A country schoolhouse in Stockholm, NY, much like the one in this story

(courtesy of the Stockholm Historical Association)
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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1894

Nov 193

Wednes day - 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 Robinson’s Progressive Arithmetic. I have failed in two or three examples and I fail. Earl ought to aid with his native 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 stiff at all hazards. And I have a few hand accidents 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 all...
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)
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)
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)
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)
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)