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B A C K T O S C H O O L

Back to school at Searsville - the fall of 1878

BY MARION SOFTKY

Imagine the first day of school 112 years ago.

Twenty-seven boys and 22 girls—presumably all shiny clean and dressed up just as they are today—walked or rode up the dusty road to Searsville School where teacher Tidie Ayres waited, possibly a little nervously, to see what her new class would bring.

That picture is sheer imagination; it is based on dry statistics and a deep-rooted sense that some things never change—at least the first day of school.

A tantalizing picture can be reconstructed by reading four pages of statistics on schools in San Mateo County in the *Illustrated History of San Mateo County*, printed by Moore and Depue in 1878.

Another thing is known: Searsville School is no more. It was flooded in the name of progress in 1893 as water backed up behind the new Searsville Dam.

Not so many children went to school in those days—especially boys. The Searsville district reported 98 white children between five and 17 years of age; 57 were boys. Yet only 48 children were enrolled in Searsville School. Maybe some went to Redwood City to attend higher grades. The tables tell us that 34 of these children did not attend school at all.

The Searsville School reports no Mongolian students. Neither did the Greensburg School up the valley in what is now Woodside. One of the oldest schools in the county, the classic one-room schoolhouse is still tucked away behind the modern Woodside School.

Greensburg had much better attendance than Searsville. It had 66 white children, and 59 of them went to the



THE LAST DAY OF SCHOOL FOREVER was a big occasion at Searsville School. The teachers strung up bunting and ferns and flowers to commemorate the historic day before the school closed its doors and was slowly drowned by the rising waters of Searsville Lake. Photo: San Mateo County Historical Association.

school. Only three children did not attend school at all. The average attendance at Greensburg was 92 percent, compared to 84 percent at Searsville.

Portola Valley historian Dorothy Regnery attributes the difference in attendance to the makeup of the two communities. A hundred years ago the town of Searsville was primarily made up of first generation immigrants from

Europe who often valued work above school. By contrast, people living around Greensburg were mostly English-speaking Yankees who knew the value of an education.

Staffing ratios, salaries and budgets were also dramatically different in those days.

The single teacher at Searsville earned \$80 a month or \$870 for the school

year of almost 10 months. Over at Greensburg, teacher Annie F. Stevens earned \$70 a month or \$420 for a six month school year.

A puzzle: the book says each school had one male teacher; yet their names sound distinctly feminine.

Budgets for the whole school

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Searsville School

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wouldn't support a single child at today's costs. Total expenditures for the Searsville School were \$1,126.11 that year; at Greensburg, with a shorter year, the school spent \$881.63.

All 27 school districts in the county splurged with a total of \$34,303.50 in total expenditures.

The value of the school, land, and all equipment also came from another world. Searsville School, the land it sat on, the furniture and books in the library, and all apparatus added up to a grand total of \$2,850. At Greensburg it was only \$2,770; Greensburg had fewer books.

But at that time—1876—the total assessment roll for taxable property in San Mateo County was \$6,409,635. County taxes produced \$13,491.30, and a

poll tax yielded another \$2,638.90. The school tax was two mills.

In San Mateo County there were 40 first, second and third grade schools. Thirty school houses were built of wood.

These 40 schools were staffed by 40 teachers, 12 men and 28 women. The men earned an average of \$87.92 per month; women received \$63.21.

Each district was governed by three trustees. The names for the Searsville district are not familiar: William Hughes, William J. O'Shaughnessy, and Hugh Kelly.

But some of the Greensburg trustees were famous. Thomas Shine and W. J. McNulty are familiar names in Woodside; O. R. Tripp is the legendary dentist and storekeeper who gave his name to a road and to the old Woodside store—now a county park.
