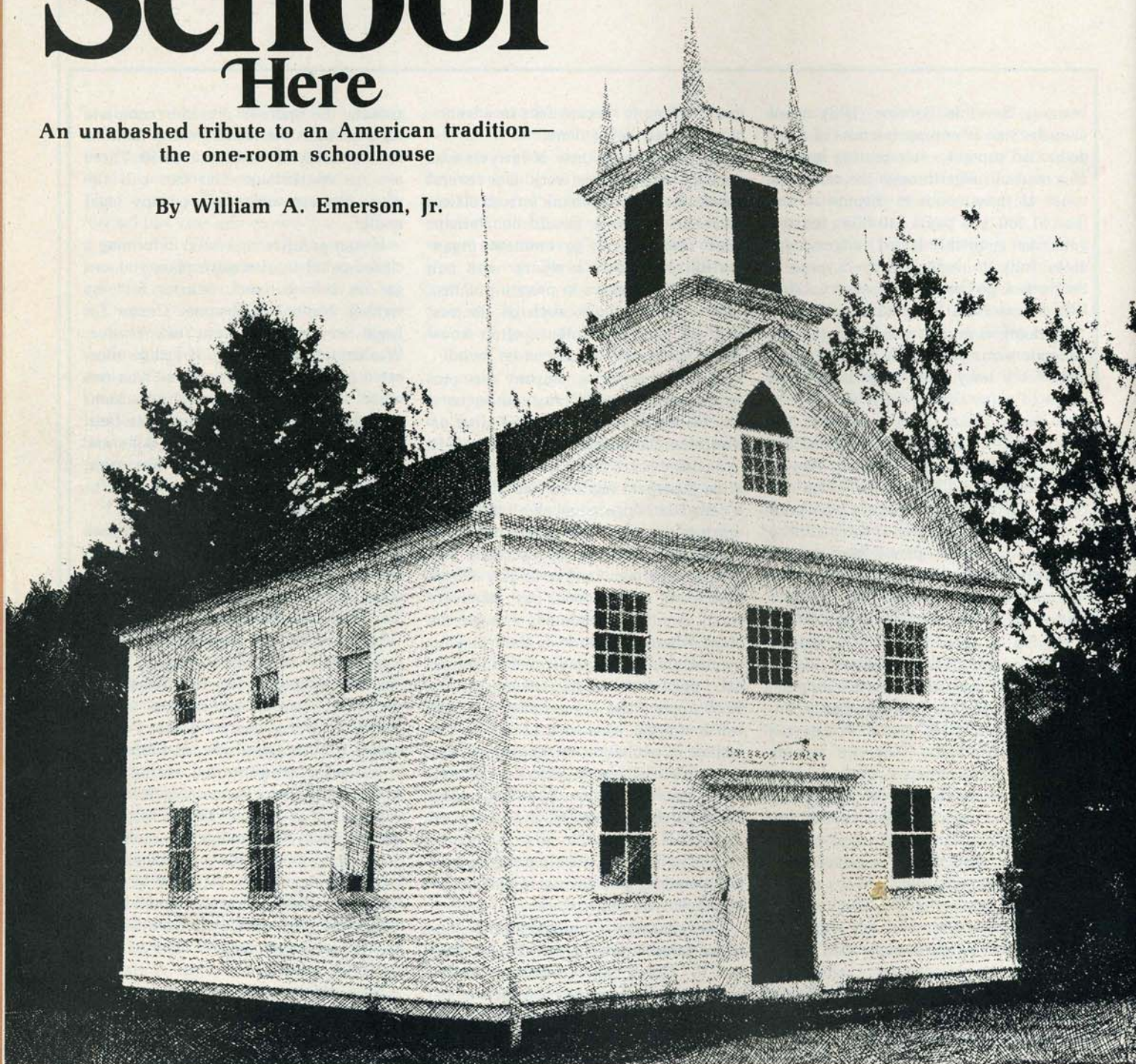

Abe Lincoln Could Have Gone To School Here

An unabashed tribute to an American tradition—
the one-room schoolhouse

By William A. Emerson, Jr.





In September, kids everywhere are scuffling back to school. It's the month for a sentimental journey, harking back to RFD America: a time past when life was simple, intact, and beautiful.

