The Porter School was closed in May 1967 when it was made part of the Kirksville School District. The building was sold at an auction for $450. (Photo courtesy of NMSU Pickler Library)

Marie Turner Harvey was nationally and internationally recognized for her work at Porter School. She travelled all over the country giving lectures about her ideas for rural education. (Photo courtesy of NMSU Pickler Library)

The Effect of One Woman

Many people of Northeast Missouri have a special place in their hearts for rural schools. They were a place where their children could be brought into the great world of knowledge yet still feel right at home. One of the schools that was known for its high educational standards in a home-like setting was Porter School when it was under the direction of Mrs. Marie Turner Harvey.

The Porter district was a nine mile square district, three miles west of Kirksville in the Benton Township. The land was donated by John L. Porter. In 1892 the school was built. The cost of the school was $600. After the school was completed, it was left unattended until Mrs. Harvey came.

Before Mrs. Harvey came, Porter had gained the reputation of being the worst district in the county. Even though it was one of the richest farming communities in the area, it lacked community spirit, involvement, and interest in education. This was partially caused by the lack of a permanent teacher. The district often had two teachers a year, one for the winter session and one for the summer session. When a teacher spends only three to six months in an area, it is hard for them to pull the people together. The people in the Porter district also felt that school was a school; if you were looking for involvement you looked to the church. Before Mrs. Harvey came they had no chance to look to the school for community events.

Marie Turner Harvey came upon the Porter School and the community because she heard of their needs. She had been teaching at the Model Rural School on the State Normal School campus, but she wanted to get into a more realistic setting. She felt that the school on campus was not a good place to practice new theories of rural education because in order to see the real effect they had they must be present in the child’s whole life, not just the school day. This wasn’t possible at the Model School because the children were transported to town and then sent home at the end of the school day. Because of the children’s commuting, the school wasn’t a part of their community so what was taught wasn’t always a part of their home life.

Mrs. Harvey had learned, through her teaching in the rural St. Louis area and being a pupil herself of a rural school for 12 years, that the school could become the center of the community. But in order to do so, the teacher must be totally devoted to improving the community.

It was with this in mind that in the summer of 1912 Mrs. Harvey went to L. B. Sipple, the county superintendent, and requested that he give her the worst district in the county. When he told her of Porter, she said she would take it provided that she would be given three years there to teach material adapted to the needs of Porter students. She would be allowed to do this without interference from others, provided that it met state standards. She also would have a residence of her own within the community. Both of her requests were granted.

The schoolhouse Mrs. Harvey found waiting for her was not by any means ready for classes. Before classes could begin, she got people of the community together. There were six or seven families that were the core of the community. These families had been waiting for the chance of a better
educational opportunity for their children. Some of the families were already acquainted with Mrs. Harvey through the Model Rural School. They were eager for her to come to their community. Under the leadership of Mrs. Harvey they worked together to obtain their goal of a better education for their children. Others soon followed their lead.

The men of the area dug a basement, and put a foundation under the school since one hadn’t been put in when the school was built and now they needed it to put in a furnace. In order to do this, they jacked up the building. Sand needed for the foundation was hauled from Rye Creek. The men also worked together to put a new roof on the building. A new furnace was installed along with a new water system including a pressure tank and drinking fountain. Broken windows and cracking plaster were also repaired. After the work was completed the school was once again in condition to be used. But Mrs. Harvey wanted the school to be a pleasant experience for the children, so the walls were papered, windows were covered with shades, and pictures were hung on the walls. All this was done with funds and labor donated by students and parents. The only thing they didn’t pay for was the water system which Mrs. Harvey paid for with her own money.

When classes did start, Mrs. Harvey brought many traditional subjects along with new ideas to her schoolroom. Mrs. Verlie Findling recalls many days of hard work in reading, geography, history, math, and English. But mixed in with these were art, music, and social behavior which included manners and learning respect for others and their property. The students worked until their lessons were correct. Mrs. Harvey’s definition of right is different from the one popularly held. To us an “A” given on a report card is the best that can be earned; Mrs. Harvey didn’t believe in grades or report cards, so none were given. Her students were advanced when she thought they were ready.

The curriculum taught wasn’t just the basics and it wasn’t confined to the traditional classroom methods. Mrs. Frances Wright, a former student of Porter School, remembered how the school day started, “Every morning we said the Pledge to the Flag and then we opened all of the windows and marched around the room to ‘Washington’s Post March.’ No matter how cold it was, that was our morning ritual.” The day ended when the students went home in the wagon Mrs. Harvey bought to transport the children from outlying farms. The wagon was driven by patrons and pulled by their horses. All of these activities were done to promote a sense of community patriotism.

Not everything taught at Porter was directed toward the goal of improving the community; although they did in the end. Some subjects were taught to improve the person or the family. Such things as art, music, and penmanship were used to improve self-worth. If the student could draw, sing, or write something that pleased someone, it improved self-worth.

Students were also taught skills to help them in family life, both in their present and future lives. They had some economics, gardening, and manners. The value of the first two is evident. These are skills needed to run a home, but manners and respect for others were very important, too. These gave the rural child the ability to put in situations foreign to rural life and still feel comfortable, for the students knew how to act. They would be able to pass these skills on to their children, bringing some sophistication to country life.

