

From Schoolhouse to Farmhouse: 1938

by Larry Kidder

Pete Wooden, his real name was Franklyn but everyone called him Pete, knew the Pleasant Valley Schoolhouse almost as well as the home he grew up in. He attended the school as a student in the 1920s, graduating from 8th grade in 1928. During his last three years in the school his older sister, Mildred, taught the younger children at the school while the older children, including Pete, were taught by the legendary Frank Carver. Pete went on to Lambertville High School, graduating in 1932. While in both grade school and high school, Pete participated actively in many of the community events held at the schoolhouse. He was a member of the Calf Club, president in 1931, and participated in the annual summer agricultural fairs the club put on. He played baseball for the Quail Athletic Club that held many functions at the schoolhouse. And, he undoubtedly attended church services and participated in the interdenominational Union Sunday School each spring, summer, and fall. So, he knew the building and grounds inside and out from having spent countless hours there acquiring some of the most memorable experiences of his young life.

Shortly after graduating from Lambertville High School, Pete married classmate and Lambertville native Alice Mae Guhl on August 6, 1932. She was known as Mae and was the daughter of William and Sadie (Housel) Guhl. Pete and Mae soon started their family with Franklyn Jr. arriving in February 1933, Frances in December 1935, and Thomas in April 1937. Pete supported his young family by working as a carpenter and the family lived with Pete's brother, George Wooden, on George's dairy farm near Harbourton. Pete's parents still lived on their dairy farm on Wooden's Lane in West Amwell Township a couple of miles to the west of George's farm and about a mile from the schoolhouse. By 1938 Pete and Mae their sixth wedding anniversary and had three small children. Although Pete supported his family adequately he found that working for others as a carpenter, suffering accidents such as falling off a barn roof and hurting his back, and coming from a family immersed in agriculture, was slowly but surely convincing him that he should have his own farm.

Although the Wooden family had a long tradition in dairy farming and the farmers in Pleasant Valley and West Amwell had been dairymen for as long as he could remember, Pete's high school agriculture teacher, Abe Coan, convinced him to consider poultry farming. Also, by the time Pete was in high school his family had diversified from straight dairy farming by adding chickens. Pete's brother Melvin had a retail egg route, as did some other Pleasant Valley farmers, such as Lowell Hunter. So, in 1938 Pete Wooden was looking for a home for his young family and a place to start his poultry farm.

With all of this going through his mind, when Pete Wooden picked up a copy of the April 13, 1938 *Hopewell Herald* his eyes must have fallen on the page one headline:

COUNTRY SCHOOLS WILL BE SOLD

DECISION OF TOWNSHIP BOARD OF EDUCATION TO SELL FOUR BUILDINGS MARKS PASSING OF OLD LANDMARKS IN PATH OF MODERN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

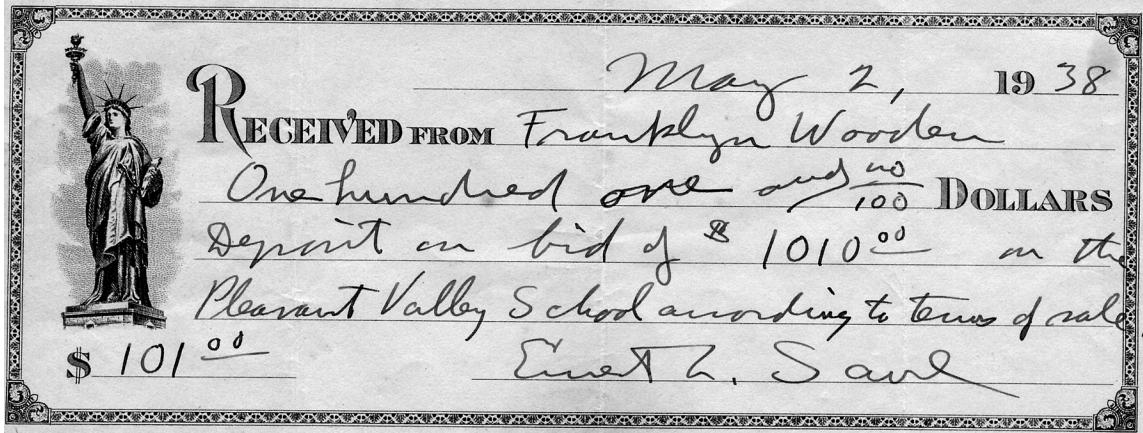
He continued to read the article and noted the four rural schools, Hart's Corner, Marshall's Corner, Mount Rose, and Pleasant Valley, had been declared "to be no longer suitable, convenient or needed for school purposes" and the board directed "that they be sold at public sale on Monday, May 2" to the highest bidder. As Pete read about the closing of the schools, he thought about the Pleasant Valley School and its one acre of ground that he knew so well and began to visualize how he could turn it into a poultry farm that could support his growing family. Perhaps this was just the place he was looking for where he could establish his family in the community he knew so well and be surrounded by his extended family and life-long friends. Pete decided to put in a bid on the school. The schoolhouse lot clearly wasn't a poultry farm, but Pete had a plan to transform it into one. When the public bidding on the Pleasant Valley schoolhouse and lot was held in Pennington on May 2, 1938, Pete put in the winning bid of \$1010.00 and put down a deposit of one hundred and one dollars.

The deed was dated one week later on May 9 and on May 16 he paid the balance of nine hundred and nine dollars. Just where he got the money is not clear, but it appears that he borrowed it from his brother Lawrence. Lawrence was the only Wooden brother who was still single and may, therefore, have had more money available. In the family records is found a deed from Lawrence to Franklyn in 1951 and it was probably at that time that Pete repaid him.

