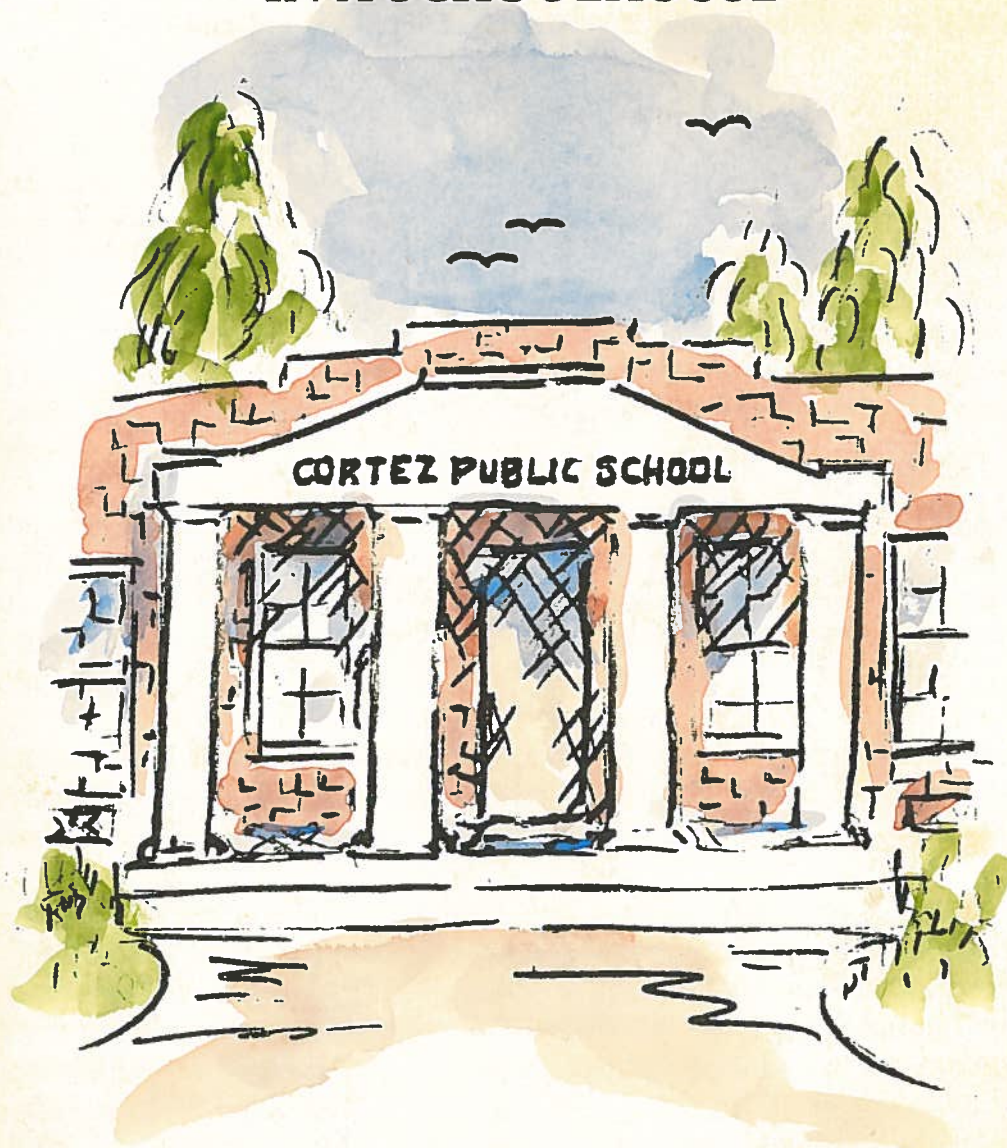


ONCE UPON A TIME
IN A SCHOOLHOUSE



Betty MacColl

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The village of Cortez with its fish houses and its boats, its coconuts and its pelicans, has long been a favorite spot for would-be artists and in the late years of the Depression, 1939 and 1940, I was one of them--being, like many another young person, out of a job.

