

Mary L. McGee's Story
Submitted to the Iowa Department for the Blind
January 18, 2011

Iowa Department for the Blind Oral History Project

Mary L. McGee
Des Moines, Iowa

Educational Experiences

A. Iowa Braille & Sight Saving School

Before I relate my specific experiences, I'll provide some general information about the Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School (I.B.S.S.S.), hereafter referred to as the Braille School. I attended that school from the beginning of the fall term of 1960 through the end of the spring term of 1970.

The education was segregated. Classes were small; I believe I had seven others in my kindergarten class. Since the school was residential, we had house parents to supervise us when we weren't in classes. Every aspect of our lives was regimented and very impersonal. I always thought being at the Braille School was sort of like being in the military because slight infractions of the many rules resulted in criticism and punishment; positive reinforcement was rare. We grudgingly nicknamed the place "the Braille Jail", an act that was not appreciated, to say the least.

The school consisted of several buildings on a campus in Vinton, Iowa. Its mailing address was 1002 G Avenue. G

Avenue was a North-South Street along the East side of the Main Building. On the West side of that building, there was an oval drive, which we appropriately called “the Oval”. On the West side of the oval were the laundry and the heating plant for the campus.

To the Southeast of the Main Building was the Children’s Cottage, which contained all the facilities for the kindergarten, and primary special classes. First-grade students slept there, but had classes in the Main Building. The Children’s Cottage connected to the Main Building by a tunnel, as did all the buildings except the hospital and the gym.

West of the Children’s Cottage was the Boys’ Dorm. (I believe they call it Rice Hall now.) West of that were a maintenance shed and the gym, which was on the Southwest corner of the campus.

Palmer Hall, the girls’ dorm, was directly North of the Main Building. The Music Department was in the basement; instrumental music was on the West end and vocal music was on the East end. The Home Economics Department was on the first floor on the East end of the building.

The hospital was directly West of Palmer Hall. It was more of an infirmary than a hospital, but we called it the “hospital” anyway. We had flu shots, physical examinations, eye examinations, TB tests, and other blood tests done there. Whenever we were sick with anything from a headache to colds and flu, we went to the hospital. I had frequent headaches, which caused vomiting, so I was there

regularly. Sometimes we were admitted and sometimes we weren't; the school physician made that decision when he made his daily visits. If the doctor wasn't available, the school nurse made the decision.

The hospital was the health care center of the Braille School; only the dentist's office wasn't located there. In the fall, a Vinton dentist came to examine teeth in an office in the basement of the Main Building. If anyone's teeth needed fixing, he'd make an appointment for a future day, and do the work. Fortunately, I never needed to have any work done.

The Main Building contained all other classrooms and the library. In the basement were maintenance areas, the dining area, the dentist's office, and the Arts and Crafts Departments. On the first floor were the administrative offices and the first, second, and third grade classrooms. The auditorium, which was called the "chapel", was also there. The fifth, sixth, and seventh grade classrooms and the library were on the second floor. All the high school classrooms were on the third floor. The main stairwells in the building were open and the stairs were iron, so, when traffic on them was heavy, they were very noisy, e.g. when high school classes were changing rooms.

I began in 1960 with kindergarten. Vinton was 83 miles from where I lived on a farm between Clermont and Postville, Iowa. It was traumatic learning that I had to travel Vinton, stay overnight all week, and could not attend school with the neighbor kids with whom I was acquainted. One day my mother simply told me I had to go to Vinton to

school instead of Clermont Elementary. She told me I had to go because I was “different from others” and I would fail at Clermont Elementary because I couldn’t learn as fast as the other kids. At the time, I didn’t comprehend the meaning of that statement, but I could understand her sadness when she made it and I assumed whatever being “different” meant was something bad. My dad said I needed to be with “my own kind” in school. I didn’t know or care what my “kind” was; my only concern was having to leave home.

