

First Year at New Garden Boarding School

E., "First year at New Garden Boarding School," *The Guilford Collegian*, 4:6 (February 1892), pp. 138–143.

As you read...

This memoir was published in the *Guilford Collegian*, a magazine of Guilford College, in 1892. The anonymous author (she is listed only as "E.") is recalling her days as a girl of "not yet ten years old" in 1837, when the college was founded as New Garden Boarding School.

NEW GARDEN BOARDING SCHOOL AND GUILFORD COLLEGE

New Garden Boarding School was founded by Quakers in 1837 to serve the large Quaker community around Greensboro, North Carolina. The school admitted both boys and girls, which was highly unusual for the time. It was the first coeducational school in the South, although — as E. recalls — great pains were taken to keep boys and girls from ever actually interacting!

The school became Guilford College in 1888, when it became a four-year liberal arts college. Its mission is still focused on its Quaker values, though only a small fraction of its students are Quaker today.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What does E. remember most about her days as a schoolgirl?
2. How old was she when she wrote this memoir? Why do you imagine she might remember (or choose to write about) some things and not others?
3. What was the school like, physically?
4. What was her day like as a student?
5. In what ways was religion a continual part of her experience at school? How does she recall the (Quaker) meetings?
6. A child nine or ten years old would today be in fourth or fifth grade. How did E.'s life compare with the life of a typical fourth-grader today?

When I saw my parents drive away from the school house and I, not yet ten years old, was left among entire strangers, it took all my courage to appear brave, as I wandered about the house and grounds, ill at ease and half homesick, with some strange little girls. To my unpracticed eyes all was so strange and new and on such an immense scale, literally a place

of “magnificent distances.” As I remember our teachers from the “north” they looked the embodiment of grace and ease, in their lovely lawns¹ and dainty slippers as they cheerfully and kindly greeted the students. In a few days the foreign feeling wore off and I became acquainted with several little girls about my own age, one from Philadelphia in particular that I grew quite intimate with. We were in the same classes, and it was not long till we were put into a Child’s Philosophy and were quite elated over the name of studying Philosophy. Among other things we learned something about Aeolian Harp², and though our ideas were rather crude, we had occasion to remember that, for, though knowing music was not allowed on the premises³, we took it into our heads to construct one, so one windy day we went down in the woods north of the house and tied some silk thread between two little trees and hastily ran back to the house to wait results. To our dismay we soon heard some musical tones from that direction, and feeling guilty began to wonder what would be done with us, for we were sure to be found out. Imagine our relief when we saw a teamster driving round the back of the kitchen with some supplies, and found it was the bells on his horse that made the music and not our harp at all.

The accommodations you would think now rather primitive. Though that is considered a mild climate, yet there were some very decidedly cold, frosty and snowy mornings, and we dressed in a cold lodging room, ran down to a pump in the back yard, to wash in cold water, and sometimes to subdue frosty rebellious hair would wet it, then, before we got back up stairs it would be frozen into decided icicles, and the next thing was to run down to the fire in the school room and thaw it out before the toilet⁴ could be completed. It took a good while for open wood fires to exert much softening influence on the chilly atmosphere of the large, cold, school room; so there were unavoidably some very uncomfortable mornings. In those days it was considered a trespass of no small magnitude to go ever so little beyond the boundaries marked out for us and a very grave offence for the boys and girls to speak to each other without special permission, but verging on the unpardonable sin for letters to be exchanged.

Once there were rumors afloat that some such letters had been discovered and intercepted, and there was much surmising and mysterious whispering and finally three or four girls were sent for, and officials held court martial in secret session, with closed doors, and what transpired within was not revealed, but the threatnings of Sinai⁵ filled the air with a sense of awe. After awhile the girls with tear stained faces re-appeared, took their seats and the common routine of school life went on just as this practical world of ours is wont to do; heedless alike of joy or sorrow the river of life’s activities flows on.... The monotony of the long Sabbath mornings in summer was sometimes broken by having a tray brought in filled with pieces of dry bread and large unsalted sea crackers, but anything was thankfully received and enjoyed. In process of time at the ringing of the bell we were all marshalled in our places, two and two, and the march to “meeting” commenced.

