

Teachers' Guide for  
*No Bigger Than A Piano Box,  
A Country School in 1893*  
Produced for North Country Public Radio



A country schoolhouse in Stockholm, NY,  
much like the one in this story  
(courtesy of the Stockholm Historical Association)

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This production grew out of my fascination with nineteenth century rural schools. What was it like to be a student in one? A young teacher? I wanted to get beyond the many myths surrounding one-room schools and try to create an audio production that was historically accurate but also used real voices and imagination to bring the material to life.

Mabel Sprague, age 16, did indeed teach in 1893 in Fowler, NY (in St. Lawrence County, the northwestern part of the state). I found her diaries in the special collections at the St. Lawrence University library, Canton, NY. For this production I took bits and pieces from her diary, but always used only her words.

The children have real nineteenth century names taken from Mabel's notes or from the class list of a young teacher who taught in a Canton, NY school in 1875. His small journal had very brief entries and the last page is labeled "Headmarks." He listed the names of his seven students and drew a tick mark each day. May Smith was the winner with 24 marks. Names in this production: Ida Allen, Nettie Brooks, Stella Brooks, Lulu Jenne, Harry Jenne, Will Kilbourne, Lizzie LaForty, Chester Martyn, Walter Martyn, Frank Nickerson, May Smith.

It surprised me to learn how small classroom books were in the nineteenth century. Early level primers are about the size of an adult hand. They were printed on cheap paper to keep costs down as students had to supply their own books. The stories were very moralistic but by the end of the nineteenth century most primers had drawings to accompany the stories.

Younger students may be surprised to learn that if they had gone to school one hundred years ago they would have been sharing the room with teenagers. Sometimes children as young as three years old attended school! School officials preferred the starting age to be five. The upper age limit was usually 14 or 15 though students who had missed school in their younger years might attend as older teens or adults to learn how to read and do ciphering (arithmetic). In school photos from the time it is often difficult to tell who is the teacher.

The teacher divided her students up into different "classes" by age and/or ability. While one class stood and recited their lesson the other classes were to sit and study. Of course, if the reciting class had something interesting to read, the whole school listened. Not surprisingly, in this production the teacher has a difficult time keeping her students "on task."

We hear much about the physical punishments teachers used one hundred years ago to discipline students—whips, rulers, switches—so I was fascinated to read Mabel's innovative punishment for her student, Lizzie LaForty. "Punished her by telling her to strike my hand with the ruler which I had given her. She would not do it and soon was in tears." Mabel also kept students after school when they misbehaved.

The older students in the production read a story from the second primer called *The Indian, the Panther and the Bear*. It takes place in New York State in the northern Adirondack Mountains. By the

late-nineteenth century many animals were hunted out from New York State—the beaver had been trapped almost to extinction, wolves and panthers (mountain lions) were gone, and even white-tail deer were scarce in most of the state.

Most of the nineteenth century math books I studied included “mental arithmetic”. The teacher would tell students the problem and they were expected to solve it—quickly—in their heads. In an age before adding machines and hand-held calculators this would have been a useful skill.

Students also memorized material—poems, speeches—and recited it at the end-of-term Examination Day. I found a rhyming geography book that advertised its poems as an easy way to learn facts about capitals and rivers and countries. The students in this production have the task of memorizing lines about all the significant cities in New York State. We certainly would have to change the pertinent facts if we re-wrote this piece today.

## RESOURCES

For studying local history, nothing is better than a town museum or a county historical society. The historian probably has a map showing where all the one-room schools were located and may have photos and primers from those schools. The little town where I live at the northern edge of the Adirondacks had thirteen one-room schools. Today it has none. (Students are bussed to a consolidated school in the next town).

Many, many books have been written about rural schools. They range from scholarly tomes to rambling reminiscences. One that I found useful was *Woman’s “True” Profession, Voices from the History of Teaching* by Nancy Hoffman (The Feminist Press 1981). It contains excellent primary source material. I published some of my research in an article in the St. Lawrence County Historical Association *Quarterly*, vol. XLVIII no.1-2, 2003. The article is “Gentle Schoolmarm or Ambitious Young Man? Mid-nineteenth Century Common School Teachers in Northern New York.”

