

MR. PASKE

His name was Orlando Paske. To his sixth grade students he was "Mr. Paske" and to the students of Fernhill School in St. Louis Park he was simply called "The Principal". In those days administration and faculty were sometimes found in the same person.

Having spent my entire grade school years in the same school, I knew it was inevitable to have Mr. Paske as a teacher. His reputation, I was to find out, was well deserved; yet how classically strange that he was to become my favorite teacher.

To my eleven-year-old perspective, he was old, but then anything over 25 was bordering on senility so now I can only guess his age at around forty. His hair was thinning, his voice was firm, and he had only one arm. We never knew how he lost his other arm, but he did not consider himself handicapped and neither did we. He was the right teacher for us at the right time. Being at the top of the pecking order in a small school, any superiority we may have assumed was personally attended to by the humbling influence of Mr. Paske.

He knew we did not wish to contribute more to our education than was minimally required, so he prodded our capabilities and expected extra. How dare he make us memorize—but he did—and do you know, I still remember those required verses. And he actually made us write poetry—it hardly seemed fair, but we did—and surprises of surprises, it turned out to be fun. And he assigned books for us to read. I had to read Little Women. It had never been one of my favorite books but it served as a discipline to read a book, not to my liking, from cover to cover.

As far as Mr. Paske's discipline was concerned, it was administered with predictable fairness and alacrity. An offender overstepping the bounds of propriety was extended an "invitation" to partake in Mr. Paske's company after school. It would appear that one boy in particular, Bruce Bellows, had secured a permanent unpaid after-school employment washing blackboards with Mr. Paske serving as over-seer and warden. Bruce, an enduring class clown, never remedied his detention-causing performances and even took in stride the occasional calls Mr. Paske would make to Mr. Bellows. The calls served as parental permission for a one-handed wallop delivered to the seat of Mr. Paske's problem. By June Mr. Paske and Bruce had become fast, if not respected, friends. It was a strange camaraderie. I sometimes felt that Bruce's lack of decorum was a blatant means to gain Mr. Paske's attentions.

But we all fought for these attentions, and Fridays were special days. If we behaved during the week, he promised to read poetry to us on Friday. The cosmopolitan computer-age kids of today will find it hard to believe that this was a treat but then they never had poetry read to them by Mr. Paske. With a sprinkling of humorous rhyme to insure our interest, he read us the classics and delivered our weekly moral lesson in verse. Sad was the Friday when our week's behavior did not merit this treat.

Mr. Paske's sixth grade class was held in a partial basement room. Our eye level was even with the hordes of happy feet departing for recess. Spring was a particularly difficult time of the year to keep our attention. Even poetry could not compete with our vernal awakenings. Baseball and Mr. Paske's promise to join us for a game were to be our Friday treat....and his only hope for order during the week.

He was as good as his word and his promise would involve batting for both sides. All year I had forgotten about his missing arm but as he stepped up to bat, I became sadly aware of his loss of limb. His stance seemed unbalanced but I could have spared myself any misgivings of sympathy as he batted the ball farther than even our best hitter. We never got tired of cheering as that ball burned its way past the center fielder and gave each team an automatic point.

The school year was ending and it would be many years before I would realize Mr. Paske had been my favorite teacher. I would meet other teachers in my school years as dedicated but none would strike home the realization of the hidden potentials within myself as that single-handed-hitter hitting into the fields of unreachable goals.

— by Gwen Evans