Since I was five years old and had never been alone away from home before, when I started school at Vinton, I had several fears. My greatest fear was of nighttime thunderstorms, which were numerous. The thunderstorms always woke me and I was afraid, but no one cared. The authoritarian environment was anything but nurturing and remained constant for my entire stay at Vinton. My clearest memories of my feelings in the kindergarten year are of newness, fear, and anger that I was “sent” to Vinton in the first place. I always wondered if it had something to do with the dance class for which my mother had enrolled me but during which I didn’t learn anything and had to quit. The kindergarten class took many “field trips” to the Main Building to learn about other parts of the school.

On a Sunday in 1962, a tornado hit parts of the Braille School and caused severe damage to some of the buildings. Prior to the tornado, the Music Department was in a building on the West side of the oval drive. It was called Orchestra Hall. That building was never repaired; the Music Department was moved instead to Palmer Hall.

I went home on some weekends and vacations: Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, and the summer vacation. We had classes on Labor Day, Columbus Day, and Veterans' Day. (Presidents' Day was not a holiday at that time.) Because traveling was necessary, parents formed car pools so they could more easily transport students to and from school. My dad's car pool included students from Decorah, West Union, Olewein, and Hazelton. The 83-mile trip was two hours long one way because at the time all the roads were two-lane, farm-to-market roads that necessitated low speeds. Often, when the Cedar River flooded in the spring, the trip was even longer because we had to detour to Waterloo.

In first grade, I learned to read from phonics and "Dick & Jane" books. The print was large print; it was probably 14 or 16 point print. Policy at the school dictated that students who had any vision at all, albeit it very little, learned to read large print. Students who couldn't see the large print learned to read Braille. We had large print or Braille flash cards with new words on them to learn in addition to the books. We practiced reading aloud so we'd learn proper pronunciation from the outset. We also learned to print.

It was in first grade that faculty and staff introduced us students to the hierarchy of sight. I was called a "high partial" because I could see to read large print. "Partials" were students who could not see well enough to read large print, but they could see a little bit. They learned Braille. The "totals" were students who had no vision at all so, of course, they learned Braille. The high partials and partials were required to help the totals find their way around

campus and on field trips. A higher level of performance was expected from the partials, as was better deportment, e.g. eating habits. I recall feeling superior and sometimes angry because of the standards set by degree of vision. I couldn't figure out why my parents expected less from me than from the kids in the local community when at Vinton I was expected to outperform the others. The hierarchy of sight permeated every aspect of life at Vinton through high school and I eventually believed that the ability to see bore a direct relationship to the degree of success I'd have in later life.

My mother died in the summer of 1962, so I remember nothing about my second grade year except that I moved from the Children's Cottage to Palmer Hall. The junior girls, i.e. those in second, third, and fourth grades, lived on the second floor of Palmer Hall.

I also recall that the second grade year was the year in which I attended Sunday School and Church at a Vinton church when I stayed at school over the weekends. Parents selected a local church for their children to attend and local people transported us to and from the churches every Sunday. Consequently, I was meeting more unfamiliar people because these Vinton people were not the ones from the church at home.

I had third and fourth grades the same year because, after I took several different kinds of tests, someone determined I was sufficiently intelligent to "skip a grade". Instead of completely "skipping" either third or fourth grade,

I had some of each that year. Thus, in mid-term, I was suddenly moved into a class that was strange to me.

While in third grade, I began Girl Scouts with the Brownies. I and one other third-grade girl were an experiment to find out if we could participate adequately. We joined a troop of Vinton Elementary girls. I have good memories of that; I don't believe I was treated any differently, etc. We toured places like the Benton County Courthouse and Jail and the Vinton newspaper office. We had projects like building bluebird houses and making Christmas ornaments for the Vinton Public Library. I stayed in the Girl Scouts till I left Vinton in 1970. The Girl Scout experience is about the best memory of have of Vinton.