We all enjoyed the walk through the grand old woods, and to me was the added pleasure of being sure to see some members of my father’s family there, and often some little package from home was handed to me as we filed out, not daring to break ranks any more than if we were convicts. One midweek “meeting” a little four year old brother came with my father and in turning around caught a glimpse of me, and wanted to express his delight in some way, and after twisting about and smiling awhile he could stand it no longer, but broke the deep solemn silence of an old Quaker “meeting” in his clear childish voice with, “Sister, we brought ‘ee some new shoes.” My dismay was something dreadful

and the silence that followed so profound that I dared not lift my eyes from the floor, but waited in trembling anxiety for the time of “shaking of hands” to come. It had been one of the unfilled ambitions and desires of my young life to possess some blue prunella shoes, and now they had come, and though their heralding was so dreadful, yet I was happy in possession at last, but “swift trod sorrow on the heels of joy,” they proved too small and had to be returned and were replaced by common black ones. So early the discipline of disappointment commenced in life and just as real and as hard to bear as subsequent seemingly greater ones.

Committee days!⁶ Who is there that don't remember them? To us little girls committee day was, as we read later on in Pollock's *Course of Time*, the “great day for which all other days were made.” When the committee was to visit our room an air of expectancy pervaded the whole place. Chairs were ranged across the platform and on each side to the fire-place. All were arranged, each in our best dress, and waited with fast beating hearts the advent of that august body. The opening of the side hall door, and creaking of shoes heralded their coming, and with slow and measured step they filed in and advanced to take up their position in front of us. Then the ordeal commenced; classes were called out, exercises gone through and a general parade of our advancement in every way. The Committee was given time to express their opinion of it all, which was generally encouraging, but the burden of most of their communications was to impress upon us our superior advantages over what they enjoyed in their school days and exhortations to appreciate and improve our privileges. But the regular field day that brought enjoyment unalloyed, was when all who wished were allowed to go, after tea, with baskets and buckets out south of the school house, to pick blackberries in aunt Polly Brown's pasture field where they grew in abundance. The freedom we felt, the quiet of the whole scene the rays of the sun slanting across the field, the tinkle of cow bells, the long shadows cast by the woods, all was so delightful, especially as we knew it would be rounded up with luscious blackberry pie next day for dinner.

There were curtains of calico suspended the whole length of the dining room to separate the tables of the boys and girls, but one morning it was found that the curtains had disappeared during the night, and for several times the boys had to wait till after the girls had finished their meals; until some carpenters put up a plank partition. The evening collection before retiring⁷, is a sort of kaleidoscopic memory of sleepy girls, dim burning candles with stalactites of tallow formed down the sides and continuing on to the candlestick like a miniature flow of lava; the incessant barking of Carlo, a little black dog that seemed to feel the responsibility of the care and oversight of the institution in general, the droning of some huge beetle slowly wheeling about the room, or laboriously rising from repeated falls from contact with post or wall, unsettled dispute of myriads of katydids in the trees outside with some such text as “The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them,” or “Ho; every one that thirsteth,” till all was finally lost in entire forgetfulness, when some more wide-awake girls would kindly shake us back to consciousness, and the fact that all were leaving the room....

On the web

About Guilford College

http://www.guilford.edu/about_guilford/

A brief history, from the college's website.

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Notes

1. *Lovely lawn* is a sheer, lightweight fabric.
2. An aeolian harp is a musical instrument with strings designed to be played by the wind. It is named for Aeolus, the ancient Greek god of the wind.
3. Early Quakers did not allow music, even in their meetings. Even religious music was prohibited, for fear that the music would become an end in itself, sparking pride and competition.

This exhibit (see <http://www.learnnc.org><http://www.haverford.edu/library/quakermusic/1.html>) from Haverford College Libraries looks at music and Quakerism.

4. *Toilet*, at this time, meant all aspects of personal grooming — washing, dressing, brushing one's hair, and so on.
5. Mount Sinai in Egypt was the mountain on which Moses was said to have received the Ten Commandments from God. In ancient times, it was believed by some in the Middle East to be the dwelling place of God.
6. On "committee day," an examining committee observed the students as they demonstrated their academic proficiency. These committee examinations were the equivalent of today's end-of-course tests, but delivered orally and in public.
7. An evening prayer service before going to bed.