

# The Dunham School Exhibit

Margaret Yocom



There is nothing extraordinary about the schoolroom that stands behind a glass wall in the Nation of Nations exhibit. It has no specially carved woodwork, no unusual blackboard art. Actually, Dunham School, Room 201, looks just like any other schoolroom of its time with its tall, narrow windows above the radiator, the American flag displayed in the corner, the wooden desks nailed to the floor, the teacher's desk, the recitation bench, and, presiding over all, the picture of George Washington. "That's my school," visitors exclaim as they peer into the room. "That's exactly the way I remember it." In this reaction lies the significance of Dunham, for what draws visitors to the exhibit is not its uniqueness, but its commonality. And it is this commonality, the educational experience in American public schools, that the exhibit explores.

In many ways, the history of

Dunham School recalls the shifting fortunes of other neighborhood schools. As the 1800s began, school officials of Cleveland, Ohio, realized that the area around 66th and Lexington had enough children for a neighborhood school of its own. In September 1883, a brick building with eight classrooms and grades opened its doors to the sons and daughters of the whites and the few blacks, the long-time citizens and the newly arrived immigrants. Both the school and the neighborhood prospered and in 1894, eight more classrooms were added. By 1920, 955 students learned reading, writing, and arithmetic there.

The neighborhood was a great place for kids then. On the way to school, they could smell the fresh-baked bread of the Lexington Avenue bakery as they stopped to talk to the druggist and the Italian shoemaker. If they had an extra penny, they picked out a handful of brightly wrapped treats at the candy store. But one special part of the area made a Dunham child's dream come true: right across

Mrs. Kay Geraci, teacher at the Dunham School from 1926 to 1932, reminds students to sit with their feet flat on the floor, their backs straight, and their heads up as they follow through the paces of a penmanship lesson inside the Dunham classroom during the 1977 Festival of American Folklife.

Photo by Al Harrell for the Smithsonian.

the street stood League Park, home of the Cleveland baseball team, and a place where heroes such as the great Babe Ruth might be seen.

Dunham School continued to grow during the 1950s until in 1960, 2241 students filed into its schoolrooms. Then, in June 1975, when only 291 came, a much-changed neighborhood watched Dunham close its doors for the last time. The children had been drawn to a larger, consolidated school. But before the wrecking ball tore down Dunham, the Smithsonian had asked for one of the rooms.

In 1977, the Festival of American Folklife invited a former Dunham teacher and four former students to talk with Festival visitors about Dunham school days. What they said sounded very familiar to those of us who listened. Although we didn't attend the same school or labor under the same teachers, our stories and experiences have much in common—favorite or eccentric teachers, the occasional prank, recess play.

To continue to present the shared traditions of the American public school, the 1978 Festival of American Folklife has invited another former Dunham pupil, Ronald Brown and five teachers and students from the Washington, D.C. area, one of whom is Mrs. Flossie Furr, who attended and taught in a one-room schoolhouse in rural Virginia. During daily one-hour workshops, they will share their school experiences with the audience and encourage visitors to talk about their own school days. Special after-

Margaret Yocom is an assistant professor of English and Folklore at George Mason University and serves as consultant to the Smithsonian Institution's Folklife Program.





Included in this typical classroom photograph is Ronald Brown, who attended Dunham School 1906-14.  
Photo courtesy Ronald Brown.

noon activities will feature lessons in the museum's Dunham schoolroom, presentations of children's folklore, and various lessons taught by Festival participants.

Although the worlds of Dunham School in Cleveland, and a one-room schoolhouse in Virginia might at first seem unrelated, both Mr. Brown and Mrs. Furr show, through their narratives, that certain things were common to both: a real concern for the welfare of their entire community, and a closeness between families and teacher. The school served as one of the focal points of the community.

Last year as the audience and the Festival participants swapped their memories, a passer-by looked at the stage area and remarked, "What's going on here? I can't tell the Festival participants from the audience." At the Dunham School exhibit, that's the lesson: there is no difference. Whether we attended the city schools of Cleveland or Washington, D.C., or the rural schools near Purcellville, Va., we are all members of the community of American school children, and we have many of the same kinds of stories to tell. Come to Dunham and share yours.

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- Spradley, James and David W. McCurdy. *The Cultural Experience: Ethnography in Complex Society*. Chicago: SRA, 1972.
- Oral histories of occupations, communities, families, and individuals often contain information about pupils and teachers. See, for example: Terkel, Studs. *Working*. New York: Pantheon, 1972 and Blythe, Ronald. *Akenfield*. New York: Pantheon, 1969.



School photographs are a shared experience. What did you wear for the occasion? Did your teacher fix your collar or comb your hair? Who did you give your pictures to? Shown above are Norman and Gladys Yocom from the Monacacy School near Douglassville, Pa.

Photos courtesy Norman Yocom and Gladys Yocom Metka

Mrs. Flossie Furr, who attended and later taught in one-room schoolhouses in rural Virginia, stands at the entrance of the Carter School in Purcellville, Va., where she taught 1946-68.

Photo by Margaret Yocom for the Smithsonian.