

# Susie McFarlin — an outstanding educator

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(Westford resident George A. Parkhurst, a well-known historian and playwright who lived in Chelmsford for many years, was a student of Miss McFarlin in the 1920's.)

BY GEORGE A. PARKHURST

CHELMSFORD — The idea that she was entering upon a career that would span half a century never entered the mind of the young teacher as she began her first class on April 14, 1879 at the one-room schoolhouse in East Chelmsford.

Susan S. McFarlin had been born in Lowell in December, 1858. After residing in Dracut for a few years, her family moved to Chelmsford in 1864. Her early education in the local schools was followed by training at the State Teacher College at Framingham.

With a few months experience as a substitute teacher in Littleton, Susie was suddenly on her own with the responsibility of educating a class of 41 students, ranging in ages from one four-year old to three over 15 years.

This might well have been a challenge even to an older and more experienced teacher — for she had not yet reached her 21st birthday.

The starting salary of \$26 per month, probably average for that time, seems somewhat low by today's standards. However, the Superintendent of Schools (who was also minister of the Chelmsford Unitarian Church) was pleased with her performance and granted her a raise to \$30 the following year.

## Teaching career

Miss McFarlin continued teaching at the East Chelmsford school for the next 14 years when she was transferred to the Center elementary school. This was the "yellow schoolhouse" that stood on North Road where the Center Fire Station is today.

It had been built in 1851 to replace the one-room brick



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"1802 school" across the Common and, over the years, was enlarged to accommodate the Center high school (there was also a high school in North Chelmsford at that time) as well as the primary and elementary grades.

Susie taught the 8th grade and also served as principal after the high school moved to the new building (now the Town offices) on Billerica Road in 1917. She continued in this capacity when the new school on Wilson Street was opened in September, 1926 until her retirement in June, 1929.

She is fondly remembered by her former pupils now living, but her no-nonsense approach to education and her strict discipline were not always appreciated by her students.

When pupils entered her room, they knew they were there for business and no fooling would be tolerated. As principal, she was the school disciplinarian. If one of her students would take "the stick" from her desk drawer and apply it vigorously to the palm of the outstretched hand of the culprit.

## Discipline problem

When other teachers in the Center school were faced with a disciplinary problem, the recalcitrant would be sent to



Susan S. McFarlin

Miss McFarlin to ask for "the stick."

It should not be misconstrued that she was a tyrant. Far from it! She was a dedicated educator with a very kind disposition except when one of her pupils might take it into his, or her, head to disregard a school rule or act in any ungentlemanly (or unladylike manner). She gladly stayed after school to work with students who needed help.

Her instruction went far beyond the required work in math, history, geography, spelling and composition. I can still, 60 years later, remember many of the poems, including psalms from the Bible, that we were required to memorize.

Likewise, her lessons in music appreciation have remained with me. An accomplished artist herself, as demonstrated by the many oils, watercolors and pastels that adorned the walls of her home, Miss McFarlin labored long and hard to instill an appreciation for famous works of art, although I must admit she was never successful in teaching me (and several others) to produce any watercolor masterpieces.

Penmanship, under the Palmer Method, may have been easy for her but eluded much of her class.

In later life, it has become apparent that Susie's classes

could be likened to a mini-art and music course not obtained from the average teacher. She was truly one of a kind.

The report of the Superintendent of Schools in 1929 paid just tribute to this remarkable woman, as follows:

"From her first year's work (1879) to the year completed last June, it has been the consensus of opinion of pupils and parents, of school committees and superintendents of both fellow teachers and the general public that she continually reached unusually high standards both in teaching and in administration.

"More than any other one person, she had molded the thoughts of the pupils at the Center, formed their ideals, shaped their characters; and by doing this over a long term of years, as her pupils class by class became the men and women of affairs, she left a permanent imprint on the life of the community."

Following her retirement in 1929, she continued to live on the farm at 184 Riverneck Road that her father had purchased in 1967. For many years, she employed Herbert Schofield as handyman and caretaker of the McFarlin home.

I well remember "Susie" being driven to school each day, and to church on Sunday, in one of the few remaining horsedrawn carriages with "Herby" at the reins.

Miss McFarlin died on Oct. 22, 1950.

It is fitting and proper that she is remembered today by a street (McFarlin Road), a former school (McFarlin School, so named while she was still living) which today has been converted into a senior housing complex (McFarlin Manor), and a memorial chapel (the Susan S. McFarlin Chapel of the First Parish Church).

I consider that I was fortunate to have known and learned from (not just studied under) Susan S. McFarlin.