In November that year, Thanksgiving vacation began a day early when John F. Kennedy was shot and the school closed. One day, we went as a class into the Teachers' Lounge, where there was a television, to watch John Glenn orbit the earth three times. I began piano lessons that year. The music was large print. It was the John Thompson piano course. I learned to read, practice, and memorize rather than train my ears because I could see to do so. For learning arithmetic, we had Braille or print flash cards. We memorized multiplication and division principles through practice and more practice.

Around this time, we had a houseparent who was an evangelical Christian. She had Bible study and devotions every day. She was only there one year and when I asked my dad why she left, he said she was fired for teaching religion in a government school. We had Christmas

programs every year, however, and they always included religious music.

In fifth grade, I began learning what everyone called the “new math”, which consisted of algebraic principles. It was very confusing; we did not finish the book by the time the school year ended. As I progressed to higher grades, I found that not finishing the book was common, and I paid for this substandard education when I went to public school in the fall of 1970 and had to work extra hard to learn what I’d missed earlier.

We began typing class in fifth grade. The school had Remington and Royal manual typewriters and we memorized the keys. We started by typing fjdksla; on the “home row”, then combinations of letters and numbers, then groups of words. I don’t know how many times I typed “The quick red fox jumped over the lazy dog”. Our first real projects were letters home. As we became more proficient, we wrote business letters and class assignments. We learned to change ribbons, use correction tape when we made typos, and set tabs and margins. We partials learned to type from copy and dictation machines. Many of my headaches resulted from squinting to read the copy and trying to type what I saw accurately.

Another fifth grade experience was beginning instrumental music lessons. The class went to Palmer Hall and listened to various instruments played one at a time. Then the band director had us get a sound from a few of them that we chose to try. After that, depending on whatever sounds we made, he helped us choose which

instrument to learn to play with a long-term goal of playing in the band. I tried the trumpet, the clarinet, and the drums. My trumpet playing was loud, but it sounded a bit like a sick elephant, so that was the beginning and end of my trumpet playing. I was good with the drums and the clarinet, but my dad said girls didn't play drums, so I learned to play the clarinet.

The music for us partials was in large print. The Braille readers had Braille music. If their instrument only required one hand to play, they read with one hand and played with the other one. If the instrument required both hands, they read a few notes, memorized them, and then played them. Some kids had the natural talent to play by ear, but I was not one of them. I never had any ear training because I could SEE, even though I requested it. I greatly admired the kids who could play without reading the notes. Later, in public school and college band, I had to train my ears because there was no large print music and I had to learn a large repertoire quickly. By that time, I was good at the clarinet; I was first chair both years, played in All-State Band my senior year, and played in college band and orchestra.

Fifth grade was also the year I began taking home economics classes, in which we learned to cook and sew. I think we also learned to knit winter scarves and bedroom slippers. The first days of cooking class, we didn't do any cooking. Instead, the teacher dictated cooking terms and we wrote them verbatim in a notebook, e.g. Roast: To cook with dry heat. Then we made Chex Party Mix. Later, we made Sugar Cookies. By high school, we were preparing entire meals.

The sewing part of home economics was before the cooking part because our first project was to sew ourselves aprons to wear for the cooking classes. The school had Viking and Singer sewing machines. By high school we made clothes and modeled them at the end of the year.

Junior High at the Braille School was a time of more Girl Scouting activities, music practice, and classes. One thing stands out in my memory like it happened last week, so I'll mention it here. I had just returned to the school from a Christmas vacation and, consequently, was unpacking. My room wasn't very far from the common area of the dorm, so I overheard my dad talking to the houseparent there. My aunt was with him and they told her to "do something about her hair." They had attended our Christmas program prior to the vacation and didn't like the way I looked with others. My dad said, "Dye it or something. That bright white really stands out and she looks like a freak." Thus, during both my Junior High years, I had to allow the house parents to dye my hair with some kind of ash blonde rinse. The stuff washed out whenever the hair got wet, so they had to frequently reapply it. Some of the other kids made fun of the fact that I only looked "presentable" when the hair was dyed. In high school, I had different house parents and the hair coloring campaign was forgotten—at least until I went to public school. (Then, at my dad's insistence, I began dying it again because he believed I'd "fit in better" if I did so.)

