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UNION TOWNSHIP- FREEWILL SCHOOL

Freewill was the name of the first subscription school in Union Township. It cost \$2.00 per three month term to attend. It was located in Union township, section 8 at the southeast corner. The raising of the log building was accomplished by the combined effort of the citizens of Slabtown in 1849 (another source says 1851).

This building was erected so there was one window on east side of the house and one on the west. For Iowa, this was a luxury. The more windows, the harder the room was to heat. These windows were unique in height and in usage. They were four feet from the floor and extended most of the length of the building. Each window had a long two foot deep plank in front of it. This plank served as a writing desk. The seats which were scattered about in the room were made of split logs, eight to ten feet long, with the split or flat side up for sitting upon. The legs attached to the seats were a foot high. The seats which matched the writing desks mentioned previously, were the length of the building and much higher. Here is where all the writing and lessons were done as the light thru the oiled window paper was good. The oiled paper stretched tightly over the window opening and served as window panes.

The entrance door of the school faced south as did all the doors of the cabins in those days. The door served as a sundial. A line was drawn on the floor to point due north. When the shadow fell on this line it was twelve o'clock noon. Time for lunch. Most families brought their lunch to school in a big basket. Other lines were marked on the floor to indicate important hours for both student and teacher. (Perhaps recess and dismissal time.) The floor was made of puncheon boards. These boards were really two inch diameter poles that were about 4 feet in length. They were laid side by side. With the cracks in between the teacher never had to worry about sweeping. The east and west window stretched across the side of the building. This building was heated by a fireplace, probably on the north side of the school room but was soon replaced by a wood-burning stove. It was the duty of the older boys to chop wood during their recess to replenish the fire.

Freewill was a subscription school. Money to pay the teacher was given by the parents involved. This usually ran two dollars per scholar for a term of three months. If you had six children that was \$12 per term for all of them to attend, quite a hefty sum in those days. At that time teaching certificates were not required. The only prerequisite for being a teacher was to stay a page ahead of the "book learnin'." The school master made it a ritual to stand a 4-5 foot hickory switch in the corner of the school room on the first day of the term. He would then use it as necessary.

The master boarded around, spending a week or whatever the patrons found convenient at each home. Even at that it wasn't much for there was school only during the winter months as the "big" boys were needed at home. And "big" they were too as they came as old as 21.

The three R's were in vogue, in fact were the only subjects offered. Text books used can be summed up in two words; the Bible and Ray's Arithmetic.

One of the school masters, Ben Griffith, wore his hair long so he could shake it in front of his face and catch the mischievous ones at their pranks. He tended to spank the whole group of boys at the same time for good measure using a hickory switch. He lined them up by size standing the tallest boy next to him. The smallest boy on the end (usually Joe Steele) got the flexible tip of the switch which stung the most. John Steele was quite

naughty and school master, Mr Griffith, sat him on top of the unused stove for punishment. Soon John was standing on it and putting his finger in a knot-hole on the ceiling. He called out, "Ben, I can put my finger in this knothole." "Let's see you do it," Mr Griffith called back.

"Now hold it there!" was the command and he did for the rest of the day.

This article was compiled from the writings of Garnette Steele Wheeler who heard her father tell these stories many times. A second resource was from the Grinnell Register, August 6, 1922 in which J.R. Steele was interviewed about his early life in Poweshiek County, Union Twp.