

**Mayhem and
Manslaughter and in an
Idyllic Setting:
“John Barleycorn” at
Howell School**

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The one-room school has served America’s rural educational and social purposes since the earliest days of white settlement. These structures provided space for developing the educational foundations for the nation’s rural youth and helped establish and sustain the identities of rural

communities. (1) Community functions held at the schools included entertainments, weddings, church services, elections, and funerals. Many believe that the school was the cement that held the rural community together, a point of common focus regardless of the

Senseless School Violence

Violence is the subject of much public debate, especially when a school is the scene of a murderous rampage. Should the government ban guns, especially automatic rifles? Or, as some would argue, perhaps adult students and teachers should be allowed to carry weapons into school for self defense. Are violent video games and films the cause of violent rampages? Or is it primarily mental illness? If the latter is true, how might we better serve the needs of those with violent tendencies? As the chronicle below indicates, rural institutions like Howell School are not immune to murder and mayhem.

Dec. 14, 2012: A teenager kills 20 school children, 6 adults, and then himself, in Sandy Hook Elementary School, Newtown, CT.

Apr. 2, 2012: A gunman murders 7 people at California Christian University.

Feb. 27, 2012: Two students are wounded and 3 killed at Chardon High School, Chardon, OH.

Feb. 14, 2008: A gunman kills 5 students and himself. Eighteen more are wounded at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL.

April 16, 2007: A gunman kills 32 people and then himself at Virginia Tech University Blacksburg, VA.

Oct. 2, 2006: A gunman attacks and kills 5 girls and then himself at West Nickel Mines Amish School in rural Pennsylvania. *

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nationality, religion, or economic status of those who gathered there. (2) If most accounts of activities in these schools can be believed, the teacher (usually a female) and her students worked together quietly and cooperatively whether inside the classroom or on the playground. When a child refused to obey, the teacher sent home a note, and the parents swiftly punished the offending child. On occasion, one or more of the bigger boys forced their teacher (usually a male) to leave the school, but such disruptions were usually expressed as fond memories of youthful rebellion. What such accounts often fail to include is evidence of a school as the setting for mayhem and manslaughter. (3) This historical reconstruction of a tragic event in Howell School, Mason County, West Virginia, calls into question the popular myth that the one-room school was and continues to be an idyllic institution immune to the crimes that plague the cities.

Howell School's Location and Construction

When West Virginia was granted statehood in 1863, the West Virginia State Legislature and governor made a commitment to provide a system of free "common" schools for the new state. By 1870, 2,257 schools were open. (4) When a rural area was in need of a school due to its children being of school age, the decision was undertaken to construct a building. West Virginia law included a legal statute to guarantee that no child would have to walk more than two miles to school by the nearest road or path. In rural areas, almost all of the newly constructed schools had only one room and served students from grades one to eight. One-room schools appeared roughly every four miles in rural Mason County and across the rest of West Virginia. (5)

The area along Tomlinson Run Road in Mason County, West Virginia, was made up of small hillside farms. At its eastern terminus, Tomlinson Run Road met the Ohio River. Large farms dotted the river bottoms at the end of the road along the banks of the river. Letart School served this population with a two-room, two-teacher school. On the western end of Tomlinson Run Road, Morgan School served the children with a one-room school constructed in the early 1870s. This school was located at the junction of Tomlinson Run Road and what would become the road known as West Virginia Route 2. As the middle

portion of Tomlinson Run began to increase in population, children walked or rode horses more than the two-mile limit to reach either Letart or Morgan School, as no other school was in closer proximity to their homes. (6)

In the late 1890s, the Cooper District Board of Education decided to construct a school along Tomlinson Run. A local farmer, Dan Howell, agreed to donate three-fourths of an acre of land on his farm for the construction of the school, which was one of 146 one-room schools in Mason County. According to district records, it measured 20' by 24' and was made completely of wood. A small coalhouse was constructed beside the school, and two outhouses sat slightly over the hill behind the school. Sandstone rocks were placed under the school to raise it off the ground, and a large flat rock served as the step to enter the school building. Like thousands of other one-room schools, the building contained only rudimentary educational furniture and materials. The school was completed in 1898 and named Howell School in honor of Dan Howell's gift. Later, the land on which the school sat became known as Howell Hill. (7)

As the school lot had previously been used for cattle and horse pasture, the area around the school was clear of tall weeds. When the leaves fell, the Ohio River was visible from the school on a clear day, as reported by Dora Atkinson, who attended Howell School as had her deceased mother, Dorothy Hudson Atkinson. Dorothy Atkinson taught many years at Howell School. Her daughter recalled, "My mother told me about when she was a student [at Howell]. She remembered seeing the Letart Islands in the Ohio River." (8) A series of locks and dams constructed in the 1930s along the Ohio River raised the water level, and the islands were then underwater.

