. In the meantime I was doing my best to teach General Science, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, and Advanced Biology. I was *the* science teacher, and no one could say "Oh, we didn't study that last year" because I was their teacher "last year". I have always been grateful for my students' tolerance that first couple of years. I was always treated with respect, and many times teacher and students learned together. A commentary on the students of that day-- my phone woke me out of a sound sleep one morning. It was Ann Graves: "Are you planning to come in this morning?" Holy cow! It was after 8:30 and my first class was at 8:45. I scrambled for clothes, brushed my teeth, and sped to the school. When I walked in, everyone in the class was seated, orderly,

with knowing smiles -- now they had something on me! (Note: they had even taken attendance!)

Because I was a "beginner" my students loved to play tricks on me. Each year the Advanced Biology class visited the Smith College greenhouses, with the stern warning not to touch, or pick anything. One July following a trip I finally cleaned out the large tote bag I always carried, and found plants growing in the bottom -- guess how they got there! Another time, when we were studying anatomy, I bemoaned the fact that we couldn't afford any specimens for dissection, and told the class about a teacher from Chicago that I had met at UMass who lived near a slaughterhouse and got free "spare parts" which he stored in his freezer. A couple of weeks later a large cardboard box appeared one morning on my desk. In it was a large cow's head. The donor was anonymous, although I had my suspicions. Volunteers from the class and I gathered after school with hammer, chisel and saw. None of us had imagined the work it took to penetrate the hard bony mass of a cow's skull. The faint of heart departed early, but two or three of my assistants stayed on, and we did indeed "harvest" the brain and eyeballs and stored them - of course- in formaldehyde. - The remains? Buried out by the stream that ran behind the school, where I assume they are to this day.

These were the days before OSHA and the EPA and I'd rather not think about how casually we used various chemicals- or- how they were stored -or- how old they were. All biology specimens were preserved in formaldehyde. We had obtained some government surplus Geiger counters, and the radioactive specimens that came with them were kept in my desk drawer. We had a little bottle of mercury, which we passed around so that everyone could observe its marvelous properties. One day the mercury barometer was knocked over and we chased mercury around on the old floor boards with medicine droppers. A lot was left in the cracks where it lurked for years before the floor was tiled. For the first few years we used Turk Foster's lab manuals, which encouraged us to use all kinds of nasty chemicals and make noxious gases, in or out of the fume hood (and who knew where the fumes went anyway?). Someone was watching over us, for disasters were rare. Bucky Sherk (accidentally?) exploded his hydrogen generator (no casualties), and someone's soap experiment erupted and left a very clean spot on the ceiling.

This was a time before kids were programmed 24/7, and hadn't been everywhere and seen everything. (No technology - only slide rules.) As a result, we had a very active Science Club, taking trips to a paper mill, a power plant, Howe Caverns, and hiking to a beaver dam, and up Briar Hill Road to the DAR State Forest in Goshen (I did that?) Most schools had Science Fairs, and though ours was not obligatory, anyone who entered was

entitled to a trip to the state fair at MIT, which gave me the privilege of riding both ways in a school bus with 40 or more exuberant teenagers (Memorable moments: Betty Sherk's prize-winning "Ecology of an Island", and Ricky Wittshirk's stuffed woodchuck.)

By 1960 student enrollment was still growing, another science teacher was added, and a new lab was built in half of the old auditorium on the first floor. The old lab became a classroom for business classes. My own classes underwent many changes as new texts and curricula became available nationwide-- BSCS (biology), PSSC (physics), and CHEM Study. These courses were developed by panels of experienced educators, and I found them to be innovative and exciting. I incorporated any or all of the new materials in my teaching as finances and time permitted. These were the original "hands on" science curricula, with excellent textbooks, supplementary reading and films, and laboratory exercises based on simple, readily available materials. When I returned to teaching in the early eighties these programs were all but forgotten, pushed aside and labeled "outdated". So the process started all over again, and new curricula are being written to this day.

I taught at Burgy High for ten years, including one year I took off to complete my master's degree in biology. It was a wonderful place to teach; its small size and place in time kept it from losing a small-town atmosphere. Teachers had the support of their administration and the community. Testing was what it should be - a tool to assess what students were learning and if instruction was on track. Of course, everything wasn't perfect. There was always a struggle to find money for books and supplies. Even though the 1960's was the decade of sexual freedom, sex education in the schools was still in the Dark Ages. In fact, the anatomy book I used came with an "optional" pamphlet on the subject. The academic program at Burgy High was strong -- it produced some Phi Beta Kappas, and three admissions to MIT. But the only alternative for students not suited for such a program was commercial courses, which also weren't for everyone. Dropping out of school was common, especially since there was no formal guidance program for many years. I also suspect that dropping out was the solution for some disciplinary problems. Of course, Burgy High ceased to exist in 1971, when the regional high school was built in Westhampton. But for those of us who went there, or taught there, there are many fond memories.