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Iron Range Schoolmarm

POLLY BULLARD

WHEN POLLY BULLARD *went to Eveleth to teach school in 1908, the village was just beginning to emerge from a primitive mining location into a promising Mesabi Range town. The original townsite had been platted by David T. Adams in 1893, but by 1900 the village had been moved a short distance eastward because there were rich deposits of ore beneath the original site. Miss Bullard, arriving on the scene just eight years later, was able to observe many of the swift and far-reaching developments in the pioneer life of the town.*

She arrived at a particularly auspicious time in the development of the Eveleth school system, for just five years previously Independent School District No. 39 had been created with Eveleth as its administrative center. During the three years from 1908 to 1911, when Miss Bullard taught in the village, a new high school was built. The Adams School, in which she taught third grade during her first year there, had been completed just before she arrived. Her observations on the development of Eveleth's educational system are thus of importance in bringing to life a little-known aspect of the history of this Iron Range town.

Miss Bullard was the daughter of W. H. Bullard, well-known St. Paul resident and one of the founders of the jewelry firm of Bullard Brothers. After leaving Eveleth in 1911, she taught for many years in the St. Paul schools. Several years before her death in 1949 Miss Bullard wrote a series of reminiscences. The following narrative is based on one chapter of them, supplemented by information contained in letters written to her family during her stay in Eveleth. This material was added to the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society by Mrs. E. W. Kohlsaat of St. Paul, Miss Bullard's sister. Ed.

I FIRST WENT TO EVELETH in November, 1908, to teach third grade in the Adams School. I had applied for a high-school position, but none was open, so I took the third grade in the hope that I would get the high-school work I wanted the following year. The school term had already started when I arrived, and I was allowed to visit for two days with the teacher I replaced until I felt ready to go ahead alone. My salary was three dollars a day for ten months of school, and I had twenty-four pupils.

The ride up to Eveleth from Duluth was most interesting. The types of people, the configuration of the land, and the arrangement and general appearance of the towns all along the way were entirely different from anything I had seen before. At Duluth the train ran for some time along the lake shore, and the view was truly wonderful. The sun was just rising as we pulled out, and shone through the lake mist and glanced back from the water like a painting of Turner. Away out, apparently rising right out of the water were great high cranes and derricks and a revolving bridge, and up from the shore ran miles and miles of elevated tracks with hundreds of little ore carts standing on them.

The land rises continually all the way to Eveleth, which is about nine hundred feet above Lake Superior and, I believe, fifteen hundred feet above sea level. Up there we stood so much higher than the horizon that it seemed like being in the high mountains and looking at the foothills all around. From one window of my school I could look nine miles away. I have never seen such a sweep of sky anywhere excepting in mid-ocean. In winter it was often filled with great gray and silver snow clouds rolling and sweeping along.

Eveleth certainly seemed a strange place. It made me think of the weird scenes in *Paradise Lost.* You could see for miles in every direction. The land undulates in low hills covered with stunted pines or fir, and the mines and their machinery were very much in evidence. The town itself straggled over the hills. Most of the houses were tiny little yellow and blue things, but there were some very comfortable residences.

The towns of Sparta, McKinley, Gilbert, and Biwabik were all within a few miles of each other, and after I visited them, Eveleth seemed quite metropolitan. They had nothing but a huge shaft, a mountain of ore, called the stockpile, another mountain which was the dump heap, and a scattering of tiny cabins which looked like the shacks that city boys build in their back yards, hardly high enough for a grown person to stand in. We saw one cunning building made of four square log cabins with a little square tower over the center where they joined. The road all the way northeast from Eveleth was up one hill and down, then up another and down, past monotonous stretches of stumps, with now and then a lonely

clump of white pine and spruce. The mud and water in the road was a brilliant golf pink.

Before I went to Eveleth, arrangements had been made for me to live at Mrs. Samuelson's boardinghouse on Fayal Road. Four other teachers already lived there — one, a former schoolmate, Rita Kendall, had urged me to come and had been my sponsor with the superintendent, Mr. Burton O. Greening, so I had a hearty welcome, and was instantly received into a friendly group.[1]

Mrs. Samuelson's Finnish name was Mikki Koukkari, but we called her Hanna. She had one or two small children, and an old peasant mother, Mawmaw, who spent the cold, cold winter days and evenings sitting in front of the kitchen stove, with the oven door open and her feet on it, while she smoked her corncob pipe filled with Peerless mixture, a particularly vile-smelling tobacco.

My room was over the kitchen, and all the heat I got there was from an open register in the hall outside my door. This register was directly over the kitchen stove, in front of which sat Mawmaw. It wasn't long before my clothes, hanging behind a curtain near the door, acquired a richly redolent and unmistakable odor! My family commented on it and sniffed, with wry faces, when I went home for the Christmas holidays.

