

The Last Schoolmarm: *Remembering Amanda Mahr*

By Tyler Walker

BY THE TIME SHE RETIRED IN MAY OF 1989, Amanda Mahr had become a living legend in the hallways of Chadwick School. She was never my classroom teacher, but she taught the grades just above me, and like any good fourth grader, I believed every tale I heard on the playground and every lie my older cousins told me. I'm certain that my recollection of her patrolling the hallways while clutching her trademark plastic bat has been greatly influenced by the stories I heard growing up and that continue to circulate even decades after her retirement. But it wasn't until Chadwick alumna Tonya Gardner recently reached out and asked me if I had any stories of my own to share about the white-haired old schoolmarm that I began to wonder how much of her legacy was based on fact and how much of it was born of myth.

A little research revealed that she had been born Amanda May Linkous in the fall of 1916, the youngest of six children of tenant farmers George and Mary Ann Linkous on a parcel of land five miles north of the Arkansas border. She and her siblings helped work the farm as well as they could. This meant, among other things, working barefoot up and down the long rows of the cotton patch. In the fall, the bolls would open and the whole family would sling burlap pick sacks over their shoulders and help fill a large wagon. The points on the burrs were sharp, and the plants were low to the ground so that the pickers had to stoop or move about the rows on their hands and knees. When they had collected a wagonload, they would truck their harvest to the nearby town of Protem where the cotton was run through a gin and baled into 500-pound bales

to sell. The days were long and the work was difficult, but cotton was a cash crop, which meant it not only helped pay the rent but allowed them to buy items at the country store that they couldn't get by trading with their neighbors.

Like many farmers, the family came upon hard times during the Great Depression. When a devastating drought forced many families to head west in search of work in the early 1930s, the Linkouses stuck to the land they knew and redoubled their efforts. Amanda dropped out of high school her sophomore year to help on the farm and care for her ailing mother, but with most of the children grown and new farming practices making small-time farming less feasible, the family was eventually forced off the farm anyway.

When her mother recovered, Amanda returned to high school and graduated, though by then she was twenty-two years old. There were few jobs available for women in the area at that time, so she took the Taney County teacher's examination. She passed, and in 1939, she took a position at Pelham School in Protem teaching all eight grades in a one-room schoolhouse and bringing home just \$59 a month. She taught at several other small rural schools, including Hilltop, Cedar Grove, and Bald Knob, over the next several years before accepting a job teaching fifth grade at Forsyth. She remained there for eleven years, and during that time earned a bachelor's degree in education from Southwest Missouri State in 1956.

In 1963, she began teaching the sixth and seventh grades at Chadwick School, and for the next 26 years, she served the district as either a teacher or an



elementary principal or sometimes both. By all reports, she was tough but effective. The Chadwick Class of 1984 invited her to deliver their commencement address, and the following year, the school yearbook was dedicated to her. She was named the Missouri State Teachers Association's Teacher of the Year in 1986 and received special permission from the state to keep teaching past seventy. When she finally retired at seventy-two years old, she was one of only three teachers in the state with at least fifty years of experience. The Chit Chat, Chadwick's student newspaper, reported the details of her retirement party and dedicated their April issue to her. Upon her retirement, Missouri State University honored her with their Outstanding Alumni Award. She passed away ten years later and was buried in Wolf Cemetery near her girlhood home.

These were the facts my initial research turned up, but these weren't the kind of details that Tonya Gardner was looking for when she contacted me, so I reached out to other Chadwick alumni to get first-hand accounts of their time in her class.

Her former students remembered her well. They said she was known for her store of tried-and-true sayings, which they found tiresome and sometimes ominous at the time, but now recall with fondness. Some of them, such as "idle hands are the devil's workshop" and "when the blind lead the blind, you'll both fall in the ditch" were straight from the Good Book, while others, including "as sure as God made little green apples," "save the pieces to mend the places," and "praise the Lord and pass the ammunition," were not.

She also often told her students, "You profit by making mistakes if you don't make them again," and according to her former students, she had plenty of ways to discourage the repetition of mistakes. Mahr was an old-school disciplinarian best remembered for smacking students with a plastic bat, an accusation that is universally supported by the testimony of her former students. Jacob Finney, a

social studies teacher, said his father told him about Mrs. Mahr carrying a bat around and striking students who got out of line. "I tell my students today," he said, "and they don't believe me."

