

Wilbert “Bill” Homan was born in 1932, and he concedes that was a long time ago. But his memories of being a little boy attending St. Rose School are still as crisp and clear as if it was yesterday.

The oldest of five, Bill walked the three-quarters of a mile along Clune-Stucke Road from the family’s home to the school. School kids in those days were generally undaunted by the weather, he said. “We had high-tops on, and we’d walk through the ditches to see how deep the snow was.” In nice weather, they’d ride their bicycles.

Eight grades of children attended the school, around 40 students in all in Bill’s time. The school day was well organized to keep chaos from breaking out, with all those kids of different ages in one room. Bill’s first-grade class included five children, one girl and four boys.

“You walked in the front door, and the teacher (Ted Hemmelgarn, who taught at the school for many years) lined us up by age. The youngest child went into the first seat. I happened to be the youngest one in our grade, so I was the first one,” Bill said.

Teacher Hemmelgarn would turn his attention to one grade, or maybe two grades at a time, Bill said. “He’d spend time with that group, then move on to the next,” Bill said. “There’s an advantage to that. In the years when you were in the fourth or fifth grade, you could see what they were doing in the sixth grade, so you knew what was coming.”

To this day, Bill holds Teacher Hemmelgarn in high esteem. “He was a super guy,” Bill said. “If you had a problem learning, a problem getting through a lesson, he would spend more time with you than anybody else.”

Teacher Hemmelgarn also had to see to the physical comfort of the children, as much as possible in a building that lacked today’s amenities. There were two outhouses in the back, one for boys and one for girls. There was a coal-fired furnace. “Teacher tried to keep the school at about 68 degrees in the winter,” Bill said. “Seventh and eighth graders filled the coal buckets.”

Teacher Hemmelgarn’s duties also included general maintenance of the school building, “firing the church’s furnace,” Bill added, and ringing the church bells. He was the organist at St. Rose for many years.

Students brought their own food for the noontime meal (called dinner), or walked home. “the first year I went to school, I didn’t pack food because my Grandma Homan lived down the road. I went there for dinner. Grandma said I needed a warm meal,” Bill said. “The years after that, my mom packed food for me: cold meat of some kind, an apple or pear. Maybe a cheese sandwich.”

The school evolved over the years that Bill attended. His father, Victor, was a member of the school board when it was determined that a two-room building would serve the students better. Bill, a fourth-grader at the time, remembers the summer of 1941, when the men of the parish put up a wall through the center of the schoolroom. Teacher Hemmelgarn taught the older grades, and a new teacher, Miss Sherman, was hired to teach the younger children. He remembers when the St. Rose School acquired its first bus; later improvements also included a sandbox for the younger grades.

Softball was a passion for most of the boys, Bill said. “You brought your ball glove to school, and you left it there overnight during the week. Over the weekend, you took your glove home, because that’s what

you did over the weekend. Your cousins would come over, and you'd play ball. We had cousins by the dozens," he said.

On rainy days at school, students would have to stay inside for recess. They'd play marbles, Bill said.

Bill started school at St. Rose in 1938 and completed eighth grade in the spring of 1947.

From there, he attended St. Johns High School in Maria Stein. There, he met his future wife, Viola Eyink. Students who started high school in those days often did not finish, but Bill and Viola both did. Viola was the valedictorian of the class of 1952.

"She was the first in her family to finish high school, and she had to prove it was worth it," Bill said.

Looking back, Bill appreciates it all: Teacher Hemmelgarn's committed leadership of the school; the parents who worked hard to support their local school; the opportunities to learn alongside his friends, to go on to high school and to finish. It's important for a community to work together, he said. And, all these years later, that has not changed.