

Ask Butch Griesdorn about his favorite subject when he was a student at St. Rose School, and he's quick with his answer: "It wasn't English," he said.

Prod him a little bit more, and he'll say that arithmetic was okay. It made sense to him.

His kid brother Mark, sitting in on the conversation, pipes up: "Mine was history."

Butch turned 97 in February, an age he never thought he would attain. Mark, the youngest in the Griesdorn family, is now 86. Both attended St. Rose School. Butch started as a first grader in 1931, Mark in 1942.

They have vivid memories of their school days. Butch said the day began with Mass at St. Rose Church, then the students would move to the school next door, where the school day started at 8:30 a.m. "We'd come into the school, and you would march right down to your seat. You sat in the same seat every day, the same bench. Next day, the same way," Butch said.

Butch's class included four girls and four boys, a big class in those days. St. Rose was a one-room schoolhouse when he attended grades one through eight there; it had been converted into a two-room school by the time Mark's class of four students attended.

Butch's school memories tell the story a boy's life in the 1930s. He talks about carrying his lunch to school in a tin bucket, about recess. (The boys played ball, but the area was limited by a fence that went through the school yard. One imagines that there had to be a lot of ground rules specific to the St. Rose School yard.)

Everybody who attended St. Rose School in that era talks about Teacher Hemmelgarn, who was Butch's only teacher in grades one through eight. "He was strict and stern," Butch said. The teacher had to be, to maintain control over all those students in a single room.

Teacher Hemmelgarn had a strap that he kept rolled up in his desk, the brothers said. He had good aim, and could throw the rolled-up strap at an errant student from a distance. The student then had to return the strap to the teacher, which required a walk of shame to the front of the room. The teacher had the option to put the strap back in the desk, or use it on the student.

Butch recalls that "I got the strap thrown at me only twice." How many times did his parents find out? "Only once," he said. "We were pretty well behaved—we lived in fear of Ted. I remember the time someone was getting a whipping, as he was laying across Ted's lap. He bit Ted on the leg, and Ted stopped the whipping."

Butch also recalls the time the teacher was in the outhouse and "Charlie Voskuhl threw a big rock in the hole in the outhouse wall. That didn't go over very good."

Butch might call his former teacher Ted, but his younger brother never could. "I respected that man until the day he died, and I never could call him Ted," Mark said. "When I would see him in later years, I would always call him Mr. Hemmelgarn."

Butch walked to school, but Mark, being younger, was a student at St. Rose when the school bought its first bus. The bus was parked at night on the Griesdorn property; their dad, Julius, drove the morning route. The kids stayed at home while he picked up other students around the St. Rose Parish, then he'd swing by the house so his kids could climb aboard for the final leg to school.

Teacher Hemmelgarn, ever energetic, drove the evening route. There was no such thing as a snow day back then; the bus rattled over the roads no matter what the weather.

The brothers laugh together, talking about their school days, separated by a few years but still similar. The St. Rose School building holds their memories, and remains a place of value in the community, they said.

“it’s the last school of its kind in the area, and it’s been fairly well kept up,” Mark said. “It’s always been a place where kids could gather.”