

Jack Whirry, Legendary Ag Teacher & Man of Faith

By John Sumwalt

Little did I know we were moving next door to a legend when the moving van pulled up to the Methodist parsonage in Montello, Wisconsin in June of 1978. “Whirry,” Jack said, when I knocked on their door to introduce myself, “rhymes with hurry.”

I was to discover over the years that Jack Whirry, who was Wisconsin Teacher of the year in 1965 and Wisconsin’s Outstanding Vocational Ag Teacher of the year in 1966, was always in a hurry to do good for his students and the community. He embodied John Wesley’s maxim “To do all the good you can by all the means you can.” Hundreds of young Future Farmers of America benefited from Whirry’s unfailing commitment to excellence.

Life on the farm, where he was born on September 27, 1919 in the front room of his parent's farm house in Buffalo Township, Marquette County, Wisconsin, prepared Whirry well for his stellar 38-year career as an Ag teacher. In several interviews with his granddaughter, Tessa Trahms Muscanero, for his autobiography “Wisconsin Grown,” after his beloved wife Mickey died in 2000, Whirry told about his “carefree years” as a farm kid:

“...playing along Graham Creek ... fishing for trout and chubs (for bait) and getting some good practice using my slingshot. I would walk down to the crick and go fishing using a pole I made out of a stick, cord string and a bent pin ...I eventually got a BB gun... but I still always preferred my slingshot.”

Jack said, “Even though I was young, I still had to help milk the cows ...the saying was, ‘If you are old enough to drive, you’re old enough to milk’ and I wanted to drive a lot more than I wanted to milk. ...Bernie (the hired man) and I would sit on one-legged stools made out of two by six board. It was actually a balancing act for us. All the while the cow’s tails were switching all around us and most of the time they were not all that clean!”

We "...discovered that the milk would squirt out quite a ways if it was aimed right... it was quite a trick to squirt each other without my parents noticing. What fun we had."

Whirry added that he lost his taste for milk during that time because of how dirty the cow's udders were. "We would milk into a 12 quart milk pail that was held between the knees. When we were finished milking, we would pour the milk into a strainer that had a filter. It was called a strainer pad. I remember those strainers would be just black when we were finished and I knew we'd only gotten about 90 percent of the dirt, if that. Our barn cats always loved to lick what got caught in the strainer."

The first school experience for the future master teacher "...was the Vondersump one-room schoolhouse in rural Dalton, about 14 miles south of Montello, Wisconsin. The school-house was built out of wood, about 20 feet by 50 feet, and stood only one story tall. Inside the school there were about a dozen... desks for the students. The teacher's desk was up front of the class room where she could keep an eye on all of us... The number of students... varied from year to year. Of course we had only one instructor for all eight grades and no kindergarten, so if you listened really well as a student, you could probably complete all eight grades in one year because everyone was able to hear what was being studied in each grade.

"School wasn't all hard work. There was of course, always recess and oh, the games we would play! Those included 'Annie, Annie Over' and 'Pom, Pom, Pull Away...'"

"Using the bathroom back then was an experience that few kids these days could even comprehend. There were two outhouses behind our little school. One was for the girls and the other for the boys. We boys had a lot of fun pegging stones at the girls outhouse while they were in there! Of course, toilet paper hadn't been invented yet, so we would use pages from the Sears Roebuck catalog instead. Once you got the hang of it, it wasn't too bad. The trick was, you had to tear out the pages and rub them back and forth between your hands for a while to soften them up a little."

Whirry said, "...after completing eight years of primary school in seven, it was time for me to head to Montello High School at the ripe old age of 12 years... there were probably about 150 students enrolled in the High School... few of whom I knew at all. Let's just say that it was an adjustment for me to go from a school of seven or eight kids to one with over a hundred students... There were 33 students in my graduating class (in 1936)... Times were hard. So there I was only four short years after beginning High School and I was off to the city to attend the University of Wisconsin Madison at the age of 16.

