

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, September 23, 2013

Blackboards, Chalk, and Erasers: During my time in school (1930–47), blackboards were an essential part of every classroom. They were used quite successfully by most teachers and with less success and some frivolity by their many pupils. Please note that I said “pupils,” and not “students.” Early on, one of my teachers told me she had many pupils but very few students.

Some of my blackboard reflections are described herewith. In the second grade as the Christmas season approached, Miss Metten, my teacher, had red and green chalk, with which she drew all sorts of holiday scenes on the blackboard in her classroom. I had never seen anything but white chalk before, and I was quite impressed with the colorful images of decorated trees, Santa Claus, and all that goes with that time of year.

One of my classmates from Grade 3 through 12 was Bill Bergman. Bill was not normal in many ways, and his physical coordination was very poor. He held a pencil like a chisel, so his skills in handwriting and arithmetic were very poor. In the fourth and fifth grades, he was dropped off for school before most of his classmates, and he would go immediately to the blackboard on one side of the large classroom. “Way out on “cloud nine,” he would envision prehistoric creatures and start to draw. All sorts of weird battles would take place, being narrated as they were drawn. Bill was completely oblivious to anyone or anything else in the room; he was enraptured in his gruesome tales. With an eraser in one hand and chalk in the other, he would half-erase as fast as he would draw, explaining to himself what awful battle was progressing (others in the room were used to it and paid no attention). This daily activity usually lasted about ½ hour, after which the teacher, Miss Passmore (fourth grade) or Miss Wright (5th grade), would tell him it was time for school to start and attempt to erase the mess on the blackboard. Bill Bergman’s recreation for the day may have been over.

In high school, Mr. Detwiler was my math teacher. He was good at what he did and could illustrate geometry very accurately on the blackboard. He would take a large compass with chalk on one end and draw a perfect circle. His pupils tried but couldn’t do as well. One of the jobs of the janitorial staff was to thoroughly clean all blackboards after each school day.

When I was a senior, anything in school was preferable to studying. I would play ping pong with friends when possible, but nearly as popular was throwing blackboard erasers at waste baskets, and keeping score. Walt Lumley (FAHP member Dave’s father) and I were especially competitive. This would take place in the senior class homeroom until Mrs. Black would come in and break it up.

Finally, in an old building on the quadrangle at Brown University, I. J. Kapstein, head of the English Department, tried to teach us public speaking as part of our Air Force Pre-Meteorology course. He would give us a scientific topic to explain verbally before the class in about 5 minutes and encouraged us to use the blackboard behind to illustrate our remarks. This was difficult at the time but turned out to be excellent experience.

Do blackboards survive in schools today? Perhaps they do, as white chalk is still available (we use it in the shop). If there are blackboards and chalk, there must be erasers.