

Ink Spots

by Lynne Belluscio

Last week we offered a special "one room school house" program for the first grade students. The basement kitchen was furnished with old school desks and a large wooden teachers desk in front of the blackboard. They had a chance to write on the slates and we talked about what it was like to go to school before there were school buses and electricity.

At the end of the lesson I asked if there were any questions. "What are the little holes in the desk for?" "The holes were for little bottles that held ink. The students had steel tipped pens that they would dip into the ink. Then they could write. You will notice that the smallest desks for the really young students don't have any holes. They weren't allowed to write with ink. They had to practice, first on their slates and then with a pencil. And it took a lot of practice. The ink would stain your fingers and clothes. And you had to be very careful not to spill any of the ink. Everyone used blotters." I showed them the ink wells and the pens and the blotter.

I didn't tell them that I learned to write with ink in the 1950s with a steel tipped pen and a blotter. Fortunately, by sixth grade we "graduated" to fountain pens (and the popular color of ink was a bright peacock blue. The knuckle on my middle finger on my right hand was dyed with that color ink.) I really don't remember when we switched to ball point pens, but certainly by high school that's all we used.

This week the fourth grades will visit LeRoy House and the school room in the basement - -

and they will have the opportunity to write with the steel tipped pens. At one time, students used quill pens made from goose feathers, but quill pens went out of style by the Civil War. (I did discover on the internet that the Supreme Court is supplied with quill pens at each session. They are placed on the desks and are often given as souvenirs.) I do mention to the kids that when students used quill pens they had to take "pen knives" to school to keep the quills sharp - - - certainly an issue that isn't possible today.

Last year I bought a couple dozen ink wells for the desks, but I have decided not to use them this year because I don't want to deal with spilled ink. So the students will practice writing with ink at the two tables. First they practice the alphabet on the slates and then with the steel tipped pens - - with a blotter close by.

I have a couple of bottles of ink that we use, and of course at one time, teachers had to make their own ink, or buy it at the store. India ink is from ancient India and is made from burnt bones, tar, pitch and other solvents. Ink could also be made from carbon soot from lamps or ground charcoal and mixing it with a glue-like substance. This kind of ink would not adhere to parchment (which is a non absorbent paper, made from scrapped lamb hides).

The best ink was made from iron galls from oak trees. This was



an acidic type of ink and it was used by Leonardo da Vinci, Bach, Rembrandt and VanGogh. The problem with iron gall ink, is that it slowly eats away at the paper. Twenty-five percent of Bach's music are in a severe condition of decay and the process cannot be stopped. Even the Declaration of Independence was written with iron gall ink. The bottle of ink that I have been using is labeled India

ink so I'm not sure what it's made from - - tar or pitch but probably not bones.

We take every precaution against having the little bottles of ink spill and so far in twenty-five years we have been lucky. I have noticed that some of the desks have ink stains on them from an unfortunate spill. Someday, our luck will run out. I just hope it's not this year!

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