After graduation from the University of Wisconsin with a degree in Agricultural Education in 1940, the farm kid from rural Marquette County, Wisconsin landed a teaching position at Gibraltar High School in the village of Fish Creek in Door County. Whirry told about his work there as a young Ag teacher:

"I had four classes of vocational Ag students during the regular school day. One of the significant requirements of my job was that I had to visit each of my students (which came out to be about 50 kids) on their home farms every week. Back then, my school week lasted five and a half days because of the extra time I needed to spend with my individual students working on their projects... Another one of my duties was to teach night classes to the area farmers. I would give a two-hour presentation and then the farmers would have a chance to ask questions. Now keep in mind that, as a new teacher, a lot of those local farmers knew more than I did...."

After three years at Gibraltar High the Whirrys moved back to Marquette County where Jack taught vocational agriculture and advised the FFA Chapter at Montello High School for the next 35 years.

It is recorded in his obituary, in the Marquette County Tribune following his death in 2015 that, "Jack was a committed educator but also a coach of FFA judging teams. He loved the competition and passed that love along to his students who excelled in state and national competition. His specialty was poultry and eggs judging. More than 20 times his state winners went on to compete in the national FFA competition in Kansas City."

Jack's meticulously coached judging teams won national awards in 1948, '53, '55 and '56, and were honored with National Golden Emblem Award for six consecutive years beginning in 1958. Whirry's students took first place in the nation as winners of the Poultry Management Contest in 1961. He also trained FFA judging teams in dairy, beef, farm crops, and soils.

"During his years at Montello HS, Jack guided the purchase of two Montello High School Forests, which were prototypes for high school forests across the nation. He took an early retirement in 1980 to manage Evergreen Ranch, the family tree farm in the township of Buffalo, Marquette County, Wisconsin."

"Jack received numerous awards/recognitions as Ag Teacher, FFA Advisor, and Tree Farmer. 1982 Regional Tree Farmer and 1999 Wisconsin FFA Hall of Fame Recipient (along with the 1965 Wisconsin Teacher of the Year), are a few of his honors. He was proud of those but even prouder of the awards achieved by his students during his years in the classroom at Montello High School."

"An active member of Trinity United Methodist Church, Montello for 60+ years, (where this pastor was privileged to know him for eight years) Jack served on the church's official board for decades. In recent years he helped guide the development of the church prayer garden."

In the foreword to his memoir, Jack's oldest daughter, Merry Whirry Larkin, wrote about her father as "...a man of integrity... a man who models the same behavior in private as he does in public. My father's life has a strong theme of doing what is right, forgiving what is wrong and teaching by example.

"Dad speaks of his precious aunts, his father's sisters, who shared their faith with him... who taught him to kneel by the bed to pray. Dad explains that he lived with parents who had a strong work ethic and governed their lives by the Ten Commandments. They tithed their money as biblically commanded.

“Dad speaks with fond memories of attending vacation Bible school and visiting Catholic Midnight Christmas mass. He speaks of his respect for Catholic friends and neighbors who lived their faith and convictions.

“As an adult I learned of Dad’s daily time with the Lord. Dad meets God each morning before he starts his day. The meeting is often only a few minutes in the Bible guided by the devotional titled “The Upper Room”. A few minutes is sufficient time for Dad to open his eyes to God’s work in his life and the lives of others. These minutes prepare Dad to give credit to ‘the Almighty’ throughout the day by noticing and pointing out the ‘mini-miracles’ he and others experience. He frequently tells me with joy that he feels safe as if he was in God’s pocket. Such peace.”

Jack Whirry wrote in the introduction to his memoir, *Wisconsin Grown*, “I have had a wonderful life filled with more blessings than I could have ever dreamed of when I was a young boy on the farm. Every day has held more ‘mini miracles’ than I could even keep track of throughout my many years of life and a number of ‘maxi miracles’ as well. When I reflect on days gone by and look back over all of the things that have happened in my 89 years on this earth, sometimes I feel as though I have lived two or three life times.”

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