A complete list of Howell School's teachers and the number of students each taught has not been found, but enough evidence exists to indicate that the first teacher was Annie Weigand Hart, who taught for a six-month term in 1920. (9) Teacher pay for a six-month term in Cooper District, home of Howell School, ranged from \$25 to \$35 per month, depending on the teacher's certification and education level. By 1921, the *West Virginia Education Directory* indicated that the pay per month had increased to \$50 to \$85 a month for an eight-month school term, also depending on the teacher's certification level. (10)

A Night of Tragedy

If this were the complete history of Howell School, it would appear to fit the stereotype of an early twentieth-century rural school—one that is usually characterized as an idyllic setting for learning. However, on the night of April 8, 1915, the school became the setting of a violent altercation that ended in injuries to up to twenty-five people by one account and the deaths of two men. According to the *Tribune-Telegraph*, published in Pomeroy, Ohio, a local musician called “Mr. Grimm” offered to provide an evening of entertainment in the school for students, their parents, and their neighbors. The paper reported further that “a crowd packed the little school house on the occasion of school entertainment. It was a happy, good-natured crowd, up to the time when John Barleycorn stumbled onto the platform.” (11) During Prohibition, “John Barleycorn” was the name often used to describe liquor made from corn. The source of the John Barleycorn was one of the legal bars in Ohio, a “wet” state (that is, one that allowed the sale of alcoholic beverages), whereas this portion of West Virginia was a “dry” area (one that prohibited the sale of alcohol). Apparently some attendees became drunk from liquor purchased in nearby Ohio and soon a fight broke out. (12)

According to the *Mason Republican*, published in Mason, West Virginia, whose motto was “Temperance, Truth and Justice,” the incident seems to have begun after one of the “Shirley boys” had completed his performance on the Howell School stage and had moved to the back of the schoolhouse. A man reported to be “Mr. Rollins” hit the school wall with enough force that the sound interrupted the performance. Another attendee, Oscar Weigand, asked Rollins to be quiet, and Rollins left the building cursing loudly. His foul language continued after he was outside. At about the same time, Eugene Bosworth and Claude Brinker began a fight in the schoolyard. Onlookers joined in the fight, assisting one man or the other. The Shirley and Brinker men supported their relative, Claude Brinker; and the Bosworth men assisted their relative, Eugene Bosworth. (13)

The *Mason Republican* indicated further that the fight ended after only a few minutes. Then Rollins entered the school and announced that Urson Bosworth had cut him

with a knife. People inside the school heard calls for Urson to come outside and fight it out. Urson's wife urged her husband to stay out of the fight, but he ignored her warning. The men fought with whiskey and beer bottles, stones, clubs, and knives. Another combatant, Earl Shirley, was either carried or made his own way to the outside of the school. When men brought him back inside and laid him on the floor at the front of the school, he died within a few minutes from cuts to his jugular vein and back. (14)

Urson Bosworth then entered the school and fell into a seat. His wife reportedly said, "They have killed Urson!" Urson, however, was still alive and asked for a drink of water. Friends of his family started to carry him to the nearby home of Oscar Weigand. After about a hundred yards, he asked them to put him down. They did and he died soon after that. He had four knife stabs in the back, two knife cuts across the head, and other injuries to his shoulder, stomach, and chest. Disparities in the number of people injured were evident in the articles published in the Point Pleasant (WV), Mason (WV), and Pomeroy (OH) newspapers. All of them relied on reports from different people in attendance. For example, the *Mason Republican* reported that ten people had injuries whereas the Pomeroy newspaper reported the number of injuries as twenty-five. (15)