Other students recalled her banging on their desks with a hammer or even throwing water in their faces if they fell asleep in class. She also carried around a yardstick that she would slam down on the desk to get a student's attention or smack across students' legs if they left them out in the walkway or wore shorts that she deemed too short. Other offenses might earn a student a stint at the blackboard standing on their tiptoes in order to keep their nose pressed inside a little circle or a swat with a broad wooden paddle.

If a student was caught chewing gum—which she said made her students look like a cow chewing its cud—she would force them to wear it on the end of their nose. Students at Chadwick today might be surprised to discover that Chadwick school board member Travis Smith and veteran fourth grade teacher Vickie Goin were among the many pupils subjected to this punishment. "Mrs. Mahr was my sixth and seventh grade teacher. ... I too have put gum on my nose, been smacked with the plastic ball bat, and had an eraser thrown at me," Vickie Goin said, calling them "good memories."

Leslie Thomas said she had Mrs. Mahr for the fifth and sixth grades. "Every spring she would bring big bouquets of lilacs in and keep them in an old aluminum pitcher," she said. "We [would have our classroom] windows that overlooked the sidewalk open to enjoy the good weather. High schoolers would come in from Vo-Tech and walk by her room, and often they were pretty rowdy. One day, she had had enough. As they walked by, she grabbed those lilacs off her desk, went to the window, and tossed the water from the pitcher onto the boys. She just laughed and laughed."

Most Chadwick alumni said they probably deserved whatever punishments they received and

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many characterized the relationship as a sort of “back-and-forth” exchange, with the students often giving Mrs. Mahr and other teachers a hard time. For instance, on at least two different occasions students put chocolate laxatives into the large coffee pot she kept in her room over the years. “We all snickered every time a teacher came in and filled up their coffee cup,” Penney Morrison said. “With students like that,” Cherlyn Miller noted, “it was no wonder she had to carry weapons!”

Though most of her former students remember her as an effective teacher, many also reported being terrified to be in her class, and her methods undoubtedly caused even well-behaved students some distress. Alan Hale recounts that students “parted like the Red Sea when she came down the

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hallway with that bat,” but also noted that even though she was intimidating, “she had your back. If you were in the right, she’d stand behind you.” Even Rena Bush, who recalls spewing her lunch all over the cafeteria when Mrs. Mahr forced her to eat peas, ultimately concluded by saying, “If you had her, you definitely learned something.”

Most folks seem to excuse her tactics by simply saying that she taught during a different time. Many of her former students bemoan the fact that there are not more teachers like Mrs. Mahr, but admit that there would inevitably be a lawsuit if she was teaching today. Those alumni may be surprised to find out that Mrs. Mahr’s physical discipline did invite legal action in at least one case in the mid-1970s after she allegedly shoved a student into a wall and dislocated his shoulder. This prompted depositions by multiple parents claiming she had injured their children on other occasions as well, and there was a faction of the community who wanted Mahr fired. When Wesley Hall was reelected schoolboard president in 1975, he noted in his journal that the first issue brought before him was what to do about Amanda Mahr and “all that business of her using a baseball bat on her

kids.” After assessing the situation, he concluded that they should retain her, for “she was the one person holding the school together.”

If even some of the stories about her are true, perhaps it shouldn’t be surprising that Amanda Mahr is still a household name in the little town of Chadwick even more than thirty years after her retirement. While her tenure at Chadwick was not without controversy, the vast majority of her former students and colleagues seem to remember Amanda Mahr fondly. While some of her methods may have been questionable, most of her former students have forgiven her trespasses because they believe she truly cared—which must be true. After all, no one teaches for fifty years without caring deeply about their students, and no one takes the time to show the kind of tough love Amanda Mahr showed her students without actually loving them a little bit too. 🐼

Authors Note: Amanda Mahr lived in Forsyth, Missouri. She served the schools of Taney County for twenty-four years before beginning her twenty-six-year stint at Chadwick School, one of the smallest K-12 public school districts in the state..

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