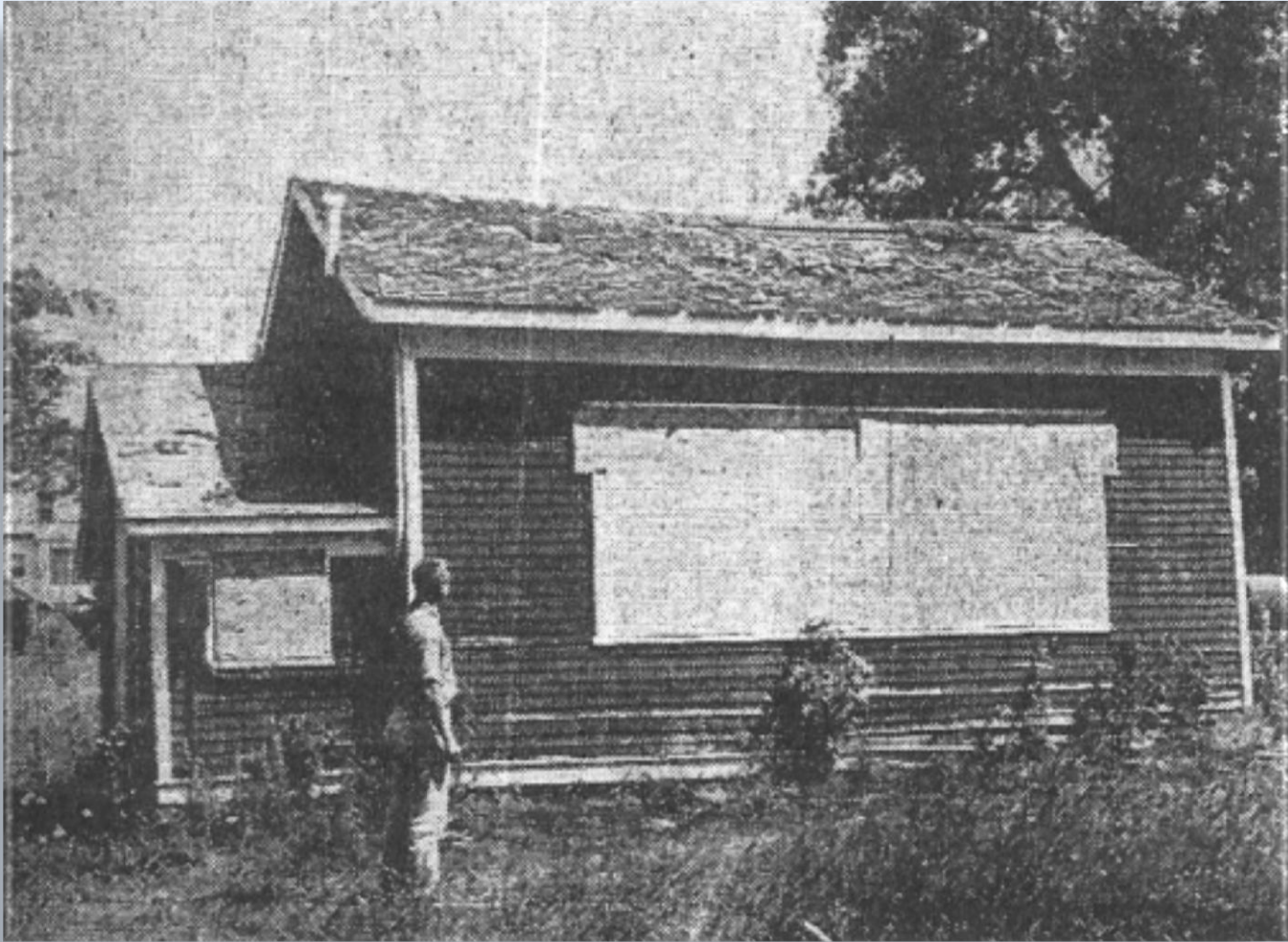


# *The Skunk Holiday Schoolhouse*

*by Frederick Wickert*



A charming part of Americana that has passed on is the little one room schoolhouse. When a small lad on the farm, my younger sister and I attended such a schoolhouse and I am thankful for having had the experience.

The school that we attended was located on Waring Road in the town of DeWitt, New York. It was a one-mile walk from our farm. The school had some history with my family before my sister and I attended. Our maternal grandmother, Nettie Gould was the teacher there when she was a young woman. By the time we attended the school, she had become elderly and another much younger woman was the teacher, but our grandmother continued to have something to do with it.

Our grandmother was by then the janitor of DeWitt District #12 as it was officially known. Every night she walked the mile to the school. She cleaned the building and washed the black board. In the cold months, she banked the coal fire in the pot-bellied stove for the night.

In the morning she again walked the mile to the school. She shook the grates in the stove, removed the ashes, replenished the stove with coal and opened the drafts to get the fire going and to heat up the classroom. She then removed the ashes from the building and carried buckets full of coal from the shed out back in to the school to replenish the supply for the day. If there was any snow, she shoveled the snow from the road to the front steps of the school building. She then walked back home before my sister and I left for school in the morning.

The school for the most part was not all that different from other one-room country schoolhouses. One difference was the two weathered old slate tombstones that stood in a small grove behind the school. The names of the deceased had been hand carved into the stones. They were the graves of Francis Cooper who died in 1812, and his wife Milicent who died in 1823. When the school was built in 1866, the graves had already been there a half-century.

The other unusual thing about the school was the unusual holiday that occurred every spring of undetermined duration. It was known as the "Skunk Holidays." No one seems to recall just what year the Skunk Holiday began, but it is known how it began. A skunk family one spring moved into the schoolhouse. The teacher opened the door and the windows and the children held their noses as long as they could. Then the first Skunk Holiday was proclaimed until the skunk family departed.

This became an annual event as the skunk family returned to the school every spring and this went on for generations. The school building had become in a state requiring some expensive repairs and was no longer fit for use for the children. The Town of DeWitt having inadequate space for the children of an expanding population, contracted with the City of Syracuse to take the overflow of students and the school was closed. Two years later, in 1954 the school board made the decision to have the school torn down. Sadly, the family of skunks had to find new spring quarters.

After 88 years, the little red school house known officially as DeWitt District #12, and unofficially as the school with the Skunk Holidays, and the spring home of a family of skunks, was no more.