The *Tribune-Telegraph* treated the fight as if the combatants were like the feuding Hatfields and McCoys. According to this newspaper, panic ensued in the school after the fight broke out. Women and children screamed and huddled at the sides and corners of the school to avoid stones coming into the school through the windows and door. Those who could do so, escaped the building. The *Tribune-Telegraph* went on to attribute the fight to an old family feud. The source was reported to be bad calls in a community softball game held at the local church the previous summer. The newspaper went on to discuss the gleam of knives in the lamp-light of the school and the quick taking of sides by those involved in the fight. The newspaper reported that screams and cries of "Murder, help, he's killed me," were heard as the combatants wielded their knives. The paper also reported that the wife of Urson Bosworth worked through the assailants to the side of her husband. As he died, she was trying to steady him with her arm. The report goes on to say that she was holding the arm of Earl Shirley as he again stabbed her dying husband. (16)

The *Point Pleasant Register*, published in the county seat of Mason County, West Virginia, also attributed the fight to an earlier disagreement during the summer. This

newspaper called the fight the culmination of a threat by the “Shirley boys,” who had reportedly said they would “whip” an umpire, Urson Bosworth, during a nearby church softball game. Whatever the cause, the fight left two men dead and others injured. (17)

The altercation seems to have centered on two families from the Howell School area. Given the close-knit community around the school, it is quite possible that all of those in attendance at the event were related to those on one side or the other of the fight. The *Mason Republican* provided a detailed list of the ten people who were injured in the fight, including Rader Shirley, brother of the dead man, “Leg almost severed from his body”; Bentz Shirley, father of the man killed from being hit in the head with a beer bottle; Cecil Bosworth, cut seriously; and Morgan Roush and Curt Rollins, both cut several times. (18) Fortunately, no children were wounded or killed in the altercation.

Aftermath

Ultimately, Rader Shirley and Oak Grimm were tried for the Howell School killings. The *Mason Republican* reported that Rader Shirley was cleared of a murder charge, and he pleaded guilty to the lesser charge of involuntary manslaughter. He was fined \$25 and court costs. Total time in jail was to be sixty days, and after release he was assigned to work on the public roads of Mason County. (19) The newspaper provides no further information on Oak Grimm.

Peter Shields of Pomeroy, Ohio, was tried on the charge of giving away the liquor that had played a part in the killings. He was sentenced to two months on the county road and fined \$100. (20) The *Tribune-Telegraph* ended its coverage of the event with a long editorial on the front page which placed all the blame on “Pomeroy Whiskey a.k.a. John Barleycorn.” The paper’s editor opined that events like the Howell School tragedy were the natural outgrowth of the availability of whiskey and even added, “Murder is just as certain a by-product of whiskey drinking as is bastardly (sic) the outcome of free love.” (21)

How did the John Barleycorn violence affect educational activities in Howell School? Apparently it had no lasting impact despite the lurid coverage of the event in several local newspapers. John Taylor, who attended Howell School in the 1920s, heard the story of the

fight many times. He said that afterwards, many local people were afraid the school would close and their children would have to attend Morgan or Letart School. Arguments in favor of school closure were that the children knew the men who were injured or killed, blood covered much of the school's wooden floor, and the stage was where one of the victims had died. Other injured men, all bleeding, came into the school seeking assistance after the fight was over. John Taylor said the front of the school had a blood spot "bigger than a wash tub." He said the children couldn't have school with all that blood around. Hence, men from the area put a new wooden floor over the blood-stained floor the next day. (22) Their prompt action is an indication of their support of local education.

The Mason County Board of Education minutes revealed some interest in closing the school. However, the poor road condition of Tomlinson Run made pupil transportation to other schools very difficult, if not impossible. If the school closed, the children would have to travel more than two miles, thus breaking a West Virginia law. (23) Whatever the arguments, Howell School remained open until the early 1950s, when low enrollment raised questions about the operation of the school for the 1951-1952 school year. A family with three children attending the school moved away in late October to find employment in Ohio, resulting in the board of education's decision to close the school and transport the remaining students, less than ten, to a neighboring school. (24)

Conclusion

Today, if you were to turn off West Virginia Route 2 onto Tomlinson Run, drive over Howell Hill and look to your right at the top of the hill, you might see some evidence of a structure that once sat there. In the summer months, overgrown pastures and scattered trees fill the spot. In the winter, after the grass and weeds have frozen, scattered sandstone rocks are visible. At one time, a small white school sat upon those rocks, the only visible evidence of what was once an educational and community center.

