

Remembering the Old Monteagle School

Interview with Johnnie Louise (Meeks) Gilliam

by Jackie Layne Partin

One of my favorite topics when discussing Monteagle with someone is the old Monteagle School. That was the primary focus of this talk with my friend, Johnnie Louise.

Q. Was the front door of the school facing the main road (*King St.*)?

A. No, it faced the side of Charlie and Ella Mankin's home, which later belonged to the Jim Short family and is now the Johnny Brannan home.

Q. What kind of heat did the school have?

A. Our heat was a pot-bellied stove in the center of the building. The fire was always roaring when we arrived, but the building was not always warm enough. The teacher would line us up, and we would march around the stove until we got warm enough to sit down. We often came in wet to our thighs from the walk to school in the rain or snow.

Q. Where did the students get their drinking water?

A. When we came in the front door, there was a large water bottle of sorts. Each child brought his own cup from home. (*Others remember walks for water to the Cicero King spring and to Charlie Mankin's well; some remember making cups from sheets of paper.*)

Q. What did the children do for lunch?

A. Early on, we each brought our lunch from home. My lunch was biscuit and fried potatoes. I really liked that lunch. Mama would pack it in one of those small paper lard boxes which was just the right size to hold two biscuits with potatoes. Then later, some of the mothers in the community came together and cooked soups or stews for us in the kitchen of the house across the street. I think it was an Oglevie house, but the same house later became the Wilburn Sampley house. I think there was a Preacher Oglevie who lived there at one time. I remember Peggy Oglevie and her brother Frank. Peggy was one of my best friends. After we ate, we lined up and went back across the street to begin our classes.

Q. Did the children get to slide down the big hill on King Street when it was frozen over?

A. Not while we were at school, but when on our own time, we got our mothers' washtubs and down we went. That was a lot of fun.

Q. What families lived down that big hill and up on the other side?

A. The Jennings family lived at the foot of the hill, but I don't remember anyone else living over that way.

Q. Who were some of the teachers at the school?

A. I can remember Eloise Partin, Ms. Birdwell, Ms. Martin and Howard Sanders. Ms. Martin and Ms. Birdwell came together. I think Mr. Sanders was principal at both the old and new school.

Q. What kind of punishment was used for naughty children?

A. Well, our first grade teacher, Rose Raulston, would always take our hand and bent the fingers back a little to raise our palms; then she would hit us with a short wooden paddle or rule. She would do that every day just in case we had done something that she had overlooked. Sometimes students had to go outside and get their own switch. They were pretty strict on us.

Q. What happened to the old school after it closed?

A. My father, Charlie Meeks, tore it down and built three houses out of the scraps. He built a house on the same spot which we lived in for a while, then Cleveland and Clara Layne bought it. He built a house for Jamey and Louise Meeks which stood across the road from Hughie Wooten's house, and he built the one we lived in which became known as the Wilma Farmer/Metcalf house.

Q. Tell me something else about your days at the old school.

A. Well, Charlie Mankin not only had cows, he had hogs. They would sleep under the school building, and we would scratch and scratch the bites that we got from the fleas or whatever the hogs had on them. I will never forget those days.

Q. Was there a road down the side of the school which connected King St. with the road over by Cicero King's house?

A. Yes, I mean no, there was not a road, but a path which went down the hill and across the creek. The creek had a board laying across it for us to walk on. That old board had a nail sticking out of it, and one day I fell on that nail and hurt my thigh bad. *(She showed me a scar on her thigh that I know must have been a terrible wound when it happened.)*

Q. Where were the outdoor toilets in relation to the buildings?

A. They were down that same hill (*2nd St.*) just a ways behind the school. There were toilets for boys and girls separately.

Q. Who were some of your playmates in school?

A. My cousin Thelma Mankin was a playmate.

Q. Did most of the children come to school in their barefeet?

A. We all put on our shoes on the first day of December and pulled them off on the first day of May.

Q. Where did you live during your school days?

A. We lived several places. We once lived behind Dock and Mae Tucker in a little house. It was at the back of the school on the other hill. Daddy tore that house down. We also lived in the little gray barn down a little from Mae's house. Several families including Mary Bennett lived in that little house. When I was a teen-ager, we lived in the house that became Wilma Farmer's house, and a house down the road which was between the Lappin house and Tubby's BBQ. The interstate took that house. Then we lived up in Summerfield down the lane between the Summerfield School and that old church building.

Q. Do you remember the little Church of Christ building up the road from Charlie Mankin's house?

A. Yes, when the weather was bad, Daddy would carry me to the church on his shoulders so that my feet would stay dry.

Q. Where did your dad work?

A. He was always the milkman for Charlie Mankin. Daddy would have to gather all the cows from all over Monteagle since they were allowed to roam freely.