I spent over a week at the American Antiquarian Society library in Worcester, MA. immersed in nineteenth-century school primers, children’s novels and teacher’s diaries. This library is an amazing resource for early American history.

And never forget the wonderful novels about the common school experience. Many teachers in New York State use *Farmer Boy* by Laura Ingalls Wilder, a novel set in the 1860’s. In the book, Almanzo Wilder is terrified that his teacher will be beaten up by the “Big Boys.” Richard Peck’s *The Teacher’s Funeral* is an excellent and funny historical novel set in the mid-west. The list could go on and on.

Any historical blunders in *No Bigger Than A Piano Box* are completely my own. If you find anything that may be in error, please write and let me know. Or, if you are intrigued by this story and need more information, I may be able to help. I have an entire bookcase devoted to books on this topic.

Betsy Kepes, February 26, 2007  
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A page from sixteen-year-old Mabel Sprague's journal  
(special collections, Owen D. Young Library, St. Lawrence University)

1894

Nov 8/93

Wednesday - I have taught school nearly eight weeks and like it very well. in some directions I have made a success while in others I have failed but I am going to try again I get along very well excepting one branch, and that is mathematics in form of Robinsons Progressive Arithmetic Ugh! I have failed in two or three examples sad to tell.

Last night I dined with Mr Karcus people they were very kind and tried to please me or seemed to.

A school is a good place for fun but the teacher ought to be able to keep her face straight at all hazards. And I am a poor hand.

Incidents in my school.

The strangest ideas crop out now and then and in their ignorance they make such mistakes, also a slip of the tongue may cause some commotion while others

Beginning primers started with two and then three letter words.  
(An ox is.) Notice that every word in this story is only one  
syllable. Try writing a story this way!

(Sargent's Standard School Primer, 1861 American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA)



### THE BAD BOY.

The bad boy is on the wall.  
He got on the wall to steal  
a ripe pear.

But a man, with a stick, is  
by. He saw the bad boy  
steal the pear, and will whip  
him.

We must not take what is  
not ours. To do that is to  
steal; and to steal is a sin.

To lie is a sin; and he who  
steals will lie.

## LESSON III.

CRU' EL, unfeeling.  
 CHIRP' ING, making the noise  
 of small birds.  
 HUN' GRY, in want of food.  
 CREA' TURE, living being.  
 PER' ISH, die; expire.  
 WICK' ED, bad; sinful.

TEMPT' ED, enticed.  
 HARM' LESS, blameless; innocent.  
 BE CAUSE', got to be.  
 BE CAUSE', for the reason that.  
 WITH OUT', destitute of.  
 A LONE', by itself.  
 FOR GET', fail to remember.



THE CRUEL BOY AND THE ROBINS.

1. As a robin had left her nest to seek food for her young birds, a cruel boy shot her from a branch of a tree, and she fell to the ground dead.

2. The poor young birds did not know why they were left so long without food and they kept chirping and chirping till it was dark, when they all lay still in their nest.

Detailed drawings gave interest to moralistic stories. A vocabulary list usually began each lesson. Notice the definition of "without".

(The School Reader, second book by Charles M. Sanders, 1862 American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA)

3. There were five young robins in the nest; and that night three of them became so cold and hungry, that they died before morning.

4. The other two lived till the next day, when one of them, in getting on the edge of the nest, fell out on the ground, and was caught by the cat.

5. The other poor little creature kept chirping, as long as it had strength to make a noise, and then it died alone in its nest.

6. Thus these five pretty young robins were left to perish in this cruel way, because their mother had been shot by a wicked boy.

7. I hope none of my young friends will forget this story, when they are tempted to kill the harmless birds, or even insects that God has made.

## LESSON IV.

MEAN' ING, sense.  
 SPEAK' ING, talking.  
 PLEAS' ING, interesting.  
 SUP POSE', think.  
 MIS TAKE', error.  
 MIS CALL', mispronounce.

STAM' MER, stammer or falter.  
 SEN' TENCE, a series of words, making complete sense; a period.  
 PAUS' ES, stops; points.  
 WEA' RY, tire; fatigue.

