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HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

'A large family, a small democracy'

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####BEGIN SUBHED####

Guilford's early schools fostered intimacy and independence — qualities that have grown harder to measure in today's larger, more complex system

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TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

ELEANOR COLEMAN began her education in 1933, in the depths of the Great Depression, in a one-room schoolhouse known as the Hinesburg School, in West Guilford. There was no kindergarten; she entered as a first-grader. The school served grades 1 through 8. The building had no electricity, telephone, plumbing or central heating.

"It was kind of cold," said Coleman — now Eleanor Emery, 97 and living in Dummerston. "We just kept our jackets on."

On winter mornings a chunk-wood stove, fired up before school started, slowly brought warmth to the classroom. Water came from a nearby spring, in pails carried in by the bigger boys; two latrines completed the plumbing infrastructure.

There were no school buses. If their families had cars, students might get a ride to the school; otherwise they walked. There being no plumbing, far less a cafeteria, the pupils' mothers took turns, during the cold months, preparing a hot dish for the lunch. As needed, the teacher warmed the dish up on an oil stove at the school.

There were typically 10 or 12 pupils, and always just one full-time employee, the teacher. Her instruction — it was always a woman — ranged from the fundamentals of reading and writing, including cursive writing, for the youngest pupils, to a civics unit for the oldest.

The teacher boarded with a local family, as did those at Guilford's six other one-room schools (a shorthand for one-classroom schools, which often had an auxiliary room not used for instruction).

Students handled certain janitorial chores. When she reached the eighth grade in 1940, Eleanor, who lived conveniently close to the schoolhouse, thus got the job of starting up the stove. She also cleaned up each afternoon after the other pupils had gone home. For these efforts she got paid $7 for the year.

Other than the teachers, the school district itself had no regular employees, although, under the terms of a 1906 state law, Guilford had joined with Dummerston, Putney, and Vernon to form a supervisory union.

The four towns thus shared the expense of a superintendent, who would come around to all their schoolhouses to check on how the teachers were doing, and

occasionally to take misbehaving students outside for a tongue-lashing.

A private benefactor, meanwhile, paid for the services of medical professionals who called at the schools. In her report on the 1937-38 school year, the superintendent, Ethel Eddy, noted that "the health work performed by Dorothy Allen, R.N., has added greatly to the efficiency of the work done by the schoolchildren, and has helped in keeping the attendance record high."

The report also mentioned examinations by a physician and noted that "Miss Ely's work in cleaning the teeth and the instruction given by her has been another factor in promoting general health."

In building the town's schoolhouses, the assumption appears to have been that the pupils could walk to school a distance of up to 1½ or 2 miles. Interviewed at a videotaped reunion of Hinesburg students in 2011, Eva Lynde, who finished eighth grade there in 1937, noted that the walking sometimes meant "we waded in the snow."

But for all the discomfort and challenges her schooling entailed, Emery recalled those distant years without complaint.

"We had fun," she said, in an interview for this article. She delighted in talking about the skiing they did, the tree they climbed, the recesses in the schoolyard, where the play equipment consisted of two teeter-totters.

Asked if she got a good education in her eight years in the school, she answered immediately: "Oh, yes!"

* * *

When John and Elizabeth Serkin attended Guilford schools in the years just after World War II, elementary education hadn't changed tremendously from Depression days.

Elizabeth, who began her schooling in 1946 at the Wellman School, recalled the coal stove, the homemade wintertime lunches, the outhouse, the two teeter-totters which, as at Hinesburg, comprised the entire playground equipment.

Buckets of water fetched from a nearby creek by students and poured into a spigoted carboy sufficed as the day's supply. Students handled some janitorial chores while the teacher attended to liming the outhouse, for example.

"Sometimes if something was needed, fathers would come and fix it," she added.

With few exceptions, such as exceptionally bad weather, all the youngsters walked to Wellman, situated on a back road outside any of the town's villages. For the Serkins, that meant a mile and a half on foot. In the winter, sleds provided a respite from the exertion.

"There was one stretch of about 50 yards that we had to walk. The rest of the way it was all downhill for the sledding," John said. Of course, the uphill return didn't afford the same luxury.

"Usually we'd walk together, in small groups," Elizabeth said. "The little ones didn't walk alone. They all had older siblings."

When the Wellman teacher, a neighbor of the Serkins named Edith Quinn, transferred to the Algiers School, 5 miles from Wellman in what is now known as Guilford Village, John transferred to Algiers with her, traveling in her car. (Elizabeth had already graduated.)

When he entered seventh grade, he began attending the newly built secondary school in Brattleboro, as did some other Guilford seventh- and eighth-graders, on the strength of a tuition of $275 a year, paid by the Guilford School District - the town, otherwise stated.

