



## Willowdale School District #3 All-Class Reunion Planned

By Robert F. Lyons

**Published: Friday, September 21, 2007 2:00 AM CDT**

When word traveled through cyberspace that the alumni of Willowdale School District #3 were planning to have the first-ever all-school reunion on Sept. 29, in Yankton, I wondered if my wife, Nona, and I would be able to make the trek from New England. But when I saw that the majority of my five older brothers and about 50 other people educated in that one-room schoolhouse planned to attend as well as some of teachers, I knew we had to make the 3,000-mile journey. So we eagerly look forward to that trip down memory lane and what's left of the willow lined lane east of Yankton.

About 40 years ago when I was enrolled at Manhattan College in New York City in a Masters of Education Administration program, I let out to those seasoned and quite citified classmates that my primary school education began in a one-room school on my father's farm [Bill Lyons] and that I walked to school every day down a dirt road with my five brothers and twin sister to the schoolhouse. My classmates held me in a certain awe after that

admission, except for the few who would not believe there was anybody alive who had lived in that pioneer way except in the TV series, "Little House on the Prairie." I did not tell them that it took us all of about five minutes to skip along from our house through the woods and over the fence to Willowdale School on my father's farm.

I expect to relive the delights of those early years with my classmates Joan Madison Nielsen and Midge Van Epps O'Flaherty (I wonder if she still plays the piano so well by ear). I am looking forward to this reunion especially to meet up with my first and third grade teachers, Barbara Bernston and Alice Thomsen who will be joined by two other teachers: Josephine Smith Barger and Pat Van Epps Farley who graduated from there. The local organizing committee (contact Karen Olson Lindgren, (605) 660-6437 or [kri@byelectric.com](mailto:kri@byelectric.com)) hopes that the word may get out to others to join the reunion at the Willowdale School Saturday, Sept. 29 at 10 a.m. and conclude with a no-host dinner at Ma and Pa's Highway 50 in Gayville at 6 p.m.

I remember very well my first day at Willowdale in September of 1943 when all of the Lyons children stood in front of the grape arbor on my parent's farm to face the morning sun rising over the big red barn so that mother's Kodak box camera could capture the moment when finally all her children were going to school. We proudly displayed our Big Red Chief writing tablets and number two pencils, and sported new striped polo shirts. Then the six of us, Bobby-and-Betty (they spoke of us twins as one then) and Tom, Jack Gene and Frank formed a parade down the willow tree-lined road to the country school. Big brother Pat sped off to high school uptown in his model T, a recent graduate of Willowdale.

With my father on the school board and my mother a former schoolteacher of English and grammar, no Lyons child ever went to bed or left the breakfast table without homework carefully checked. In the early 1930s, one of the school's teachers, Violet Turner, lived in the backroom upstairs in our farmhouse. I think she paid either five dollars a week or more likely five dollars a month for the room. My father provided her with cord wood for the small wood stove to do light cooking, and mother invited her to Sunday dinner.

Willowdale School educated hundreds of children from that part of Yankton county for 96 years beginning in 1873 until February of 1969 when it became part of the Yankton Independent District. The school was not only where we got educated, but where the people went to vote, to have community and 4-H meetings, and during the depression, gather for card games on a Sunday afternoon.

Everyone brought an apple or cheese or fresh baked bread or whatever they might have to share in those lean and dusty '30s.



**Back: Gene, Frank, Jack. Front: Tom, Bob, Betty**  
*.... First day of school (for twins), Sept. 1943*

Alma Burke, County superintendent, some years ago provided me with the Yankton School Bulletin 1956-57 which gives a brief history of Willowdale:

"When the school was first built it was known as the Harrison school in honor of William Harrison who lived on the first farm north of the school (west of the William Lyons farm). The first teacher was Mary Johnson. Some of the first pupils were Frank, Joe and Fred Sickman. The largest enrollment was 40 pupils. Sometime later, Mr. Ben Schlaefli donated the land where Willowdale is now located and the name changed to Willowdale because of all the tame willows around it. The oldest person living in the District is Wallace Shipton, who is 92. The second oldest is Addie Van-Epps, who is 86 years old. The school district was organized in 1873."

Alma Schlaefli Nelson gave a lively account of Willowdale in the early years around 1900 to the Yankton P&D historical notes columnist, Ellen Tobin: "...church-school life centered around the Willowdale schoolhouse. W. H. Ball [Yankton pioneer] and his wife and daughter, Lillis, organized a Sunday School which was held there regularly. Mrs. Nelson (Alma Schlaefli) and her brother were baptized in the school house by a Methodist minister in 1906....The Sunday school continued until 1912." (Yankton P&D, November 25, 1982, p A2).

The rural school system originated from the vision of Thomas Jefferson who drafted one of the most far-reaching legislative acts in American history, the Land Ordinance of 1785. He and the Founding Fathers believed that an educated citizenry was the building stone for a democracy and mandated in the Land Ordinance of 1784 and the Northwest Ordinance of 1785 that one section in each

township was to be reserved for the support of "common schools," The Homestead Act (1862) established that section #16 of each township must be reserved for a public school. For nearly 100 years, Willowdale and hundreds of similar rural schools in South Dakota were examples of a now all but vanished lifestyle: independent, family-centered and consciously tied to the soil.

When Willowdale discontinued as a school in 1969, the land and school building reverted to the Pat Lyons farm. It is now the headquarters of Yankton's snowmobile club, the Lewis & Clark Winter Wheelers whose members have kept the school in excellent condition and recently replaced the bell in the tower. The alumni and graduates of Willowdale will gather there at 10 a.m. on Sept. 29 to view the school and share stories and pictures of their experiences there. In the spirit of the old days, there will be a sing-a-long of favorite songs from the Golden Song Book.

But the Sept. 29 reunion calls us back to this spot along the Jim River, to that schoolhouse where our earliest introduction to learning began. We look forward to hearing about the journeys our classmates made and to why they are coming back to Willowdale today.

**About the Author: Robert F. Lyons of Kennebunkport, Maine is an alumnus (1943-47) of Willowdale School District #3, which was located on his parent's farm, Bill and Mary Lyons, 4 miles east of Yankton, off Highway 50 on Willowdale Road -- now on his brother's farm: Pat and Pearl Lyons.**

**Post script: by Robert F. Lyons**  
**6/3/2010**

## **Whatever happened to Lyons children who attended Willowdale School?**

- **Pat Lyons**, Yankton County. Retired farmer. Lives on the home farm just south of the Willowdale school yard. (Since the school closed, its ownership reverted to him.)
- **Frank Lyons**, Rock Island, IL. Retired engineer. Worked for 32 years for John Deere--then operated an international manufacturing consulting business.
- **Gene Lyons**, PhD, Lexington, KY. Professor of Equine Medicine, University of Kentucky. Expert on horse and Pacific mammal parasites.
- **Jack Lyons**, Ed.D, Yankton. Retired chairman of the Fine Arts Department, Mt. Marty College. Active in Community Theater and music.
- **Tom Lyons**, New Braunfels, TX. Chief Engineer for commercial refrigeration and petroleum equipment company.
- **Bob Lyons**, Kennebunkport, Maine and Cork, Ireland. Retired executive director for 7 town Special Education Collaborative of Boston area schools. (Betty's twin.). Teaches Irish Studies in lifelong learning programs.
- **Betty (Susan) Lyons Winkler**, deceased. Elementary school teacher for many years in SD and Nebraska. (Bob's twin.)