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Little play of the Prairie: Salmon Prairie School students light up the stage with two-person Christmas production

By MICHAEL JAMISON of the Missoulian

SALMON PRAIRIE - The tiny schoolhouse, all decked out in its sparkling coat of winter and tucked tight to the evergreens, looked just like the one under the Christmas tree.

Outside, fat flakes filled footprints, falling still through silent night, and the only sound was their crunch underfoot at 5 below. From inside, a steady glow kindled the snug promise of a warm stove, shining through windows and lighting the drifts.

It was, in a word, peaceful.

“But just you wait,” warned teacher Holl Hubbard. “Things are going to get going around here when the class arrives.”

First to arrive was Will Clarke, who did much of the writing for this year’s school pageant.

Then came Keith Woods, the artist behind the sets.

And that was it. These two 12-year-olds are in a class of their own, the only students at Salmon Prairie School.

Since 1920, the one-room schoolhouse has served the children of Condon, located in the deep woods halfway between Swan Lake and Seeley Lake, between the soaring Swan Range and the rocky Mission Mountains.



Keith Woods (in picture frame) portrays the Ghost of Christmas Past, while Will Clarke is Principal Scrooge, two of the seven characters the boys portrayed in their holiday play. Photo by MICHAEL JAMISON/Missoulian

There's a spot on the highway map that marks Condon, a dot alongside Highway 83, “but Condon isn't really a spot,” said Will's mom, Paula.

It's tough to say how many live in Condon, she said, because Condon is less a town than a community, a sprawl of forest stretching for miles. You cannot, Paula said, define precisely where it begins or where it ends.

But tonight, the night of the school's Christmas play, the community is defined by the splash of soft light that rings the schoolhouse, by the smell of cold snow and pine, by the sound of laughter just touching the forest edge, and by the reach of a snowball thrown by a 12-year-old. Tonight, their community is defined by a gathering, and two boys are the center of the season.

“I know I'm going to crack up and laugh,” worried Keith, who is supposed to keep a straight face as the Ghost of Christmas Past. (He also plays Scrooge's student, his secretary, a former school principal and the Ghost of Christmas Future, in this play with seven parts and two actors.)

“Don't worry so much,” Hubbard said, “you'll be fine.”

Will, on the other hand, seemed worried about nothing at all, and was goofing with a costume wig only moments before curtain time.

"I'm always impressed," Hubbard said of his class. "They wrote the play, made the sets, did it all, just the two of them."

On the other side of that curtain, Salmon Prairie School slowly filled with nearly 50 folk, the stragglers forced to stand in the back for lack of seats.

"Some years, we've had five or six kids for the play," Hubbard said. "But it doesn't matter how many we have. They're always up for it."

Because this is far more than a Christmas play. This is a party, and a remembering.

"What I'm trying to do is pull some community back in as best I can," Hubbard said. "The school has always been a central part of this place."

It was central when Gladys Olson, the first teacher, arrived nearly 90 years ago, with 15 students attending. It was central when the log teacherage - Hubbard lives there now - was built in 1935. It was central when sisters Leita Anderson and Dixie Meyer and Karen Conley rode to class behind a wagon team.

"We were always having parties at the school," Anderson said. "Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, the spring picnic. Lots of parties, with dancing after."

Families came by wagon, Meyer said, and stayed the night at neighboring homes.

Tonight, the three sisters are back, Conley said, "to see what kind of program they could put on, just the two of them."

There have been times when Salmon Prairie School was filled with 20 kids or more. And there were times when only two or three attended.

"It's never been a big school," Anderson said. "Never will be."

What it will be, in Christmas Future, remains to be seen. Hubbard has another year with Keith, two

more with Will, but after that there are no more youngsters to fill the chairs.

This is logging country, and jobs are scarce.

Condon still is home to several more school-age children, Hubbard said, but most bus the 20 miles or more north to Swan Lake, or south to Seeley.

"Now why would you do that," Anderson wondered, "when there's such a fine school right here?"

Will is here - and his older sister Lily was here - "because I grew up in Los Angeles," their mother said, "where every classroom was packed in with kids. I wouldn't pass up this opportunity for the world."

Sure, there's no marching band, and no basketball team, but Will and Keith have Mr. Hubbard's constant attention. He takes them stomping through the woods, teaching them science and poetry all at the same time. He knows where they excel, and where they struggle, and can move them along at their own pace.

The school day is flexible - work fast, and there's more time to play, or to move on to another subject. Will and Keith aren't waiting for a bell to ring, or for 30 other students to finish with math time, and so "they have a real incentive to exercise a personal work ethic," Hubbard said. "We're one-on-one, and that's so beneficial."

Two boys, seven roles, music and sets and the script itself. The scene opens on a grumpy school principal named Scrooge - "and no," Mr. H insists, "it's not me."

Some of the parts, as Keith's ghost ushers Scrooge through time, are video vignettes, which allows the pair to play even more roles.

Sometimes, the video doesn't quite work, though, and sometimes there's a lot of bustling behind the curtain as the boys scramble to switch characters between scenes. At one point, Hubbard's stage whisper carries past the curtain: "Spit it out! Spit it out!"

It seems Scrooge, who is, after all, just 12, has lost a tooth mid-scene.

But for a full half-hour, no one fidgets. Instead, people grin and even giggle a bit, and sometimes laugh out loud. Keith as Katherine - in full drag, wig and all - draws hoots, and Will breaks the action with a couple of Christmas trumpet tunes. People clap, and they mean it.

“They did a fine job,” Anderson says afterward. “That was a real fine job.”

And then the feast - the baked ham and mashers and corn bread, hot cider and breaded green beans, brownies, the works.

“We did this at Thanksgiving, too,” Hubbard said. “We want to create a real community event.”

That it's working is evidenced by the standing-room-only crowd, many of whom hardly even know these boys. They have come to visit and to chat, Hubbard said, “To say, ‘Hey, I haven't seen you for a while.’”

Because Condon may not be a spot, but the schoolhouse surely is.

“You know,” Hubbard said, “it seems like no one has time to get together anymore. People are so busy, running in and out and up and down and back and forth. These gatherings are our chance to slow it down, to see our neighbors and say, ‘Hey, how've you been?’”

“That's what we're hoping for tonight.”

Inside, the schoolhouse is packed, and Santa - looking suspiciously like Will's dad - finally has arrived. The paper plates are loaded to the hilt, and every cup is full.

The happy tangle of conversation spills into the dark, punctuated by bursts of laughter and occasional rolling ho-ho-hos. Older couples hold hands, and younger couples too, and the kids take treats from Mr. Claus.

It could be 2008, or 1948, and Leita Anderson is remembering going to school here, remembering her kids going to school here, and her grandkids too.

You can see her there, through the frosted glass windows, laughing like a schoolgirl in her red holiday sweater.

She's chatting with former Salmon Prairie students, with teachers and business owners and computer programmers. From here, she says, you can do anything, go anywhere - although you might not want to.

Outside, the snow still is falling, piling 8 inches deep on the tether ball, like a sparkling elven hat. The schoolhouse marks a small circle of light in the dark, warmth in the cold, another gathering for Christmas Present, children at its center.

“We want to keep it alive,” Hubbard said. “There's not much community left.”

But you wouldn't know it, not tonight, not with the chaos of a snowball fight swirling around the schoolhouse.

“I got you!” Will cries, and Keith is buried, and it is as Hubbard warned - the class has arrived, and things are getting going.

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