Q. If you got a nickel or dime, what would you buy with it?

A. I would go to Lacy's Drugstore and buy me one of those big chocolate ice cream cones. Sometimes I would buy one of those little flat metal tins of Bayer aspirin which held about twelve pills, and I would eat them.

Q. Why did you do that? Didn't you know that it would thin your blood or maybe kill you?

A. No, we just liked to eat them. We liked the taste.

Q. Do you have a positive and warm feeling about your school days?

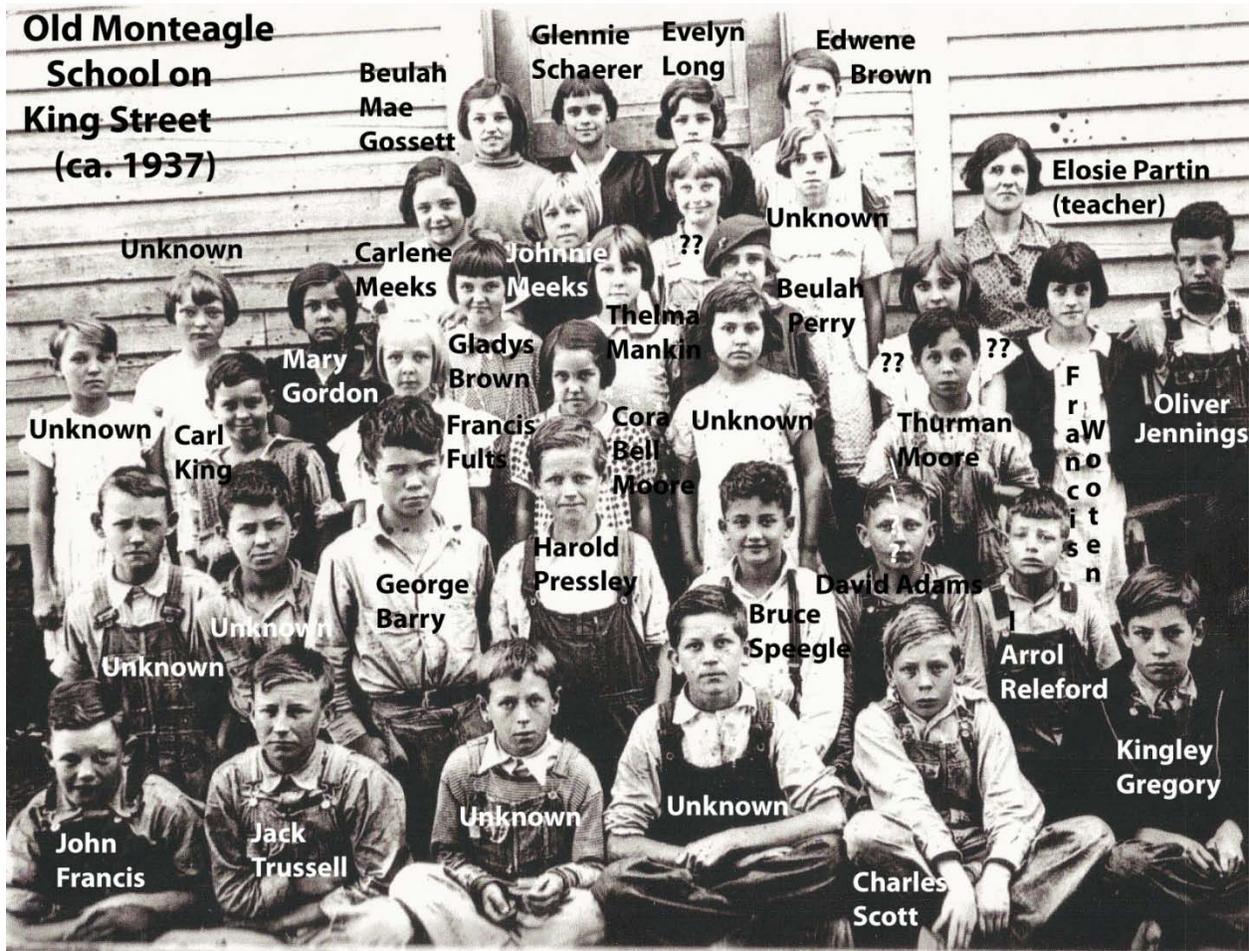
A. I have good feelings; I loved going to school.

Q. Did you get to attend the new school?

A. Yes, I remember when they lined us all up, and we walked up to the railroad tracks and over into our new school. We were so happy. We had water fountains, indoor toilets, and the building was always warm. We were so excited. That must have been around 1937. I was in the fifth grade.



The inside of the old Monteagle School showing the pot-bellied stove.



Johnnie Louise Meeks is in the second row from the back, second child from the left.