In 1893 Mabel Sprague may have read this thirty-year-old advice. Primers were handed down from parent to child and circulated for years.

(The School Reader, second book by Charles M. Sanders,  
1862 American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA)

## P R E F A C E .

Distinct Articulation and correct Pronunciation, being essential to good reading, no pains should be spared in acquiring these prime requisites.

To aid the pupil in doing this, we have given, in the fore part of the present volume, a Table of the Elementary Sounds, specimens of the most common faults in Pronunciation, and, also, examples of difficult combinations of the letters. These should receive a large share of attention and practice every day, till every word, every sound, and every combination of sounds, can be easily and clearly uttered.

With the same design, the words of each lesson, which are more likely to be mispronounced, have been so arranged as to exhibit by comparison and contrast their true pronunciation. With due attention, therefore, to these aids, and a proper regard to the words forming the spelling lessons, the pupil can scarcely fail to pronounce all the words with ease and correctness.

To enable the pupil to avoid, as far as may be, that disagreeable monotony that always results from reading a succession of pieces of the same general cast, great pains have been taken to secure the utmost possible variety of style and matter. In this particular, therefore, the following pages will be found especially interesting.

But, above and beyond all excellencies of style, matter, and arrangement, the moral influence of the lessons has been steadily considered; since, whatever else may form the superstructure, *sound morals* must ever be the foundation of right education.

With this brief prefatory note, the present number of the Series goes forth, designed, like all the rest, to contribute its mite toward educating the youth of our country.

NEW YORK, *June*, 1860.

**Sabbitis and his son, members of the Mohawk nation,  
were well-known as trappers and guides in the  
Adirondack Mountains of New York State.**

(The Schoolhouse Reader by Charles Sanders, 1860 American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA)

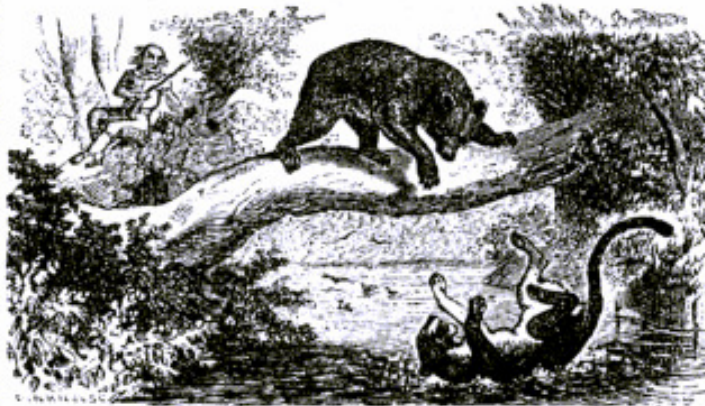
SECOND READER.

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LESSON LXXVI.

So' CIAL, free to converse.  
AN' EC DOTES, stories.  
RE LAT' ED, told.  
TRAP' PING, setting traps.  
SUR' FACE, face, or level.  
WOUND' ED, maimed.  
E NOR' MOUS, very large.  
PER CEIV' ED, ascertained.  
TER RIF' IC, fearful.

STRUG' GLING, striving.  
GROWL' ING, grumbling.  
O VER TAK' EN, caught.  
COM' BAT ANTS, fighters.  
CON' FLICT, combat.  
CAU' TIOUS LY, carefully.  
IN FLICT' ED, given, or brought.  
OC CUR' RENCE, event.  
QUAR' REL SOME, contentious.



THE INDIAN, THE PANTHER, AND THE BEAR.

1. On the river St. Lawrence lived an aged Indian named Sabastas, who belonged to the St. Regis tribe.

2. He was gentle and friendly, and though nearly a hundred years old, he was very social, and pleasing in his manners; and many were the anec-

**This 1909 photograph of the Porter Hill School in Hermon, NY shows the wide age range of the students who shared the same one-room school. Notice how the teacher on the far right looks to be the same age as many of her students.**

*(From the Collections of the St. Lawrence County Historical Association )*



*No Bigger Than A Piano Box* was written and produced by Betsy Kepes and recorded at North Country Public Radio in Canton, NY.

For more information, visit [www.ncpr.org/teacher](http://www.ncpr.org/teacher)