Holidays were looked forward to at Porter School. There were many ways Mrs. Harvey found to celebrate. Arbor Day called for planting trees outside. A variety of items were planted including trees and flowers; tulip bulbs were planted annually. Lincoln’s and Washington’s birthdays were often celebrated with plays that were incorporated into history lessons. Christmas pageants were outstanding; every student was involved and members of the community also took part. There would always be a play; sometimes it would be Charles Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol.” At the end of the festive evening Mrs. Elizabeth Link remembered singing “Up on the House Top” while Santa came in to pass out the presents. Each child received a book or two every Christmas. They were given by Mrs. Harvey and other patrons of the school. Some were used for studies, such as geography. Others were good, solid fiction meant to be read again and again.

Birthdays at Porter were a lesson in proper social behavior. The children would take their lunches to the basement where a long table was set up. The table hung from the joists by chains and was long enough to get all the children around it. Sitting around the table, they would use proper etiquette and hold polite dinner conversation. In this way students would feel very grown up, being expected to act like adults, and also learn how to behave at dinner parties.

Mrs. Harvey also loved to take her children on trips. Often they were just into Kirksville to the college to see some event. But even a simple program was more than most children of other districts ever got to see with their school. Mrs. Harvey considered it very important that her pupils should have all the advantages available. They shouldn’t be denied because of their rural home; therefore, she took them to everything possible, often arranging rides with the people of the community. She also took some of the older boys to Columbia to Farmers’ Week held at the college in January, 1913.

The first trip to Columbia helped develop an awareness of agricultural education. A school farm was developed on seven acres donated by a father of one of the students. The

The eighth grade class of 1926: Glenn Conner, Nell Fish, Lorene Gruhn, Mary Lee Ingraham, Mike Tomich, Pauline Green, Mrs. Marie Turner Harvey, Laura Harth, Victoria Tomich, Gordon Ingraham, Norma Meyers, and (seated) Geneva Summers. (Photo courtesy of Mrs. Verlie Findling and Mrs. Frances Wright)
Mrs. Harvey's home "The Cottage," was the first teacherage in Missouri. (Photo courtesy of NMSU Pickler Library)

State Department of Agriculture helped set up a plan for crops and crop rotation for five years. They also started the first short courses ever held by the State College of Agriculture. These became an annual event in the community with as many as 200 people attending. All these people were fed by the Farm Women's Club.

One of the final contributions to the classroom at Porter was the visitors they had. Since Porter School was really a demonstration school, groups from the Teachers College often observed the classroom methods used by Mrs. Harvey. The school and Mrs. Harvey had gained national and international acclaim. People came from all over the world and from the education field to observe her in the classroom. They came so often that Mrs. Harvey had to limit the number of visitors she would have in a year so that they would not interrupt her classes. Two of the most enjoyed visitors were Mr. and Mrs. Waters, Mrs. Harvey’s sister and brother-in-law, who were world travelers. When they returned from a trip, they would come to the school and share their adventures with the children. They would also come at Christmas. They were some of the people who brought books for the children. All the visitors at Porter may have added to the classroom experience but they never distracted from it. The classes were run the same whether people were there or not.

Mrs. Harvey’s main contribution to the community outside the school was the organization of community clubs. Even though they were community clubs, many of them had something to do with the school. Some of them were the Farm Women’s Club, Porter Farm Club, Porter Pig Club, Poultry Club, Porter Jr. Band, Porter Sr. Band, Parent-Teachers Association, and Interdenominational Sunday School. All of these clubs were of great importance to the community. They provided a gathering point for the adults as well as the children of the community, providing more
community spirit.

Mrs. Harvey’s work at Porter School has long been remembered. It touched many peoples’ lives and hearts. She made the residents proud to be a part of the Porter District even after she left there to teach at Kirksville State Teachers College. She was not alone in her work at Porter; she had many assistant teachers. One that was part of the backbone of the community was Miss Margret CRECeLus. She came to Porter soon after Mrs. Harvey, and helped in all aspects there. Others who taught there included Mrs. Erma Darr, Mrs. Jones, Mrs. Beverly, Mrs. Linder, and Mrs. Mary Novinger.

When Mrs. Harvey left Porter, she left behind many things that weren’t there when she came: a sense of community, a love of books, a decent schoolroom, and a knowledge that people could reach their goals. Mrs. Harvey expressed her feelings in a forward she wrote in Mrs. Elizabeth Link’s book.

_I am hoping this will have deeper meaning to you with passing years, and that it will inspire you to actively “carry on,” and make such a community life as will sustain the name “Porter” as symbolical of “service” before the country at large._

Marie Turner Harvey

Young gardeners show off the tulips they grew from bulbs planted the fall before. Miss CRECeLus brought many of the flowers and vegetables planted in the garden from southern Missouri where her father was a truck farmer. (Photo courtesy of NMSU Pickler Library)

By Renée Wilson

Porter School had running water in 1912. This was made possible through funds provided by Mrs. Harvey. (Photo courtesy of NMSU Pickler Library)