This article has argued that the mayhem and murder that engulfed Howell School on a spring evening in 1915 call into question the popular belief that one-room schools are bucolic institutions untarnished by the violence of urban life. Despite the terror of the

Howell School altercation and its lurid coverage in the local newspapers, the legal establishment moved quickly to punish the assailants. Community members also responded promptly to restore the school to its former condition, and they continued to send their children there for instruction for many years.

Unanswered questions raised by this historical reconstruction are, How often and where did country school violence occur throughout the nation? Was it more prevalent in some regions and during certain time periods than in others? When a violent episode occurred, how did local and state authorities respond? Perhaps most importantly, What can we learn from these historic and current school incidents?

Notes

* Madison Gray, "Bushmaster .223: Weapon Used in Newtown Shooting a Lightning Rod in Gun Debate," *Time News Feed*, Dec. 19, 2012, <http://newsfeed.time.com/2012/12/19/bushmaster-223-weapon-used-in-newtown-shooting-a-lightning-rod-in-gun-debate/>. List of school attacks in William Glaberson, "Another Senseless Shooting," *New York Times*, reprinted in the *Commercial Appeal* [Memphis, TN], Dec. 15, 2012.

1. R. L. Leight and A. D. Rinehar, "Revisiting Americana: One-room Schools in Retrospect," *The Educational Forum*, 56, no. 2 (1992), 133-151.
2. Dorothy Rankin, *Country School Legacy: Humanities on the Frontier* (Silt, CO: Mountain Plains Literary Association, 1981.)
3. An example of the popular myth in columnist Melinda Henneberger's response to the Newtown school shootings of Dec. 14, 2012: "If guns alone—or even guns plus lousy-to-nonexistent mental health services—were the entire problem, why were no little red schoolhouses fired on in the Wild West, where everyone was armed and mental illness completely untreated?" See "Illness Shouldn't Be Confused with Evil," *Commercial Appeal* [Memphis, TN], Dec. 20, 2012.
4. Tony Williams, "A Salute to the West Virginia One-room Schools," *Journal of Rural and Small Schools*, 1, no. 2 (1986), 29-32.
5. Douglas Sturgeon, "Filling a Need: Administrative Practices in Mason County West Virginia's One-room Schools" (EdD thesis, Marshall University, 2003).
6. Dora Jan Atkinson, interview conducted by Douglas A. Sturgeon, summer 2003
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Howell School (Cooper Sub District #20) teachers, number of students, and years taught: Annie Weigand Hart, 1920; Clyde Paisley, 1921; Eva Gill, (14 students) 1926; Freda Kay, (19 students) 1927; Bess McBee, 1933; Pearl Gerlach, 1934; Dorothy Hudson, 1935; Bess McBee, 1936, 1937, 1938; Dorothy Hudson, 1939, 1940, 1941; Dorothy Hudson Atkinson, 1942; Dorothy Atkinson 1943, 1944, 1945 (13 students in 1945), 1946; Iva Boston, 1947, 1948, 1949, 1950; Mrs. John Hudson, 1951.
10. Department of Schools, *West Virginia Education Directory, 1919-1920* (Charleston, WV: Tribune Printing Co. n.d.); State Department of Education, *West Virginia Education Directory* (Charleston, WV: Parsons Printing Company, 1960-1961).
11. "The Letart Tragedy," *Tribune-Telegraph* (Pomeroy, Ohio), April 14, 1915, 1.
12. John Taylor, interview conducted by Douglas A. Sturgeon, summer 2003.
13. Editorial, *Mason Republican*, April 23, 1915, 5.

14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., "The Letart Tragedy," 1.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Editorial, *Point Pleasant Register*, April 21, 1915, 1.
19. Ibid.
20. Editorial, *Mason Republican*, April 23, 1915), 5
21. Ibid.
22. "The Letart Tragedy," 1.
23. John Taylor, interviews conducted by Douglas Sturgeon, summer 2003.
24. Mason County Board of Education Records and Meeting Minutes, 1950-1955.
25. Ibid.