One day I found an ideal subject, a fisherman sitting on one of the docks working on his net, with the blue bay beyond. He was leaning against a post, and during the entire morning never changed his position, with only his hands moving, back and forth, a perfect model! As I worked, several children looked over my shoulder, and one boy showed particular interest, of whom more later--much more!

With the coming of the Second World War, the job market changed. The teacher shortage suddenly became acute, and Miss Jessie Miller, the school superintendent, was frantically searching for people who had AB degrees and would be able to qualify as emergency teachers by going to summer school. Although my training and experience were in social group work, I had taken a course at Columbia University which allowed me to observe in their "experimental" school where the "modern" principles of John Dewey were being put into action. I had sat in on a fifth grade class of eighteen pupils who were really enjoying learning; and it had looked very attractive to me, but the road to a certificate was long and I hadn't gone further. Now, it seemed that Fate was offering me a short cut and an opportunity to serve my country at the same time. I decided to risk it, and off I went to Gainesville for a long hot summer.

On August 31, five days before school was to open, I presented myself to Miss Jessie, to find that she had managed to fill all the vacancies except one, in the three-room school at Cortez. Would I be willing to take that? Cortez! My favorite haunt. Of course I said "Yes." Wherever I went, it was going to be an adventure, but little did I know how much of one! Neither of us mentioned salary. I was enlisting, wasn't I?

The families who made up the community were known as being very independent, having come from a free life on the coast of North Carolina, and Miss Jessie had promised that they could interview the new teacher. I agreed, not realizing that my fate hung in the balance.

I was received by gracious "Miss Letha" Fulford, who introduced me to a dozen other mothers already seated in a circle, and ready with polite questions about my qualifications and experience. I explained that I had worked with many groups of children, first as a Girl Scout Leader and camp counselor and then, after college, as a member of the staff of a big community center where I had organized children's recreational activities, put on plays, and done a lot of story telling. None of this dispelled the air of thoroughly justified skepticism. In spite of my four education courses, it was clear that when it came to actually teaching the Three Rs, I was green as grass--and a Yankee besides. The mothers addressed the last unspoken problem by asking whether I liked living in Florida, and to this I could give an enthusiastic answer. They must have known that I was at the bottom of the barrel and they were giving me every chance to look good. One asked, "What kind of flowers would you plant at this time of year?" "Oh, marigolds are the only ones which will bloom now, aren't they?" At last there was something that brought smiles of approval and at a nod from dear Miss Letha, the meeting broke up. I was in for two of the most colorful years of my life.

Next, I was to meet Miss May McLeod, the principal who had years of experience teaching in the rural schools of the county and without whose guidance I would have been a short-lived disaster. I learned that I was to have three grades in the morning--third, fourth and fifth--while Lydia Green, taught the first and second; with the third going to her for the afternoon. While this sounded like an equitable division, it turned out to be weighted by the fact that I had "The Brothers," the Capo twins, all day! Lloyd and Floyd, known as Big Bubba and Little Bubba. I learned, too, that opening exercises had not changed since my own school days. So on the day after Labor Day, I fared forth to take up a new career, armed only with my Bible and a box of lunch. Miss May drove Lydia and me out in her time honored coupe, and they both did their best to encourage me.

My thirty charges filed in, happily barefoot. The girls looked pretty in their little dresses and the boys were scrubbed and shining. They were a nice looking group with expectant faces and a slightly proprietary air. They knew where each grade was to sit. No question, it was their school, and I was the outsider, there only by the grace of a little orange flower.

I introduced myself, wrote my name on the board, and proceeded to read "The Lord is my shepherd" with a fervent hope that it was true. Immediately after the Lord's prayer and the flag salute, a large boy in the back row stood up waving his hand. "Last year," he said excitedly, "there was a lady down by Fulford's dock painting a picture. Miss Coll, wasn't that you?"