There was plenty of urgent need that first winter for keeping the stoves going at top heat. One huge stove in the downstairs sitting room, in addition to the kitchen range, was supposed to heat the first floor; a heater in our upstairs teachers' sitting room, and another in the middle of the large bathroom, together with the register over the kitchen range, took care of our second-floor rooms. When we came back after Christmas, the daytime temperature was twenty degrees below zero, and it never went above that for six weeks. At night the temperature sank regularly to forty degrees below zero.

My room was small. It contained a bed, a table, a bureau and a chair, and had one window. The walls were a noncommittal bluish gray. I paid seven dollars a month for the room, and twenty-two dollars a month for board. We were paid every four weeks, and these expenses were due every calendar month. There was a good big bathroom, with hot water nearly all the time — one of the greatest blessings the house afforded. To give us a little more room, we girls at the house went together and rented an extra room from Mrs. Samuelson and fixed it up for an upstairs sitting room. There were also electric lights throughout the establishment.

The Adams School, where I taught, was a mile away, and I walked

[1] Burton O. Greening was superintendent of schools in Eveleth from 1904 until 1917, the pioneer period of Independent School District No. 39. See Walter Van Brunt, ed., *Duluth and St. Louis County*, 2:535, 537 (Chicago, 1921).

there twice a day, carrying a lunch to save two more miles of walking. The morning walk, facing the full force of the north wind with nothing to break it, the afternoon trek with old Boreas pushing me along, were tests of endurance. My clothing was a fearful, but effective, protection, and a complete camouflage of my size and weight. I wore a long-sleeved high-necked woolen shirt, long-legged bulky woolen underdrawers, a knitted woolen petticoat, a heavy wool dress, and a cap covered with a knitted scarf over my ears and neck, wound round and round to my waist, as well as heavy mittens, a muff, and long wool tights tucked into high overshoes. It took time to get these on and off twice a day, and left something to be desired in modish appearance.

On my rustling straw mattress, under my collection of blankets and comforters, I slept a deep and dreamless sleep at night, even though, directly under my room, Hanna baked bread and cake, rattled pans, and at frequent intervals brewed and drank unnumbered cups of vile strong coffee. The huge pot stood on the stove all day long, from morn until after midnight, replenished occasionally with additions of coffee and water on top of the old grounds. When Hanna slept, I never knew.

My one bedroom window, frozen tightly closed for the winter, looked out upon an Austrian saloon next door, and I could look into a window of the large main room and observe some of the life that went on there. It seemed to be a favorite gathering place for the Austrian peasant population of the town. Wedding parties were often held there, the bride sitting at a well-laden table and greeting the guests as they arrived to pay their respects to her and to partake of the refreshments. I was never able to spot the groom, however. The bride was often invited to dance, and as she whirled about, her pink gingham dress (that is the one I remember) and long wedding veil billowed out and made a truly bridal picture. There was always music—violins and singing. When things really got going well, and the festive glass had been passed a few times, the music rose louder and lustier—and always included the beautiful Austrian national hymn composed by Joseph Haydn, which appears even today in our church hymnals. The guests, I might add, contributed to the expense of the festivity by putting money into a saucer near the bride's seat.

On the other side of our boardinghouse, only two or three feet away from it, was one of the Finnish bathhouses—a high, unpainted, barn-like building with few windows. Especially on Saturday nights, a frequent stream of bath water drained out at the bottom and over the sidewalk into the gutter. The Finnish baths were well patronized always, and I was told that the bath routine was quite a social affair. Hot water poured over hot stones gave a heavy steam, in which the bathers stood or sat,

beating each other with brooms and getting well scrubbed. At the end of it they emerged very red from such violent treatment, and carrying underarm their soiled clothing wrapped in the newspaper in which they had brought the clean articles.

My entire first year was spent teaching the third grade at the Adams School, in a little dark, dingy basement room with windows high up in the walls.[2] The class was truly a melting pot. Almost every child was foreign born — Russian, Finnish, Cornish, Italian, Scandinavian, Austrian — which included many different eastern Europeans whom we now call Czech, Polish, Bohemian, Jugo-Slav, Serbian, etc. One little blond Russian Jewish girl had barely escaped a pogrom. The newcomers often knew no English. They sat in silence, listening, watching. Usually at the end of two weeks the silent one would burst forth into speech and take part in our talk, so happy to be one of us at last.

We spent much time in class talking about everyday objects and experiences, for the words for these were needed most. Never was there a more absorbed and attentive audience than I had as I described incidents of their daily life — their houses, rooms, furnishings, food, daily routine, clothes, etc. One day we described the kitchen and the sink and what each member of the family did there.

