

Still sits the school house by the side of the road

BY RAYMOND POINTER
SPECIAL TO THE PIONEER

Issac Berry, one of the early settlers in Mecosta County, was illiterate until his wife, Lucy taught him to read. He then became an avid reader, and realized the value of education.

At that time, the Michigan Department of Education required communities of 10 families in every four square-mile area to be granted funds to support a school. When the tenth family arrived in the Little River community, Isaac called them all together on the property to discuss the issue of their children's education, with all the families voting in favor of a school.

Isaac then offered two acres of his property for the school site located near the center of Section 16, known as School Section Lake, the name of the beautiful lake touching this property.

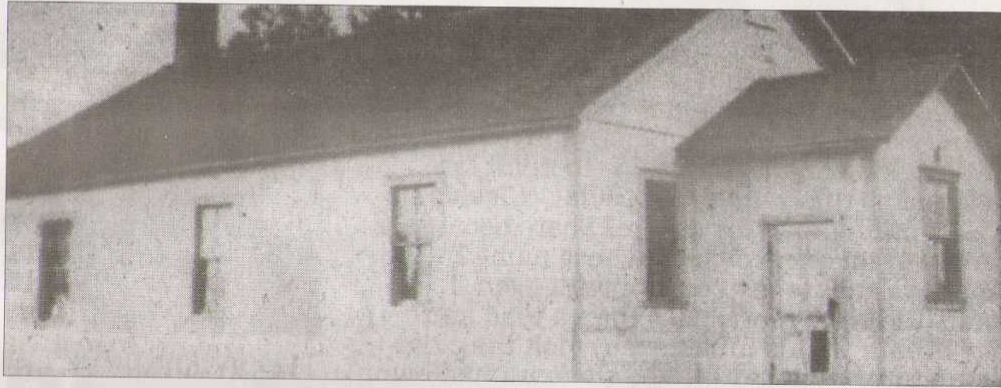
After several meetings, the men of the community hauled logs and raised the building in the mid 1870s. An extensive teacher search proved fruitless, so Isaac's wife, Esther Lucille (Lucy) Berry was employed as the Little River School's first teacher, a position she held for several years.

As new settlers continued arriving, and the next generations were school age, the old log building became inadequate and in need of

repairs. The School Board and the community decided on a new building, erected in 1910. It was a frame structure with wood siding, 40 feet by 20. It had four tall windows on each side. The furnace was probably the best available at the time, and burned wood.

The Little River School was probably the most important location in the community, and was the central gathering place for news. When important information needed to be passed along Isaac Berry would ring the bell. Certain rings would signal a birth, a death, grave illness, or fire. Of course, there was a certain ring to summon the children to school in the morning. There were two rings in the morning on school days, one at 8:30 and the last bell at five minutes before nine. And, if the first bell didn't ring, there would be no school that day. The school was even used as a church on Sundays. When an ordained minister was not available, some man of the community filled in.

My first visit to the Little River School was at Christmas time (1924), and the Christmas program as was the tradition with all one-room schools of the time. This was before my fourth birthday, and I was ecstatic about seeing Santa Claus, but disappointed at not seeing his reindeer. Inside the school, the Christmas tree was decorated



The Little River School as it looked in 1928. (Pioneer file photo)

with lighted candles. To add to my disappointment, Santa's beard caught fire while passing out gifts from the tree, revealing that Santa Claus was actually a neighbor I knew!

In 1935, the district was consolidated with the Mecosta system, and the land and buildings were sold. After changing hands several times and suffering from neglect, the county decided that the schoolhouse had historical value and should be preserved. The county acquired the land and buildings, and rejoined the original Berry property since it had been acquired as a county park in 1931.

When the school building was in private hands, I had an uneasy feeling whenever I passed by it because I realized that I was a part of its history. I started attending school there the latter part of the second grade, and left the early part of the sixth. Both of my father's parents got their schooling in the original log school. My father began in the old log building, and finished in the new building. In all, I don't think anyone knows just how many people got their formal education there, nor how many went on to college, but nearly everyone who attended Little River received everything that the school had to offer. Even though

some structural changes have altered the original contour, I feel a little more secure knowing its history is being preserved.

But the memory of the one room experience may not be much longer than the lives of those of us who attended it. It was an experience of dedicated teachers and students, one of order and management, and a commitment to achievement. It saddens me to think that the days of Little River, and all the other one-room schools will pass with our memories of them. Maybe their time has passed, but in their time, they were the very best we had.