A ripple of interest went around the room. "Yes, I was there," I answered, "and you must have been the boy who was watching me!" "Then do you like our place?" queried a little third grade girl, with a note of surprise in her voice. "I certainly do like it," I answered, "but I'm kind of new around here and I don't know much about it, so you'll have to tell me!" Seizing this lead, I listed things I would like to know; How old was the village? Who were the first people here? Where did they come from? How did Cortez get its name? They couldn't answer any of them. "Is there someone who could come to school and tell us all these things?" I asked. "Oh, yes! Patty's grandmother!" came the chorus.

So Patty was commissioned to deliver the invitation to her grandmother during the lunch hour. The news spread quickly. "The new teacher has invited Miss Lela Taylor to school!"

I have a clear and treasured memory of a Victorian lady dressed all in black, with hat and gloves, walking pertly up to the school next morning. There couldn't have been a greater pleasure than that of welcoming her and listening as, seated in front of the room, she answered all the questions and added her own priceless recollections.

The first settlers to come were the Fulfords, Guthries and Joneses, she said. They came from Cateret County, North Carolina, by steamer and railroad to Cedar Key in the 1880s. This was already quite a large fishing village, but the newcomers wanted to establish their own, so they explored the coast and, after trying Perico Isle, close the present site which was then called Hunter's Point. Other families gradually joined them--Bells, Taylors, Moras, Greens, Lewises, Roberts, Culbreaths, Capos, and McDonalds among them. Since descendants of all these were right there in the classroom, Grandma Taylor had a rapt audience. When the community grew large enough to have a post office, she explained, the name was chosen by the government in Washington. Someone there selected

"Cortez," although that explorer had never been in this area; but there were already two other post offices named for DeSoto, who probably had been.

The one piece of equipment in the room was a map case, so the route of the first settlers could be traced. I filled the board with their names and with words which would be needed in writing "The Story of Cortez" and we had material enough to keep all three grades busy until I had a chance to look inside the covers of the text books and set up some three-ring lesson plans.

The other teachers patted me on the back for starting a project on the second day of school, but since it was born of pure desperation, I was only too glad to give full credit to the Lord, who had used as His unlikely instrument the Big Brother!

Next day I brought the painting to school to brighten up a drab classroom and to reinforce the initial advantage.

That morning, I noticed that Albert Moras' seat was empty and was surprised to discover him stretched out on the floor. "Albert?" I queried. The children answered for him. It seemed that the previous teacher had allowed this because Albert had insisted that he couldn't learn in any other position. I didn't buy that one, so back into his seat he went, grinning good naturedly. Lydia, who had grown up in Cortez, later shed light on the situation. Albert was such good help that fishermen often took him out at night with them, and he needed to catch up on his sleep. Since I couldn't change the system, I became tolerant of a little nap with his head on his desk--especially when the mackerel were running.

The other children were wide awake, and for the most part eager and very able to learn. They were unfailingly appreciative of any objects which I brought from home to add interest to the required curriculum, but they were a vigorous bunch and if enough activities were not offered, the boys especially were adept at thinking up their own. After all, the field was mined with the tradition of badgering or outwitting the teacher.

One day I noticed that Big Bubba was rising up in his seat periodically and peering out at the highway which could be clearly seen from our room. Suddenly he jumped up shouting "Johnny's pig's loose! Come on, Johnny!" And out the two of them rushed to chase and capture the pig. The windows, of course, were filled with spectators. Once the fugitive had been safely penned up, back came the boys doing their best to look virtuous. Little Bubba found a chance to whisper to me, "Miss Coll, Bubba left the gate open."

While this was his most dramatic scheme, the self-made hero found enough other ways to make it difficult for me that Miss May finally said, "Betty, you're going to have to paddle him!" "Wouldn't it be more appropriate if the principal did it?" I asked. "No," was her firm reply. "You'll have to do it yourself or he isn't going to respect you!" She gave me the stout wooden paddle and I think that the sight of it egged Bubba on to bolder infringements. He was as big as I was, so it took courage which I wasn't sure I had to summon him out into the hall. He didn't demur, believing, I suspect, that I couldn't hit hard enough to hurt. But I quoted to myself "Whatsoever thou doest, do it with thy might!" and I followed the Biblical advice--one, two, three, four whacks. He winced, then twisted

up his head and gave me a big grin. It was seen as the event of the day in Cortez, and I never heard of any disapproval.