Sometimes I took small peppermint sticks — red and white striped ones — and placed one on each desk before school or during outdoor recess. How those childish faces beamed when they found the surprise party! And how I had to swallow hard when almost every child broke his stick in two and put half away to take home to little brother or sister! One quiet little boy frequently stayed after school to help clean up, and always asked to be allowed to look for treasures in the wastebasket — treasures consisting of discarded writing papers and drawings — which also went to the little ones at home.

When the little boys had their lesson on taking off their hats to a lady, I found my journey home transformed into a royal progress. At every street corner along my way was a small boy lying in wait to show his knightly proficiency.

I soon learned, however, that a certain amount of sternness also was expected by this happy group, who so seldom needed it. At some small misdemeanor one day, a voice from the seats remarked, "Miss Wilson has a rubber hose on *her* desk." A hint was enough. I borrowed a piece of rubber hose. At the first sign of the need for such a demonstration — what it was I can't remember — I said in the required stern tone, "James, come

[2] The Adams School, completed early in 1908, the year Miss Bullard arrived, was constructed of red brick at a cost of $33,000, and contained the first six grades. Van Brunt, *Duluth*, 2:536.

here. Hold out your hand." James knew what was required. He held out his hand, and as each blow descended with a resounding swish (though so gently for the last inch that it hardly touched him) he let out a heart-rending bellow that satisfied the most bloodthirsty of our audience. They gave a sigh of satisfaction. I measured up to their requirements in this respect, too, and my standing as a disciplinarian was established.

At Christmas, such a display of magnificent trees! Janitors from all the local schools were busy journeying to and from the great pine forests which nearly surrounded the town. (This was before the huge growth had been decimated by the horrible forest fires of a few years later.) In each classroom of every school, a great majestic pine towered to the ceiling, and every room was heavily scented with the delicious fragrance.

Then followed hours of delight, stringing popcorn and cranberries, making cornucopias, and other hand-made ornaments. To these children the joys of Christmas, and most other satisfactions, too, came chiefly at school. The bare dingy shacks that housed the miners' families in the mine locations had few comforts, few toys, few joys for children. Far too little happiness for them was planned or provided at home.

The big moment of the year came when the bells of Santa's sleigh jingled outside. In he burst in red coat and furred cap and high boots, with a dash and a shouted greeting, and tossed an orange from his pack to each child in the room. In breathless silence, with wide-eyed tense faces — tears the outlet for many — they watched him dash in and out. There was very little joyous shouting or laughter. It was almost too much excitement for many of those babes.

In the intense cold of that winter, I sometimes thought of my little ones as so many little onions — especially when I unfastened the top button of shirt or dress and found the garment of last week still there, underneath, sometimes three or four of them, in layers of warmth. No wonder I longed to open a window now and then, even though the thermometer registered twenty or thirty degrees below zero.

There were no old people in Eveleth, but there were many babies and small children, like my third-graders, and enough teen-agers to fill the high school. There were a few citizens in the forties, and many young married people in the twenties and thirties. The teachers, mine engineers, clerks, and storekeepers were almost all in the twenty to thirty age group. The miners, too, were mostly, I should say, of this age group. To be sure, a few Russian and Polish Jews had long gray beards, and a few of their women wore black wigs, which apparently signified marital status, but they were far from aged or decrepit. Even Mawmaw, who wore no wig but was plainly a grandmother, had few gray hairs.

In such a world of youth there was bound to be excitement and drama. Scarcely a day passed without its startling event, its scandal, its surprise. The extreme cold of the long winters, the dry, clear air, helped to increase the atmosphere of intense emotion. There was seldom a period of relaxation for any of us. Our nervous energies drove us at top speed through the day, until, in my case at least, there was sudden exhaustion so complete that I could barely go through the routine of getting to bed.

Except for the teen-age schoolgirls, the teachers were the only girls in town, so they filled a two-fold social need — as teachers and as social belles. During the first two or three weeks of school, every time a new teacher appeared on the street, in the drug store, the post office, the dry goods store, or in the boardinghouses or hotel, she was studied intently. Newcomers rarely realized the importance, to them, of the first impressions they made. Then the first dance of the season drew near, and one by one the girls were dated for it. It was very amusing to see the way the men's dancing club invited the girls. They put a hand in a bag and drew out the first apple that came — anything, so as to have all the girls attend. Woe to her who drew an undesirable partner, for he would be her lot for the eight other dances of the school year. Thus did the men's dancing club provide a partner for each girl with the least amount of uncertainty — a very sensible arrangement. To be sure, there were a few changes — or exchanges — of partners after the first two or three dances, but not many.

There were frequent card parties, too. Even in our boardinghouse they could be managed with two tables in our tiny upstairs sitting room and one in each of two or three bedrooms. The newcomer was sometimes slightly amazed, but she quickly adjusted to the informal arrangements. Refreshments were usually prepared in the bathroom, though occasionally in the kitchen downstairs, and were served from the bathroom. A dishpan was always an essential of our bathroom equipment.