Come along with us to rediscover that somewhere out there serious-faced youngsters still repeat allegiance to the flag. And just as you remember it—or have read about it—morning prayers are being recited, and earnest voices are rehearsing all four verses to “The Star-Spangled Banner.” You don’t actually have to step across the threshold into the past to recapture this life because these old-fashioned days are alive and well in the last of the one-room schools, in New Hampshire, Vermont, Nebraska, and in 30 other states.

The one-room school educated us when we were a rural nation. It taught presidents like Washington and Lincoln to read and write; it educated other famous Americans—Thomas Edison, Herbert Hoover, Bat Masterson, and Chet Huntley; and it survives into these parlous days as a revered American institution. It used to be that contracts for one-room-school teachers provided for two dollars a week for men and less for women. Moreover, the women were “schoolmarms” who weren’t allowed to date or wear make-

The Hebron Village School, Hebron, New Hampshire (far left and above). The Blue School, in Landaff, New Hampshire (left).





Isabel Blodgett (top), Hebron's librarian and former teacher, reads in library, above the one-room school. Last spring, the Hebron Village School created their own circus (right). Kristie Lane (above), rides a papier-mâché elephant, made by the class.

The Blue School (far right), over 100 years old, is still educating youngsters in Landaff, New Hampshire.



up. In some communities, it was understood that they would teach their way into spinstership.

All early American schools taught the three Rs with a hickory stick, but the venerable one-roomers have always been outposts of the American dream that democracy can work, provided we give everybody an education. As a nation, we have always insisted that our children go to school. No matter how deep in the swamp or how high up on the hogback they live, they must receive an education. And, when summer vacation is suddenly over one morning soon, they will once again come trudging down out of the hollows, through the woods and across fields to the school-bus routes, and then on to

one-room schoolhouses like the two I visited recently in that "Live Free or Die" state of New Hampshire.

* * *

By 7:30 A.M. any weekday morning, Mary Anne Kirby is already at the Blue School in Landaff, waiting for her 26 children. Her school is in the foothills of the White Mountains, where the air is crisp and where, in September, Jonathan and McIntosh apples are sold by the bushel and cider by the jug. At this time when the White Birch leaves are flashing early yellow, the intense hue of the Blue School stands out even against the clear autumn sky.

As the time-honored yellow school bus rumbles into the yard, Mary Anne greets the first-through-fifth-grade children—