After that, discipline was easier to maintain, but shuttling from grade to grade, I had to rely on ingenuity to make up for lack of experience; and the days were often exhausting. Each group had to be left with enough written work to keep them busy until their turn came again, which added up to at least sixty papers to take home each day. Even with some help from my mother I couldn't keep up with the checking. I scanned for the most frequent mistakes and planned to reteach, but I was never without a feeling of guilt over the number of papers which never got returned.

With Daylight Saving in effect the entire year it wasn't long before we were driving out in the pitch dark. One stormy day we arrived to find that the stove pipe in my classroom had blown down and the roof had leaked onto my desk, soaking the Bible which I had earned in my youth by reciting the Westminster Shorter Catechism. This hurt! I couldn't allow myself tears because the soot had to be cleaned up before the children came in. It was close to being too much for my patriotism. I had just learned that my salary was to be \$898 for the year!

But the war helped us in one way. The Coast Guard had established a station in the former Albion Inn, and Miss May had the inspiration to ask for a member to come and give the children some drills at play period to furnish a little respite to the teachers, whose duty it was to organize the games and act as whatever kind of arbiter was called for. I had taken quite a little satisfaction in showing that I could be a pretty good umpire for baseball, though Cortez being Cortez, there were some unusual decisions called for. Who was out, for instance, when the runner from first to second paused and caught the ball hit by his own team mate? Nonetheless, I was more than willing to give over to a Guardsman if one should come.

In the meantime a suspicious looking little snake had been seen wiggling out from under the school house. Miss May had alerted a couple of fathers who discovered a nest of rattlers! They dispatched the adults after school hours. They killed all the babies they could find, but if there should be more, they said, we were not to worry, because they were too small to bite. This was life on the edge of the wilds!

The next day a Coast Guardsman arrived and was received with characteristic enthusiasm by my group. They took to the drill in a body and were soon wheeling and turning in great shape. As they neared the building, there was a movement in the grass and the sergeant made an unexpected leap sideways. The children kept right on marching--one-two, one-two. Pixie Norma Roberts called back over her shoulder, "It's just a rattlesnake!" No longer the newest newcomer, I took great relish in the spectacle and was amused to see how thoroughly the sergeant ground the tiny snake with his heel.

Before long marching around the playground grew old, and someone asked, "Can't we parade through the village?" The idea either had to be quashed at once or given a legitimate reason. Why not a benefit for the Red Cross!, I thought. This took fire at once (nothing ever developed slowly) and, with Miss May's permission, we went into the production of placards, banners, nurses' caps, and arm bands with purple hearts. The Brothers outdid everyone by building an ambulance. It had as its base a small red wagon with extra wheels added to the rear. The superstructure was made of lovely

clean wood which I tried not to recognize as tomato stakes from a nearby field. The whole was covered neatly with white cloth (part of a sheet?) bearing big red crosses.

The morning of the parade, Big Bubba arrived copiously bandaged from his blood-stained head to his ankles and with his arm in a sling. He couldn't have been more pleased with himself. He climbed into the ambulance, Little Bubba and Johnny McDonald pulled, and we were off down the street.

The column of marchers kept outdistancing the ambulance, and since the sergeant had not been assigned to duty that day, they had to ad lib some wheeling and turning, like Knight Templar motorcyclists. At the end of the street, we swing around toward the bay. As we were passing the first fish house and getting quite a bit of surprised attention, the ambulance broke down and the patient had to climb out and make repairs. That was fine with him because he hadn't been visible enough inside; and we had a couple more impromptu breakdowns later on. These gave the nurses a chance to pass around their cans for donations, and the total take was six dollars and thirty cents. A success!

I reported to Miss May and Lydia that during the parade, while most of the men were laughing, I had seen a couple looking my way and shaking their heads. I had thought they might be saying "She ought to take those kids back to their books!" But Lydia explained gently that ladies didn't usually go down by the fish houses. Dear me! I never did again!