Asked about the quality of the education he received in his six years in Guilford schoolhouses, John at first expressed uncertainty, and then — while expressing his high regard for Mrs. Quinn — gave the instruction faint praise.

"I think my education was adequate," he said. "What do you learn in those few years, anyway?"

Asked the same question, Elizabeth laughed.

"Basic," she answered.

Still, asked if she personally got a good education, she said, "I did, because the superintendent of schools gave me my own curriculum, [with] special books and workbooks and things like that."

Elizabeth went on to high school and ultimately a college degree, but among her schoolmates at Wellman, she said, "Generally, nobody went on to high school. […] They didn't need any higher education. They knew how to milk cows."

* * *

Discipline, it seems, varied from schoolhouse to schoolhouse.

At Hinesburg, Emery said, corporal punishment was "a no-no," whereas John Serkin described it "unusual" at Wellman.

He recalled the discipline meted out to a schoolmate.

"I don't remember what he had done, but Mrs. Quinn drove with him to his parents' house to get permission to spank him," he said. "She came back, and sent us all outside" except for the wayward boy, whom she proceeded to spank with a ruler.

In an interview at the 2011 reunion, Emery described the regimen during her school years thus: "We sat at our desk and kept our mouths shut and did as we were told. If we wanted to talk we raised our hand. It was a little different than what it is nowadays."

Asked if the simultaneous presence of eight grades was chaotic, she said, "Never. Absolutely never. It was just the way of life. […] The teacher was in charge, and that's it."

Interviewed at the same reunion, Esta Smith, who taught for a year at Hinesburg during World War II, said, "Students helped each other. That's how we ran a rural school. I don't remember ever having to discipline anybody, although they did play jokes on me."

Whichever schools they attended, interviewees recalled things that seem alien to our era.

Jim Henry, a grade-schooler during the 1950s, recalled that, following the morning pledge of allegiance and Lord's Prayer, his teacher at Weatherhead Hollow School would preface the instruction with a Bible reading.

And the children enjoyed a freedom that strikes one as exceptional today. The youngsters walked long distances to school without adults watching over them.

Recalling the Depression in a 1974 *Brattleboro Reformer* interview, retired Guilford teacher Margaret Smith recalled that "during deer season boys hunted on their way to school and left their guns in the woodshed."

* * *

CHANGE CAME SLOWLY. Joy Hayes, whose family moved to the Hinesburg area just after World War II — when the Serkins also bought their place a few miles away — said there was "a great influx" of new families at that time, as Guilford and the nation, releasing pent-up energy, looked beyond their wartime horizons.

"Everybody was getting get away from centers of population — the first of the back-to-the-landers," she told her interviewer at the 2011 reunion. "A lot of the GIs got out of the military, and they had money in their pocket.

"That September [of 1945], probably 25 kids showed up [at the school]. I think that teacher was ready to go back home! The school was just overrun. […] They couldn't keep a teacher from year to year."

To ease the overload, she said, the community decided to transport seventh- and eighth-graders to West Brattleboro's Academy School (which remains in operation today). Some families decided against the time-consuming daily trips, however, since their youngsters "were needed on the farm."

Even in the early 1950s, the one-room schoolhouses remained simple, even primitive places. They had no telephones. The student "janitor" remained a fixture, although compensation

rose to $14 a year for the work, as recorded in the superintendent's 1953 report.

And winter mornings remained challenging, according to Dwight Fitch, who attended School Number 2 (it had no other name) and Wellman between 1951 and 1957.

"You'd come to school when it maybe was 20 below, and it might be 11 o'clock before you could take your jacket off," he said.

Motorized student transportation had been used even in the Depression years, but as the population growth following the war increased enrollments, pupils were increasingly transferred from one school to another, it appears, so as to consolidate students in a given grade, for example.

The arrangements remained relatively informal. The town's school directors "just told the family where they wanted you to go to school," Fitch said.

The parents enlisted as drivers got compensation, which actually totaled almost 10% of the district's budget.

Proper school buses would not enter use until after the opening of the new Guilford Central School in 1957 consigned the one-room schoolhouses to history.

As in the Depression years, each schoolhouse had but one regular employee, the teacher, although the townspeople voted in 1952 to hire a part-time music teacher, who came around to each school once a week.

By the early 1950s, a bookmobile, apparently sponsored by the state, would call at each school three or four times a year, providing what Fitch termed "access to a 'library' […]. You could select books, and when they came around again you gave them back."

Still, the education did not stray far from the fundamentals. Fitch termed the instruction "not very progressive."

"I got the basics, but you know, it varied," he said.

But whatever the shortcomings and vicissitudes he overcame, he saw today's grade-schoolers as facing even greater challenges.

"There's no comparison. Now it's unbelievable, with all the technological changes. [...] I don't know how I would do today."