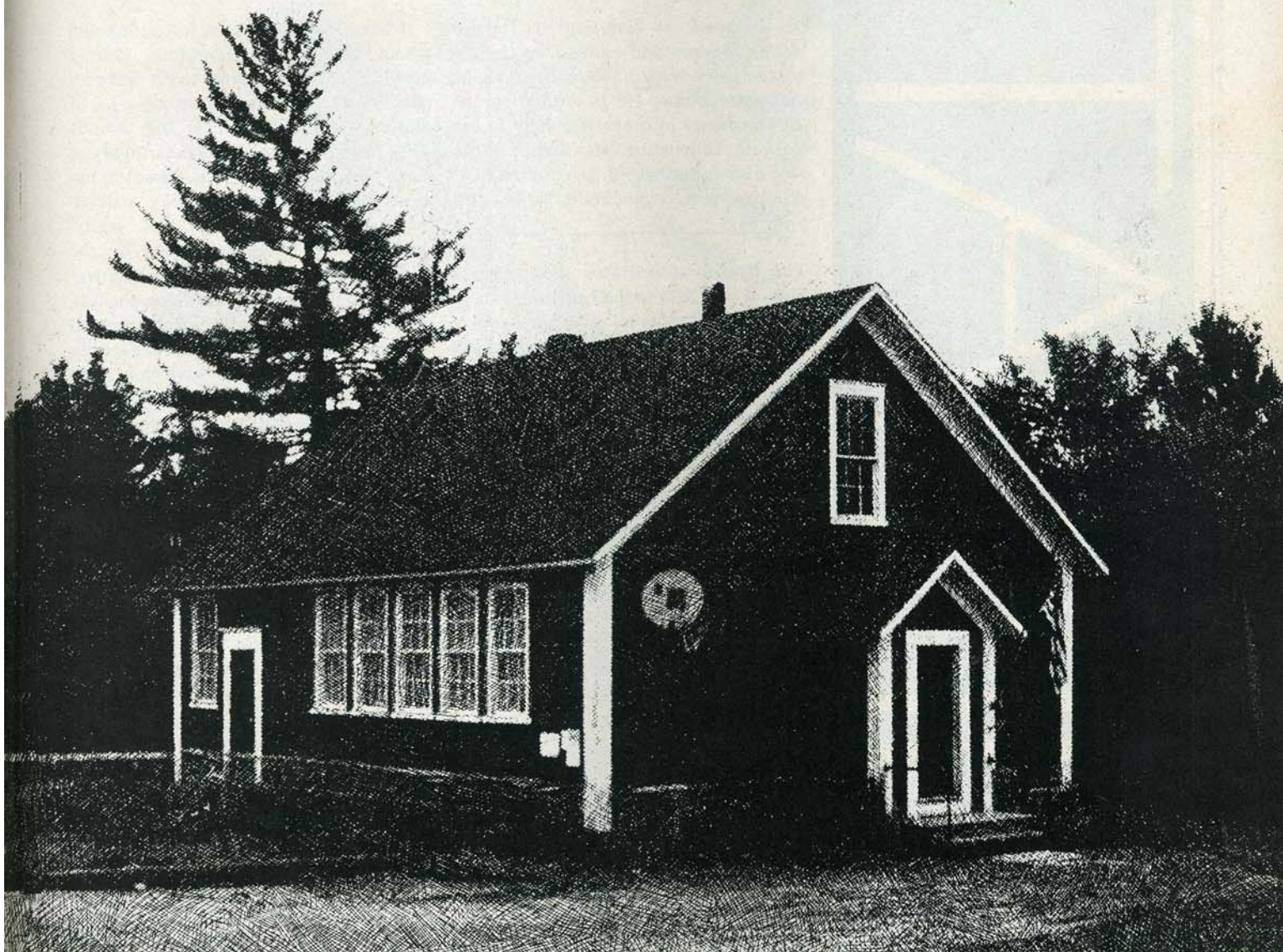
each by name: "Christie, Shawn, good morning; Regina . . ." She even hugs some of the younger ones.

"The first and second graders like affection—it's hard to be away from their mothers, at first," she told me. "The parents tell me that sometimes the little ones forget and call their mothers 'Miss Kirby.' That's all right. Sometimes I'm called 'Mummy.'"

Quickly they settle into desks of all sizes—the oldest bought from Sears & Roebuck, in 1850. All gathered together, the class resembles a large family. Indeed, half of them are kin to each other.

Mary Anne is trim and 24 years old; she immediately gathers their attention. She is blessed with a lilting voice that

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can both sing wonderful folk songs to the children and in a split second bring them to order. Beginning with a traditional lesson in patriotism, Mary Anne conducted the Pledge of Allegiance "line by line—so the first graders can learn it." I stood by as she instructed the class: "We'll do it antiphonally, like rounds, and then we'll all say it together."

Mary Anne watched each child intently with her clear green eyes. "When they face the flag and put their hands on their hearts, you sometimes see a problem in left-right coordination," she told me. "I had one little girl with her left hand over her heart. 'No, no. This way,' I said. And, as I suspected, I found out later that she made her B's backward, too."

The decal on Mary Anne's desk, given to her by one of the children, says, "I can be very friendly." Even to a visitor the lively, decorated room is congenial. Milk cartons marked "Grandview Dairy, New York" are stacked by the teacher's desk: midmorning's refreshment.

"This school is very structured, and yet it's very individualized too," she continued. "I may have as many as 10 reading groups, and this means that everyone is moving at his or her own pace. Or, there might be three science experiments going at once. This way the first and second graders who don't have too much science get a lot just by watching." I observed that the older children proudly and carefully teach the younger ones. "They love doing it and, what's more," Mary Anne told me, "it saves me a lot of time, while they learn responsibility."