But the outside world came into the classroom by way of current newspaper clippings. Four Cortez men were already overseas, so the war was carefully watched. At that time Madame Chiang Kai-Shek made a visit to this country, adding great interest to the children's study of China. One morning Jimmie Green came in rising up on his toes, his cheeks pink with excitement and his brown eyes sparkling. With a gesture of triumph, he produced from under his shirt a full page color photo of Madame Chiang. He had rescued it down at the dock. "They was gonna wrap a fish in it!" he said.

Our science materials also came in from outside. The curriculum called for "A Study of the Earth and Its Creatures." In a display called "What the Earth is Made Of," little bottles of water and sand and muck took on new significance, to which were gradually added rocks, so scarce in Cortez as to be thought of minor importance, and many other minerals. But of creatures we had a plentiful supply, some a bit close for comfort. The window sills served as our laboratories, with glass jars quickly filling with insects in all stages (the favorite being the caterpillar), salamanders and most fascinating of all, a toad, whose tongue captured its food in the most astonishing fashion. Children who had finished their written work were permitted to do quiet observation while waiting for their turn with the teacher. One day Shirley Fulford was availing herself of this privilege and since she was a model of behavior, as were all the girls really, I paid no attention until a quick glance revealed a number of empty jars. Fat green caterpillars which had not got on with the business of spinning cocoons had been released by Shirley to use as extra treats for the toad! She was now an authority on the working of that wondrous tongue, and His Eminence was bulging. Why he didn't burst I don't know, but now we had room for new specimens.

The next to arrive was greeted with delight: a small seahorse, rescued from his net by one of the fathers. He was in a medium sized bowl with some seaweed to cling to and provide oxygen, but not

enough of course, so after about twenty-four hours the beautiful little creature began to seem faint and someone had to be dispatched to the bay for a supply of salt water. Little Bubba was especially anxious to do this daily chore, but I made exemplary behavior a qualification; and after working harder than he had all year for several days, I took a chance and let him go. The only sinks were in the restrooms, so he took the bowl in to the boys' room to change the water. As I was about to send after him, he emerged and reported that the sea horse had gone down the drain. Cries of both dismay and indignation! Surely it was an accident--or was it?

Nature study was further pursued through individual reports with each child selecting his own subject. While Cortez children were on an equal footing as far as general information went, there was one pupil who was not; a stolid little girl named Nancy who lived in the trailer park just outside the village. She came from "Up North" and what should she choose to report on but fish! When it came her turn to present her findings, she faced an absolutely silent audience, with hostility hanging thickly in the air. "This is a cod," she began turning to the first page of a booklet filled with neatly colored drawings which the children must have known as well as I did she was not capable of doing; but since they had never seen a cod, they held their fire. "This is a bass," she continued, and on through pickerel and herring, all unfamiliar in these waters, but when she turned the page to a large green fish and announced, "This is a mackerel," the whole the room rose up in protest. Big Bubba shouted, "Dat ain't no mackerel!" and started up the aisle. I moved to protect Nancy from assault, but Bubba stopped suddenly and declared, "Ill show you a mackerel!" Back to his desk he went and extracted a good sized paper package containing--a mackerel! Its bright blue scales seemed to undermine poor Nancy's whole report. "But there are different kinds of mackerel," I said, not too sure of my ground. "Nancy is reporting on fish that are found up where she comes from. Isn't this one called a Spanish mackerel?" "King," corrected Albert. Crisis averted. Whew!

"How did you happen to bring your mackerel today?" I asked Bubba. Becoming suddenly embarrassed, he murmured, "I was going to give it to you!" I suspected that he had planned to see how we got along that day before presenting it. In any case, it seemed best to accept with thanks and ask him to take it home for his mother to put in the refrigerator until afternoon. The Capos lived right across the street and at lunch time Mrs. Capo sent back a supersubstitute--a pompano hot out of the pan!