* * *

IN THE MID-1940s, with some changes in motion and others hovering in many a mind's eye, the question of whether local, one-classroom schools had a future came to the fore. The issue generated "lots of controversy," in Fitch's words.

Eddy, who served as superintendent from 1917 until 1951, championed consolidation of the scattered schools. In her yearly reports to the town, she banged the drum for more modern schools and lambasted the one-room schoolhouse as a relic as hopelessly old-fashioned as horse-drawn plows.

"Well trained, professionally minded girls will not take positions in schools such as Guilford has to offer," she wrote in her 1948 report. She excoriated "toilet facilities that are unsatisfactory according to present day standards [and] drinking water that has to be brought in a pail," among other features of the status quo.

In her 1950 report, she summarized her arguments thus: "It is as difficult to meet the needs of modern education in the restricted environment of the one-room school as it would be to keep pace with the rapidly expanding thinking of a modern age by using the methods of transportation and communication of [...] fifty to one hundred years ago when the schoolhouses in Guilford were built."

Town Meeting votes attest to the opposition to Eddy, although no record exists of the arguments voiced.

At the 1945 meeting, the citizenry, on a voice vote, defeated a motion to establish a sinking fund for a new school building. At the 1946 meeting, the *Brattleboro Reformer* reported, "nearly three hours was absorbed in the discussion of school

problems," but those favoring consolidation didn't fare much better: a proposal "to construct a consolidated school to replace our present obsolete and inadequate system" failed on a 100-to-45 tally, apparently because the cost to taxpayers had not been determined.

For his part, Harlan Allen, who replaced Eddy as superintendent, took a much more sanguine view of the little schools, writing in his first report to the town that "an excellent hot lunch program is provided by the P.T.A. and Mothers' Clubs which has proper nutritional value. This activity provides an opportunity to teach certain mannerisms in a pleasant and happy relationship of pupil and teacher. Each classroom is a large family, in addition it is a small democracy."

But the contemporary world's assumptions would gradually overcome resistance.

The 1953 Annual Town Meeting authorized the school district's directors to commence a search for a site for a centralized school. A proposal to increase the property tax rate by $0.006 per dollar — to cover the eventual costs of construction — met with failure, but a motion for $0.003 per dollar then passed.

In 1954 the school district purchased a suitable parcel for the school near Guilford Center. Planning continued until 1956; in December of that year, the town's voters green-lighted the finalized plans.

Things then moved quickly, and on Sept. 8, 1957, the new Guilford Central School welcomed its first students. Built as it was in a hurry, it opened without completion of certain amenities, but the Rubicon was crossed: Guilford's one-room schoolhouses were history.

Jim Henry, who had attended the Algiers and Weatherhead Hollow schoolhouses before spending his eighth-grade year at Guilford Central School, delighted in the new facility's indoor plumbing, central heating, and cafeteria.

But when asked whether he preferred the new school to the old schoolhouses, he demurred.

"I adored the one-room schoolhouses more," he said. At the new school, "you didn't have the close connection to all the kids who attended your school."

He mentioned the benefit of having been able, at the one-room schoolhouses, to hear the older students' lessons and absorb learning from them — in a sort of bygone variant of advanced placement.

"It was an excellent method of education," he said.

* * *

GUILFORD, POPULATION about 2,100, no longer even has its own school district, say nothing of functioning one-room schools. A 2015 state law folded the town school district in with those in Brattleboro, Dummerston, and Putney to form the Windham Southeast School District (WSESD).

The Windham Southeast Supervisory Union (WSESU), the outgrowth of Ethel Eddy's office, meanwhile assumed administration of the WSESD and the standalone school district in Vernon.

In the 2024-25 school year, the Guilford Central School educated 145 children in grades 1 through 6, kindergarten, and prekindergarten programs. (Enrollment figures here represent actual children, as opposed to the modified figure known as the "equalized student count," which essentially creates extra "students" on the basis of a school's greater educational needs — students who don't speak English at home, for example.) Students in the seventh through 12th grades have all attended Brattleboro's middle and high schools since 2013.

In the 2024-25 year, the Guilford Central School maintained a staff of 32, expressed as full-time equivalents (FTEs) and including non-instructional positions. That translates into a student-to employee ratio of 4.5 to 1. That ratio stood at about 18 to 1 in 1933-34, Eleanor Coleman's first year at school, when each Guilford schoolhouse's staff consisted of just its one teacher.

A rough extrapolation of data from the 2025-26 WSESD and WSESU budgets finds that each of the district's grammar school students will cost $25,531 to educate this school year.

According to Guilford 1934 town report, education of a Guilford grammar school child then cost about $66 a year. One 1934 dollar is equivalent to $24.11 today, but even multiplying that year's expenditures by that factor yields a cost of only about $1,596 — almost exactly 1/16 of that $25,531.