Mary Anne Kirby maintains that inside the old Blue School (it has been painted darker and darker shades of blue over the last 100 years), the educational process is as modern as the 'open concept' schools down in the big cities. "No walls between the grades or the materials," Mary Anne gestured at the wide-open room and the many activities. "And look at our fantastic reading lab—we spend a lot of money in this area." But the innovative and well-equipped Blue School in the mountainous northern reaches of New Hampshire, in many ways, also retains its colonial-day remoteness.

"We'll have to learn about bears again this year," Mary Anne said. "Last year, one of the mothers saw a large grizzly near the school. He never actually came

into the school yard, but it is essential that I teach the children they shouldn't go into the woods this time of year. I warn them never to irritate a bear. I also prepare them for a chance encounter.

"I tell them that if ever a bear is after them, to run downhill. I warn, 'Don't run uphill because a bear runs uphill faster than you can. He's got short front paws, and longer back legs, so he can climb easily. But, when he goes downhill he will lose his footing and tumble if he goes too fast.' Finally, I remind them that a bear is afraid of them, too, and if he's not too hungry he will most likely go his own way."

While bears and one-room schools are getting more and more scarce in 1974 America, a reasonable number of both remain. According to the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare's latest statistical survey, in 1971 there were 1,815 one-teacher schools in the United States.

These schools were distributed among 33 states. Nebraska had the most, 674, and South Dakota ranked next, with 315. Back in 1916, there were as many as 200,099 one-teacher (one-room) schools, which marks a decline of more than 90 percent over the decades.

The communities who still have their one-room schools cherish them: They are convenient, inexpensive, and the best of them do a highly professional job. The schoolmasters and mistresses of these ever-dwindling institutions are not surprised to see progressive American education returning to their way of teaching. They point out that the most modern schools have adopted "mixed" classrooms and teaching methods as "innovations"—because they work!

From the Blue School in Landaff, I traveled southeast, to the center of New Hampshire, to visit Mrs. Verna Matthews, who teaches grades one through three at the Hebron Village School in Hebron, at the top of Newfound Lake.

The sign on the old white clapboard building actually reads, "Hebron Library," which is upstairs over Mrs. Matthews's school. More than 150 years old, the school is a typically well-preserved New England establishment that is a mirror image of the Congregational Church situated just across the village common. Outside, the school has a serene, picture-postcard appearance; inside there is bustling activity.

Verna Matthews welcomed me into a spacious, bright room where all the stu-

dents were busy. She began by telling me about "her" children: "They have a competitive edge, but they learn in a relaxed situation without pressure. I think they have an advantage in being in a one-room school, and I do a better job of teaching all three grades combined than I did when I taught just first grade in Bristol (New Hampshire)."

Looking around the room, I was fascinated by enormous papier-maché animals.

"A circus," Verna explained. "The project came about last spring after the whole school went to Boston on a chartered bus to see Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey. Our seats were so close that one of our girls fed peanuts to the elephants when they walked into the ring. There was a tiger on top of an elephant and a man on top of the tiger; we could have scratched the tiger's ears.

"So, we came back and made our own circus," she said. "I started out by building a box, putting four legs on it and a board for a head. I wrapped it in chicken wire and started dipping newspapers in wheat paste and, before long," she smiled, "the children were working with me, all of us sloppy with paste and paint."

Hebron has always been exhilarated by Mrs. Matthews's school, and the citizens participate in its projects. "When we have a crazy hat show," Verna said, "we parade over at the village store and the parents come to see us. And, there was the time we presented 'A Day in the Life of the Plains Indians' over at Groton.

"We dressed up in authentic Plains Indians costumes that we made ourselves: headdresses, moccasins, beaded vests," she described. "We even made huge tepees and tomahawks. In order to do all this, we simply didn't have any formal lessons for six weeks. Instead, we learned about Indians, including their sign language. Our chief was a local machine-shop worker who was of Indian descent. He did his powwow thing and he was magnificent! Then we tented overnight in our tepees." She laughed, then added, "We nearly froze to death."

This September, the Hebron Village School is again excited about another project. "We are able to do this kind of thing," Verna explained, "because we progress at a rapid pace with the academic subjects. I am more or less my own boss. I have requirements I must meet, but nobody gives me any trouble."