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Daniels Creek's 1-room school still going strong

By G. SAM PIATT
Independent News Writer
BANNER — The van bearing government tags turned left off U. S. 23 at Banner onto the country lane leading up Daniels Creek.

One mile up the creek the narrow blacktop turned to gravel and mud. The van slipped along for another half mile before pulling to a stop in front of Daniels Creek School, one of three one-room schools still operating in Kentucky.

Inside the vehicle were three state senators and a state representative — members of the Interim Joint Committee on Education — and four staff members.

They had come from Frankfort to meet teacher Meredith Slone and his students. And they had come to see for themselves if students in grades one through eight in a single classroom, with one teacher, can get an adequate education.

They arrived just in time for the morning recess. Children bounded out the door and headed for the muddy yard behind the school, some starting a game of tag and others choosing up sides for a game of basketball.

The 58-year-old frame building was showing its age. The roof sagged a little in the middle, a piece was broken out of the corner of a front window pane, and a weatherboard was missing here and there. On the hillside across the creek in front of

the school, several foxhounds in a make-shift pen barked a welcome.

Inside, the legislators walked across a bare wooden floor that never complained about muddy shoes. They found Slone adding a few lumps of coal to the pot-bellied stove in the center of the room. He brushed off his hands and welcomed the visitors.

State Sen. Nelson Allen, D-Bellefonte, chairman of the committee, walked to the blackboard at the front of the room, picked up a piece of chalk, and scrawled a message for the children to read when they returned: "Hello — we're from the General Assembly."

The others were Rep. Kenny Rapier, D-Bardstown, chairman of the Subcommittee on Elementary and Secondary Education; Sen. Ed Ford, D-Cynthiana; and Sen. Clyde Middleton, R-Fort Mitchell.

In answering questions, Slone said he "enjoyed the challenge" of teaching eight grades in a single classroom.

"I try to involve the different grades in all of the teaching," he said. "They have to combine, and they've learned that they have to be extra alert."

The level of advancement differs with each individual student, he said. "I've got a fourth-grader who can look at the map of the United States there and pinpoint just about

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Ring them in

Meredith Slone uses an old hand bell to signal the end of recess at Daniels Creek School. The one-room school, one of only three still in operation in Kentucky, has 21 students in grades one through eight and has operated since 1924.

Hoopin' it up

A broken backboard and a worn net testify to the amount of use this dirt basketball court gets at Daniels Creek School in Floyd County. The 58-year-old frame school house is beginning to show its age, but is still filled with warmth and learning on the inside.

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all 50 states. Then I've got a seventh-grader who can't tell you three."

Slone, in his fifth year as the school's lone teacher, continued to answer questions as the legislators expressed concerns about how the students did at Betsy Lane High School after graduating from the eighth grade, about special education for those who might have speech, hearing, or eye problems.

Glancing at his wristwatch, Slone excused himself, picked up a brass handbell, and stepped out onto the small front porch to ring it. The students soon filed back into the classroom and found their seats.

The entourage was joined by state Rep. Greg Stumbo, D-Prestonsburg, and Rudolph Lewis, the school's bus driver.

Some of the children looked at their visitors a bit suspiciously, it seemed, as if wondering if some attempt to close their school might follow. There was a proposal several years ago to close the school and send its pupils to consolidated schools, but Daniels Creek parents protested and won.

It's about 1½ miles from the school on up to the head of the creek. About 25 dwellings are squeezed in between the creek and the steep hills. Lewis' pickup truck with a camper top on the back serves as the bus that hauls the students to and from school.

The school had 42 students when Slone took over in 1977, but has dwindled to 21 this year.

Viola Osborne, who lives in a trailer just up the road, serves as the school's janitor. One of her chores is to kindle the fire in the old iron stove on winter mornings so that the building is warm when students arrive.

A single window air conditioner battles the heat in late summer and early spring. Five electric lights hang from the high ceiling.

"It's not as rugged as it was in the old one-room schools," Slone said.

The students are served breakfast and lunch at the small annex to the Daniels Creek Baptist Fellowship Church of Christ, located next door to the school.

Mrs. Linda Endicott, Lewis' daughter and the cook, said only one of the 21 students is required to pay for meals. Meals for the rest are subsidized because of family income levels.

Lewis, who is the pastor of the church, said the school building serves as a Sunday School on Sunday mornings. "We have 60 or 70 kids turn out to learn about the scriptures," he said.

Lewis, 68, attended the first class when the building opened in 1924, and now has great-grandchildren going there. He didn't continue his education beyond the eighth grade. "I had to go to work and make a living," he said.

Lewis said he believes church, school and community should work together in the education of children. He said he felt "it was a shame" that a copy of the Ten Commandments had to be taken down from the school house wall last year.

Stumbo was quick to defend the school. "The entire community is so involved with this school that it's like a family setting, and I think that's

conducive to learning," he said.

Allen, who is a principal at Russell Central Elementary School in Greenup County, said committee members were not there to close the school down. He said they learned about it through an Associated Press story back in early fall, and committee members had penciled in the tour as a part of the agenda for their regular monthly meeting.

"Sixty-one cents of each tax dollar goes for education, and we simply wanted to make sure that the money's being spent to the best advantage of the students," Allen said.

Apparently the legislators liked what they saw. "I'm impressed with the teacher and with the students," Ford said. "If this is what they want, then I see no reason to change it."

"We could forbid this by statute," Middleton said. "But I believe local people ought to make those decisions."

Committee members wound up inviting Slone and his students to attend a day of the special session of the legislature called for next month. "At our expense," Allen said.

When he asked how many of the students would like to go, only about half held up their hands.

But after he added, "We pass three McDonalds on the way," all of them held up their hands.