Eddy, the superintendent employed by the supervisory union of 1934 cost the district $648 that year - less than $16 per student. (Of that sum, state aid defrayed $440.) Her job has evolved into today's WSESU, with its 28 3/4 FTEs in non-instructional tasks and a budget for the current school year of $4.537 million for non-instructional functions, or $1,856 for each student in the WSESD.

In the 1930s, Guilford's school system included no buses, no cafeteria, nary a professional janitor, and no teaching assistants, say nothing of administrative personnel other than Eddy.

Nor did the district pay for health insurance. That expense is first mentioned in the 1948 school report, which notes an expenditure of $54.10 for, or at least toward, "hospital insurance."

Today, health insurance premiums for Vermont's public school employees total approximately $383.5 million. That represents $20,152 per employee per year, of which $16,122 to $17,129 is paid by the school district.

With more psychological issues reported among schoolchildren than in decades past, simply the management of student mental health has meanwhile generated substantial and increasing expense.

Purchasing and maintaining computer hardware and software doesn't come cheap. The teeter-totters have morphed into fully equipped playgrounds and gymnasiums with professional gym teachers. The homemade lunch dishes reheated

on an oil stove have yielded to professionally staffed cafeterias offering free breakfast and lunch to all students.

* * *

THE HINESBURG SCHOOLHOUSE saw its last students leave in 1955, with the children dispersing to three other schools in the town. The closure represented one step in the consolidation that led to the opening of Guilford Central School.

Today, the old schoolhouse is slowly decaying, its leaded paint chipped, the main door broken at one corner, the vegetation to the rear of the structure crowding against the adjacent wall.

Through one of the south-facing windows, whose illumination nurtured the learning of another era's children, one sees inside the wood stove, an old piano, an assemblage of old desks — a dusty still-life.

But the schoolhouse still serves a purpose — as a foil to what schools are today.

Comparing the Hinesburg schools of 1933 or even 1955 involves more questions than this essay can meaningfully consider, but a few factors warrant mention that have received less attention than that given to health insurance premiums, for instance. They include the rising social expectations that began their ascent at the end of World War II; the growing affluence that brought the expansion of all things educational within the reach of public finance; and the emergence and eventual ubiquity of motor vehicle transportation, which facilitated the relegation of so many local things to memory.

In 1944, when Eleanor Coleman was a junior at the Brattleboro High School, a senior named Barbara Jane Deyo penned the yearbook's graduating-class essay, entitled "Our delinquency problem."

Attempting to explain that phenomenon, Deyo pointed to the affluence factor in words that still provide food for thought. "There is an increased interest in the use of money," she wrote, "and a decreased use of the value of schooling."

In other words, she asked, and continues to ask, whether our increasing wealth is diminishing who we are.

Two adjectives may crystallize what has happened to the educational system since Coleman started school: *simple* and *elaborate*.

Her walk to school was a lot simpler than maintaining a fleet of school buses. Giving an eighth-grader the routine janitorial work was a lot simpler than hiring an adult professional. Carrying a bucket of drinking water in from a nearby spring was simpler than plumbing an entire modern school building.

Predicated as it was on the basics — as several interviewees noted — the simple rural society of decades long past has in short yielded to the far more elaborate and expensive society of 2025.

Which leads to the last question directed to our interviewees: "Given that, even when corrected for inflation, the cost of educating a grade school student in 2025 in Guilford is still a lot more than when you attended grade school there, do you feel the benefits of grade-school education today are commensurate with its cost?"

Emery expressed skepticism.

"Not particularly," she answered, "because of all this other crap that doesn't teach anything."

She leaned forward and gestured with her fingers, as if examining a smartphone's screen. The students, she continued, "don't know how to write anything. I don't think they're any smarter than we were in 1940."

While he adored the schoolhouses he attended, Henry answered affirmatively, saying that today's children "are getting an excellent education."

John Serkin concurred. "Yes, I do, and I think we should be spending more," he opined, citing inadequacy of pay for teachers.

His sister Elizabeth declined to express an opinion. So did Fitch, citing all the changes that the world has seen since his school days, but he felt that the education he received was sufficient for his contemporaries, living as they did in a far more agrarian society than ours today.

"The town has changed so much," he said. "We had more cows than people back then."

* * *

*Postscript: Eleanor (Coleman) Emery, interviewed for this piece, died on Sept. 30, 2025. To read Fran Lynggaard Hansen's 2024 feature about Emery's youth in Guilford, visit bit.ly/862-emery.*

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL####

**C.B. HALL** is a freelance writer whose work has appeared numerous times in *The Commons*. This piece was originally published in the current edition of the annual *Vermont Almanac* (vermontalmanac.org), which publishes "stories from and for the land" from the Orange County town of Cornith.

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

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