In Junior High and High School, we held class meetings, wherein we elected class officers and used Parliamentary

Procedure to plan activities. We had both Junior High and High School Student Councils.

I don't recall much of anything about my Freshman year besides playing in the band. The band and chorus went on a tour of Central Iowa. We performed concerts at schools and churches and stayed nights in the homes of Lions Club members in the towns where we performed.

By the time I reached tenth grade, we had a superintendant named Frank Rocco. He made several changes at the Braille School. Most of these changes were an effort to demonstrate that the school should not be controlled by the Iowa Commission for the Blind in Des Moines. We students were unwilling participants in a dispute regarding the content of proper education for blind children. Kenneth Jernigan, the Commission's Director, was portrayed to us as the enemy and the embodiment of evil because he advocated teaching ALL of us, regardless of the amount of vision we had, the skills of blindness, e.g. Braille and cane travel. Rocco's faculty and staff told us that Jernigan would "make us all blind people", if he got control of the school. We partials totally denied we were blind, so we cooperated fully with Rocco's schemes, the specifics of which I do not recall. What I DO recall from that year was never having any leisure time because, when I wasn't busy studying, practicing, or engaged in Girl Scout activities, I was busy proselytizing Rocco's philosophy that we partials were doing just fine and would continue to do just fine without Braille and cane travel because we were NOT blind.

Toward the end of the spring term that year, Rocco called me into his office and asked me how I'd like attending public school the next year. Of course, I said that I would because I absolutely hated the dorm life at Vinton. He then explained that he'd meet with my dad and they'd do what was necessary to enable me to leave the Braille School for Valley Community High School of Elgin, Iowa. He told me that I'd do well in public school, that I didn't need to be in school with "blind people" because I COULD SEE. I don't remember much more about this year except that I manifested symptoms of mental illness and visited a psychologist from the University of Iowa. I continued with the psychologist for awhile after beginning public high school.

In all my years at Vinton, I never learned Braille, cane travel, or any other skills that would enable me to function without vision. Moreover, I was not prepared for a school where everybody else could see much, much more than I did.

Before I discuss my memories of Valley Community, I'll say a little about the physical education and recreation programs at the Braille School. We learned everything from dance to swimming and bowling. We had several games, which included crab soccer. In crab soccer, we hunkered down in the crab position and kicked a ball that was approximately three feet in diameter. We couldn't touch the ball. The wall at the other end of the room was the other team's goal. A goal was hitting their wall with the ball.

There was also a game called stand-up soccer with the same large ball, only we stood up and threw it at the other team's goal. Kickball was played with the same rules as baseball, only we kicked a volley ball or a soccer ball (I can't recall which) instead of batting. The pitcher rolled the ball along the ground like a bowling ball instead of throwing it. There was no striking out in this game; we had unlimited changes to kick the ball. If we could see, we kicked the ball as hard as we could and ran for first base or whichever one we could reach before someone caught it in the air. Totally blind kids had partials to tell them when to kick the ball and run with them.

We had both recreational roller skating and gym roller skating. In the elementary years, I and a few other kids had skates for use outdoors on the sidewalks. These were the metal skates that clamped onto our shoes. The school had shoe skates and some days we spent the entire gym period skating around and around the gym.

B. Public high school at Valley Community High School

Valley Community High School, hereafter referred to as Valley, was a consolidated school that included students from Clermont, Elgin, and Wadena. It was located in the country about halfway between Clermont and Elgin. All students took Driver Education during the summer and by their Junior year had completed the course. Consequently, everyone in eleventh grade except me drove to and from school most of the time. I was the only older student who

had to ride the bus and I felt odd and ashamed that I had to ride to school with the younger kids.

