

## MY START - - LATE 1950s

She just couldn't get any words out. Laryngitis had gotten her that fall of 1958, and she needed to teach tomorrow. This was my eldest sister Jeanette's first year as a teacher. We lived one mile east of Onaka, Faulk County, South Dakota. There were three girls and four boys in this farm family. Now, how to solve Monday's dilemma. "Well, Virg, would you do this?" came the words between many low squeaks and pauses. And, so with the understanding that there were no other available 'other' candidates to do this, a call was made to my highschool Superintendent at Cresbard to let him know that I wasn't just skipping school; an activity that could have cost academic points for my grades.

Monday morning did come after an evening of preparing for this new experience. I loaded the books and materials into the family 1954 Plymouth auto with my lunch box and headed north-northwest to work. The wood, country school was not unfamiliar to me since I had passed it several times in the past visiting relatives north of it. I had not, however, been inside of the building. So, two and one-half miles later on a gravel road, I steered the four-door machine onto the grassy-strip, parking spot. Wood steps, two in number, led me to the only door on the east side of a regular, rectangle, small building. Inside, there was a water crock (filled each morning by the parent whose child lived closest to the school) and washbasin to the left and coat hangers and shelving for the lunch boxes to the right. Tall windows decorated the entire south wall—to provide maximum light for the room and to sun heat in the colder days. A six-roll pull-down map graced the north wall. As there was no basement (the building was set on a cement foundation) the heating unit was oil fired. The furnace sat against the west wall centered between the blackboard. The upper and lower case letters and the number cards were tacked across the top of the boards. The teacher's desk sat in the south-west corner facing east. Six student desks graced the center of the room. These wooden desks were adjusted for the varying size of the students and had a storage unit under the seating area that had no door or drawer. Often materials or books were on the floor. A bench was near the teacher's desk for students to sit on when reciting their lessons.

Outside, the individual out-houses were against the west two-stranded, barbed-wire fence. The flagpole stood next to the south-east corner of the school. The four-swing and slide unit filled the area between the school and the out-houses. The remaining area on the south side was reserved for softball; a must.

Since there was no bell, my call brought the students to the flagpole for the morning Pledge of Alliance to start the day at 8:00 am. The day was rather routine with the singing of two songs before studies. The reading sections per class took place with practice of the spelling words. The children had varying academic and ability levels. What a challenge! Dinner allowed for a full hour outside; I would join them for softball. Mathematics, the sciences and social sciences came in the afternoon. I did not have to work with art. The children would walk home after school was out at 5:00 pm.

After-school activities for the teacher included cleaning the blackboards and preparing them for the next day, cleaning the floor and wash basin and then deciding whether to check the class work or taking it home to do after farm chores. My discipline student got to clean the chalkboard erasers and empty the pencil sharpener. The second day repeated the first. Then, the REAL teacher was back.

My real feelings of becoming a teacher actually occurred when I was an enlistee of the U. S. Army 1959-62. During my three-years service to our country, I occasionally found it difficult to understand how our young men were so uneducated. I loved accounting, so when my discharge came, I enrolled in secondary education at Northern state College, Aberdeen Central High School. Graduation with a bachelor's degree was in 1966.

Big Stone City, near Milbank, was where I practiced my new skills. Classes taught were: Typewriter I, Typewriter II, Bookkeeping, Business Math and Law and secretarial Skills with Shorthand. Acting Principal of the school was attached as a side activity with the school yearbook and newspaper. The class sizes were 1 to 6, not bad. This was my first experience with a special needs child. After my second year, the School Board closed the high school and sent those students to Ortonville. I stayed on as Principal of the 1-8 program with the understanding between the Board and myself that I would do this to give them time to find a suitable replacement. A teacher taught the 7-8<sup>th</sup> graders English and Math while I took the sciences and social sciences, typewriting and physical education classes. My biggest Principal job was to get two young 9<sup>th</sup> grade boys to understand the dangers of starting a fire with safety-book matches in the washroom's waste basket one evening after school had let out.

In the summer of 1969, I started a Master's program in Business Administration at Northern state. I was now unemployed and not too worried about it. In July I saw a listing for a Business Educator at Ipswich. Their young lady teacher had married and moved on.

Ipswich was almost an opposite of Big Stone City. Class sizes now were in the upper 20s and low 30s. And, can you imagine having about 62 in a last hour study hall environment in the school library. There was just enough room between the rows to walk. It is challenging to keep them quiet the last hour of the day. Some students did sleep. Only three were allowed to speak with someone else with teacher approval. There were 2 sections of Freshman Typewriter I (one lad's fingers were so large around that he had to learn touch rather than reach typing.) We made it work. Typewriter II was for Juniors and seniors with the newspaper and yearbook (this also include the photolab—the Darkroom environment would not work with today's fear of a student with a teacher one-on-one). I still taught Business Law, Business Math for Sophomores and Shorthand for seniors. The large mandatory class of Bookkeeping for seniors with its many pages of correcting papers took a lot of time. I converted the Law, Math and Bookkeeping classes to individual learning in the classroom. I can say that some of this would not have happened if I would have had a family to share time with. I further involved myself with activities by running the books and announcing for indoor athletic games. As advisor for

the National Honor Society, I had to direct a one-act play in competition with the two English groups. When the state of South Dakota opened funding for Vocation student needs, I started the Secretarial training program for the school. This three-hour block took the typewriting classes off of my schedule, but not the yearbook. In the second semester, these secretarial students were placed in city business places to “work in the real world”.

My Master’s program was completed in the summer of 1977. An opening for a School Financial Officer opened in Mobridge. A friend called me about the position. Since I was feeling ready to move on, I took the interview and accepted the position. I met and later married Darlene in 1979. My retirement in 1999 from the school position occurred in the same year that my only child, Joel, graduated from Mobridge high School. Education has not left me. I was voted to the School Board in 2004. The major events on the Board were the reorganization activities with the Pollock School district and the building of a new High School facility.

To be involved in Community is almost as important as student involvement. Jaycees and golf placed me with two different age groups while I was at Ipswich. Mobridge area people would know me as being involved in Rodeo, Coin & Stamp, Investment Club, American Legion, Knights of Columbus, Oahe Area Retired Teachers Asso. and the Mobridge Library foundation. Since retirement, I obtained a relaxing job as a mowing operator for a local contractor, which could often lead to shingling, metal roofing or other type activities.

Virgil J. Binfet  
Mobridge, S. Dak.  
Spring 2009