My own knowledge of marine life was expanded in a most memorable way when I was invited to go scalloping by Vera Fulford, one of the mothers who was a staunch supporter. On a Saturday morning, I dressed as directed in sneakers, shorts and a shirt, with a wide brimmed hat tied under my chin and waded out into the bay with Vera and her daughters, Johnny Vee, Mona, and Shirley. We had small wash tubs tied to our waists, leaving both hands free to try to catch the little creatures as they zipped through the water by jet propulsion. Sometimes they nipped bare legs, or fastened ouchly onto a finger; if captured, they spit a jet stream into your face. I was so convulsed that I didn't catch very many, but the others sent me home with a generous share of theirs. Since I was a complete novice at shucking, it was a good thing I got at it while the creatures were still alive. I lined them up on the kitchen sink, their bright blue eyes looking at me; and when one opened its shell to peek, I grabbed it and stuck my knife in. More sport, with my mother as a highly amused spectator. Our gourmet dinner was late, but it was truly a historic one.

Miss May's large classroom doubled as an auditorium and was used for community gatherings such as the Christmas entertainment. This was a traditional pageant involving the whole school with a capacity audience of parents. We were fortunate to have the help of "Miss Kathleen" Donovan, a music teacher who had lived on Anna Maria all her life, the daughter of the island's first settler, Captain Davis. There was a good sized stage with a door leading directly outside so any last-minute costuming had to be done in the front hall after the audience was seated. I was stationed there dispatching the characters in their turns. The shepherds and the wise men made their entrances up the aisle, but that was no way for the angels to appear from heaven, so they were to go around the outside of the building and enter through the stage door. The night of the program there was a slight drizzle and I hated to send the three little girls out into it, with their fragile wings; but they were game, and out they went. Two appeared at the proper time, but where was the third? I hurried out to see and met her limping back, sobbing and holding up her broken wing. She had slipped and fallen, and when she got to the stage door it was locked! There was a prankster among the shepherds!

The study of America's explorers was by far the most popular part of the history curriculum. Water routes on the map held a special fascination and all "those guys" were worth learning about, though the children gave short shrift to Cortez because he had double crossed them by going to Mexico. DeSoto, of course, was their man. The Smithsonian Institution had recently designated Shaw's Point as his landing place and the entire report of the research involved had been published in *The Bradenton Herald*. It gave distances between passes, depth of channels at high and low tides, location of Indian mounds and other details which coincided with Hernando's own account. These were more comprehensible to the boys than they were to me, especially to Albert, who could navigate in the dark. He was in his element and forgot all about naps.

I had been to Shaw's Point previously over the narrow sand road. It had been so exciting to be able to pick up charred pieces of pottery along the shore where the river had eaten into shell mounds built more than five hundred years ago and to see the strange gumbo-limbo trees. At the time, there were even wild orchids in the swamp. "What a field trip this would make!" I thought, but all school bus trips had been canceled for the duration because of gas rationing. Although I had learned never to mention an interesting possibility unless I was prepared to carry it out no later than the next day, I let down my guard and expressed my regrets out loud to the children. The reaction nearly blew me off my feet. "We can go, Miss MacColl!" "We don't need no bus!" "We know how to get there! You just go out the bay into the river." "It isn't far!" "We can go in Johnny's father's boat!"

All of a sudden, we were practically there! Although Johnny looked a bit dubious, he agreed to ask his father that evening. I tried not to be as excited as the children but overnight, the idea developed on its own into a project that would have put John Dewey in the shade. In the morning, it went to pieces all at once. Johnny's father had said "No." He didn't carry passengers.

It was three years before the newly formed Manatee Historical Society organized the DeSoto Pageant, and a group of prominent citizens, authentically costumed, first re-enacted the landing. They never knew how close they came to being upstaged by a boatload of school children from Cortez!

Since that time, the residents of Cortez, led by Mary Fulford Green, have organized their own historical association. When they began collecting memorabilia for a little museum, I contributed the

painting which had stood me in such good stead and to my great pleasure they have had it reproduced on a small poster to promote interest in the village, which is now listed in the National Register as a Historical Area. The Association hopes to obtain the schoolhouse, which is now vacant, to use as a community center and sometimes even as an art gallery where the work of the many artists who have painted in the village over the years could be displayed.