The first semester was unspeakably difficult, but with a lot of hard work I finished it. That semester was a shocking reality check during which I learned that the Braille School was not a microcosm of the real world. Since IDEA and its progeny were far in the future, there was no accommodation for my low vision and requesting any accommodation was unthinkable.

Public school required major adjustments. First, everything was FASTER, whether it was mastering academic material or band music. We ALWAYS finished the book by the end of the term. I already had the requisite two years of PE credit, so I didn't experience public school PE. Second, there was no hands-on teaching like at Vinton. Everything, e.g. chemistry experiments, was taught by demonstration only. Since the classes were not too large, the classrooms were sufficiently small that, if I sat in the front, I could adequately, if not perfectly, see necessary material. Third, the kids had no bizarre behaviors or mannerisms, sometimes called "blindisms", which were so common there that I didn't consider them extraordinary. I noticed major differences in actions between the kids at Valley and the majority of those at Vinton.

Photocopiers didn't exist in 1970 so handout materials were duplicated on a mimeograph machine. The machines produced copies in standard type, which looked like Courier, but the type was purple. Sometimes it was blurry and sometimes, when the ink supply was low, it was faded. A lot

of it was very difficult for me to read and the kids with normal vision complained, particularly when the print was faded.

After the first semester, I did well by just plain working harder than everyone else. I was involved in these extracurricular activities: concert and marching band, mixed chorus and girl's glee club, school play and musical, and German Club. I continued with piano and participated in countless music and speech contests. In my Senior year, I played in the All-State Band and made the National Honor Society.

I had no social life at Valley other than that which accompanied the extracurricular activities for several reasons. First, friendships were established by the time I arrived there and by nature teenagers tend to exclude outsiders. Second, despite my dad's attempts to hide the fact, school scuttlebutt had it that I'd come from some kind of "special state school"; thus, kids were hesitant to get acquainted. (Who knows what misinformation circulated regarding the reason I hadn't taken Driver Education.) Third, since I had to rely on others for transportation and spent so much time studying, I didn't really do anything outside of class except the planned activities. Fourth, I never overcame the shame and embarrassment of not being able to drive and being sick frequently due to the severe headaches, which rudely interrupted so many of my days.

When I complained about the headaches, taking the bus, lack of friends, or having to work so hard, my dad said I had one of two choices: either suck it up and do my best or

go back to Vinton. He provided no support or help. I was NEVER supposed to act like I couldn't see normally, despite the fact that I couldn't drive. I recall one time occasion a teacher was giving me a ride to some activity. Like any teenage girl, I was fussing in the bathroom with my hair, makeup, or some such thing. The teacher pulled up to the door of the house and my dad hollered through the screen, "Just go on. This God damned thing ain't ready!". The teacher came to the door and I went to the event. When I returned home, however, my dad proceeded to lecture me with respect to the facts of life for someone who was less than normal, e.g., I'd never date because I was ugly, had poor vision, and therefore would require extra help with nearly every life task.

C. Luther College

My first semester of undergraduate college in the fall of 1972 was very similar to that at Valley—very tough. The pace was faster even than public high school and, since the Rehab Act wasn't law yet, I had no accommodation till the headaches became so debilitating that my dad sent me to talk to a Vocational Rehabilitation counselor, who referred me to the Iowa Commission for the Blind, as was required by the Iowa Code. I hated the idea of the Commission because it was Jernigan's agency, but I wanted to do well in college so badly that I agreed to meet one of its counselors, Dewey Cummings. The outcome of that meeting was that the Commission provided funds to enable me to hire readers. Moreover, Dewey had some conversations with the college administration that resulted in minor accommodations like enlarged photocopies and the opportunity to type test

answers. The headaches markedly decreased and I graduated with honors.

I didn't have much of a social life at Luther, since I was so busy. The readers didn't read as fast as I would have liked and I still had to spend more time studying than the students with normal vision. I still felt self-conscious about my disability. I still felt like an oddball. However, I graduated with a double major in biology and psychology and was fortunate to participate in some extracurricular activities.