*Back Home by Chris Hardie*

**Yes, they’re built like brick … outhouses**

I was driving down a country road the other day when I spotted two structures at the edge of a field — structures that made me stop for a double-take.

Upon closer examination, my suspicions were confirmed. Yes, they were brick outhouses, near the intersection of Rogness Coulee Road and Emery Lane in the town of Ettrick — just a few miles southeast of Hegg in Trempealeau County.

Apparently, it’s now considered vulgar to refer to someone as being built like a brick outhouse, but it’s an expression I heard many times growing up — though usually with the word “out” replaced by a four-letter word for excrement. But I’ve never actually seen one. I’ve seen and used many one- and two-holers in my life, but never one built of brick.

As they say, there’s a first time for everything.

There was no other structure near the two outhouses, but I suspected there must have been a schoolhouse there at one point. I could find no reference online so I asked local historian Steve “Willie” Vehrenkamp of Hegg.

“Yep,” he said. “It was the Harmon School. The only way I can remember that is to think of Harmon Killebrew,” referring to the late Minnesota Twins Hall of Fame slugger.

I drove back to the location and took a walk around. The foundation of what was once the school was filled in with dirt and assorted junk. The two outhouses — located maybe 20 yards apart — were set on brick foundations. They had red-brick exteriors, tin roofs, windows for plenty of daylight, and rooftop vents.

The wooden doors were partially open but warped against the wood floor. I was able to stick my camera around the door for a couple of photos. The skeleton of a dead cat was on the floor of one privy.

When did the Harmon School exist? When was it torn down? Was it also brick? What did it look like?

I was unable to find any information about the school on the Trempealeau County Historical Society website, which has lots of information and photos on many of the other former one-room schools. The only reference I found was the school listed as one of the 10 rural school districts in Ettrick.

I also found two obituaries of folks who grew up in German Coulee and attended the Harmon School. A 1930 historical map showed a school was located at the site.

It’s possible the school was named after a local family. The “History of Trempealeau County” from 1917 mentions Thomas Harmon, who was part of the Irish settlers in the Ettrick area. He arrived with his wife and two children in 1861 and farmed on land with his brother John Harmon.

“On his farm he built a frame shack and later a house of hewed logs, 16 by 24 feet, which was so well and substantially made that it is still occupied by the family. Here Thomas Harmon passed the rest of his life engaged in improving his farm, his death taking place May 3, 1887, when he had reached the age of 66 years. He served some time on the school board, and, as a good Catholic, helped to build the first church at Ettrick.”

The school was mentioned in the Dec. 31, 1942, edition of the Blair Press newspaper under South Branch News. “The Christmas tree and program at the Harmon school was given Friday afternoon by Miss Lillian Crogan. All present were treated with apples and candy by the teacher.”

Crogan was a longtime local teacher for various schools before she retired in 1971. She died in 1988 at the age of 83.

I found one other mention of the school in an Aug. 19, 1952, La Crosse Tribune article that mentioned classes at Ettrick resumed Sept. 2; Harmon was one of the bus-route stops. It’s possible that students from that area were being transported to the larger school in Ettrick because many of the one-room schools were closed in that era.

The article also mentions that Mrs. Richard (Leone) Mattson — who was my great-aunt — was the new teacher of grades 3 and 4.

The school and the land apparently came under the ownership of Louis Salzwedel, who died this past year. I talked to his son, who gave me the name and number of an aunt who would have some knowledge about the school, but I’ve been unable to reach her.

I did talk to a neighbor who lives near the former school, who told me it also was made of brick, like the outhouses. But it had fallen into a state of disrepair and was torn down.

I’m sure there’s more to this story, so stay tuned for further updates.

Someday, too, the outhouses will fall down or be torn down, the last vestige of days gone by.

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***Photo cutlines:***

070821-agrv-life-hardie-1: A door remains in the entrance to one of the outhouses.

070821-agrv-life-hardie-2: An outhouse interior remembers a different era.

070821-agrv-life-hardie-3: Each outhouse features a brick exterior, metal roof and a window for plenty of light.

070821-agrv-life-hardie-4: The intersection of two roads in the town of Ettrick in Trempealeau County, Wisconsin, is the location of the one-time Harmon School.

070821-agrv-life-hardie-5: Two outhouses stand next to a field – a clue that a school was once on the site.

070821-agrv-life-hardie-6: The old foundation of the Harmon School is filled with debris.