

Around Town

by Don Lambert



MRS. CONNELL

It hardly seems possible that it's been over sixty years since my class walked through the "Little Kids Door" at the southeast end of the old Smackover Grammar School on a traumatic first day of school in 1937. As we first graders glanced up the long hallway we saw gaggles of older students who were finding their own independent way to class. We were impressed.

We first timers were dressed in our everyday best with freshly scrubbed faces, neatly combed heads, dangling curls and ribbon bows with jumbo pencils, Big Chief tablets and neatly packed sack lunches. My group was assigned to Audrey Connell's class which was in the first room on the right immediately after entering the rear of the building.

Little did we realize that she would eventually teach our children in the same building ... the same room.

When we settled at our desks and shyly looked around, we discovered new faces that would play an important part of our lives for the next 12 uninterrupted years. It was also on that day that we established lifelong friendships.

We soon became engrossed in trying to keep the colors neat and our letters within the lines and learning the mysterious sequence of our a-b-c's.

We were the least in our little world, but Mrs. Connell was our haven and our strength in this strange new land. She was our role model, our nurse, our mother and our mentor. She instilled in us the confidence that we could learn and survive in this new world of ours despite the fact that as children of the Great Depression, there were many of us living in poverty.

It wasn't long before our apprehension had melted into the certain awareness that someday we would survive and gain entrance to the "Big Kids Door" at the front of the building. Sixth grade was our goal and, once attained, we would be on top of our universe. We would get to play on the farthest playground.

My reflections that I write can be shared and enhanced by legions of former students both before and after my time.

Mrs. Connell arrived in Smackover fresh out of college and taught high school English and literature during the Oil Boom era. Her first classes met in the rustic Baptist Tabernacle. She was the sponsor of the first S.H.S. graduating class. Later she was needed on the elementary level and taught first grade for over thirty years until retirement in 1963. How many students did she teach during those 40 years? Two thousand? Three?

At the end of her final school day, she was presented with a pin that entitled her to a lifetime membership in the P.T.A. There was no ceremony, no plaque, no photograph, no oratory and no media attention of the event. She accepted her pin with gratitude and quietly left the classroom for one last time.

Today, childhood vignettes lie scattered and faded but there are still many of us who remember we students of Audrey Connell. Although decades separate us in age and time, a common experience weaves through out pasts to create a common experience that grips our souls and we remember and we appreciate and we revere the memory of our Mrs. Connell.

Audrey Clark Connell died in January, 1995 at the age of 92.