Entertaining either at card parties or by attending the big dances in near-by towns was very frequent. Since there were few automobiles, usually two couples joined in hiring a carriage to drive them to the town where the festivities were to be. The roads were comparatively new and led to the edge of town and across a waste of mine area, through parts of the virgin forest, both of them lonely and forlorn indeed in the darkness of night. One needed companionship on such a drive; one needed an experienced driver, too, in such waste land. But with good company, plenty of robes and foot warmers, it was a pleasant experience if the weather was not too bitter.

The dances in Eveleth were held in Walon Lahde Hall, the meeting place either of the Finnish socialist organization or the temperance society

—I have forgotten which.[3] Their hall was rented for several different kinds of occasions. The monthly dances were attended not only by Eveleth society, but also, like those of the other range towns, by citizens of other communities as well. The music for the dancing was exceptionally good. It was provided by an orchestra from Duluth, led by a Frenchman who seemed to know just when foot and leg muscles were beginning to tire and to need the spur of swifter tempo and gayer mood. Refreshments at midnight and renewed energies kept the dancing going until somewhere near three o'clock, which seemed to us late enough.

During my first year in Eveleth, my partner at the dances had charge of arrangements, so we were on hand very early to see that the orchestra from Duluth was there in time. By one o'clock my energy had usually oozed away, in spite of the midnight interlude of refreshments. It was fortunate that I lived near the hall, so that I could be escorted home easily, and my partner could return to see the affair to the end, pay the orchestra, and oversee the locking up of the hall.

The second year of my stay in Eveleth I changed not only to a new residence but also to a new school, the high school. I was given some classes in eighth- and ninth-grade English and history, and also some in sewing. There had been talk of engaging a second home economics teacher, but I boldly suggested that I was sure I could teach the sewing classes, even though I had never had any training in teaching that subject. During the summer I enrolled in Stout Institute at Menomonie, Wisconsin, where my sister Marjorie was also planning to go, and in those months I got some ideas about how to conduct a sewing class.

In the fall I moved to a most delightful Eveleth home in an apartment in a downtown block, just a few steps from the busy main street, over a grocery store and meat market. The elderly couple who took me in and welcomed me so hospitably into their family life were early settlers on the range. I soon loved them dearly, and I shall always cherish their memory as very, very dear friends.

I arranged with them to prepare simple breakfasts in my own room, with the help of an alcohol burner. I had a few cups and saucers tucked away in my bookcase and a few supplies on my closet shelf, where an intruding mouse made bold to snatch a share of them. Very conveniently, the grocery was directly underneath my bedroom. In the kitchen a door opened directly over the meat market, and often I stood there and bought three or four eggs, which the Finnish proprietor handed up to me, rather

[3] The hall was the meeting place of the local temperance society. For a review of the place of temperance societies in the lives of Minnesota's Finnish pioneers, see John I. Kolehmainen, "Finnish Temperance Societies in Minnesota," in *Minnesota History*, 22:391–403 (December, 1941).

precariously, by tucking a paper bag snugly into a broom held upside down.

I had a bookcase made for this room by a carpenter who was helping to build the new high school.[4] He used scraps of wood which he found lying around the new school building, so that the bookcase, which I still use, is, to me, a souvenir of a building where I spent many happy hours teaching my Eveleth pupils, whom I learned to love and whom I still remember with warm affection.

Across the street from my bedroom window, a little to the left, and on a corner of the main street, was an Austrian saloon — not the one I had looked into from Hanna Samuelson's, however. From my window I sometimes watched on a Saturday night as the saloon attendants brought out a drunken customer and piloted him up an outside stairway to a room on the second floor. I could see them tapping his pockets as they pushed him up, and I knew that his week's wages were doubtless being spirited out of those pockets or would be after he was put to bed.

A little farther up the same sloping street I could see several boarding-houses for miners, where I was told, there were always two sets of occupants. As the morning shift arose and went to work, the incoming workers from the night shift crawled into the still warm beds, and so the exchange continued from day to day. When — or if — the sheets were ever aired or changed I often wondered. But, in memory, I still can hear the clump clump of those heavy boots morning and evening.

Within the household where I lived for the remaining two years of my stay in Eveleth, there was always a warmth of family affection, kindness, and hospitality, which made one forget the sordidness apparent on the street outside. I left Eveleth with many happy memories at the end of the 1911 school term to return to St. Paul because of the illness of my mother.

[4] Eveleth's first high-school building burned in June, 1908, and construction began on the new building to which Miss Bullard refers the following fall. Van Brunt, *Duluth*, 2:536.