When Pete Wooden purchased the schoolhouse in 1938 he acquired a building and land, but not really a home and certainly no place to keep the chickens he wanted to raise. The schoolhouse consisted of the two large classrooms with the folding door between them, the two vestibules, the side room added in 1917/18 that had been a cloak room and that also contained a wood burning cookstove, and the basement. There wasn't much left inside from the schoolhouse days except for some cabinets, the bell, and some Bibles Mae found that were left over from the building's use as the Sunday School. One inescapable reminder of the school days was the hardwood floor that had been carefully treated with linseed oil so many times. When the young Wooden children played on the floor they got filthy black from the embedded linseed oil, much to Mae's consternation.

Pete's plan to turn the schoolhouse into a home and farm consisted of a combination of demolition and construction. The Great Depression was at its height and Pete had to be as frugal as possible. He needed wood to build a house for his chickens and he needed to reconfigure the schoolhouse for a family home. The demolition came first and Pete took down the original 1889 classroom, the two vestibules, the bell tower, and several feet from the south end of the cloak room/kitchen added in 1917/18. He removed the windows from the west wall of both rooms. He took down the horse shed behind the school. Pete carefully saved the wood and windows from the 1889 schoolhouse and the windows from the 1917/18 addition for use in the chicken houses he had in mind.

Pete's construction plan included building a new front wall for the house where the folding wall separating the two classrooms had been and giving the remaining west wall new siding and new, smaller



Receipt given to Franklyn Wooden for his deposit on the Pleasant Valley Schoolhouse. The receipt is signed by Ernest Saul, Supervising Principal for Hopewell Valley. Today he would have the title of Superintendent of Schools.

windows. It is very possible that Pete used recycled framing lumber from the 1889 building to construct the new front wall and to frame the empty west wall where all the windows had been removed. With at least two sides of the house left exposed by demolition, new siding was needed. For siding, Pete put on cream colored asbestos panels about 30 inches long. Later, in the 1960s or 1970s, he replaced them with red aluminum siding.

Pete lowered the ceiling of the remaining school room from 12 feet to 8 feet so that there could be a second floor of rooms and storage. He partitioned the first floor into several rooms and built a flight of stairs to access the second floor. When completed, the reconfigured school room provided three bedrooms and a living room on the first floor. A space was left for a bathroom to be added later. The second floor had three bedrooms and space for a bathroom. Mae's mother used the south bedroom at the top of the stairs and when she remarried in the 1970s, Pete converted the second floor into an apartment for her and her husband. This conversion included modifying the northwest bedroom so it could be used as a kitchen and putting in an exterior door on the west wall of the house at the foot of the stairway to give them a private entrance. Pete never built the planned porch and steps for the new doorway, so today it appears to be a door to nowhere. At one time, Mae's grandmother also lived with them and probably had one of the first floor bedrooms. Several of the children had rooms on the second floor at various times. Franklyn and Mae had the west bedroom on the first floor.

Pete built a wood porch on the front of the house in 1938. In the 1940s he hired an Italian stone mason from Trenton replaced it with a stone porch. The mason also built a stone fireplace for the living room and stone steps and an entry for the east side entrance to the kitchen. There was electricity in the house, since electricity had come to the Valley in 1935, but no indoor plumbing. During the first year Pete had seven lights and four receptacles put in. Seven years later, in 1945, he added three receptacles and eight lights. The demolition and reconfiguration took several years and through it all the family lived in the house amid the various construction projects.

Additional construction included turning the cloak room, with its black cast iron, four-lid, wood burning cooking stove, into a kitchen. Tom Wooden remembers as a young child taking a bath in the kitchen in a galvanized tub when a leg on that old stove gave way. The Woodens added an ice box in 1939 or 1940 that was moved to the cellar after a new refrigerator was purchased. That refrigerator was still in use over fifty years later.

Before the house had plumbing, an electric pump provided running water to the kitchen from the old schoolhouse well, but the sink had no drain. Grey water was collected in five-gallon slop buckets, as were kitchen scraps, and the hired hand or children emptied it out back at all hours of the day. The old school well and its hand pump were located in the former schoolyard out towards Pleasant Valley Road. The water must have been good, because people often stopped to ask for water from the pump. Also, in the summer months water from the well filled milk cans that were then taken to the Wooden farm on the hill on Wooden's Lane for Pete's father's cows. A car backed into the pump accidentally when turning around in the driveway and broke it. Pete removed the pump and covered the well with a red metal lid. No plumbing meant no bathrooms, so for several years the family used the westward of the two two-seat outhouses remaining from schoolhouse days. The foundation of this outhouse is still visible and a tree grows from its middle. After a cesspool was completed in the mid-1940s there was indoor plumbing in the house.

Heating the house was a problem and sometimes when it was very cold the kids were put to bed with their clothes on. One winter Pete and Mae used the cooking stove for heat. The school had been heated by a coal burning furnace in the basement that had provided steam to radiators. A newer furnace replaced the old coal burning furnace, but the base of the old furnace can still be seen. Two of the old radiators are still in use, one in the kitchen and one in the front room. The furnace could not always be used, though, and Pete put in a heating woodstove at the fireplace in the living room that he and Mae used as they got older. However, the chimney needed cleaning frequently and they got tired of carrying out the ashes.

Pete did not make many changes to the basement. He did fill in the basement under the original 1889 building except for the area under his front porch. He built a cinderblock foundation wall under the front edge of the porch. The basement had a natural spring running under it that provided a constant, cool climate. This provided the perfect environment for candling, grading, and storing the eggs produced by their chickens. The chickens also needed accommodations and other outbuildings needed to be constructed ... But, that's another story.

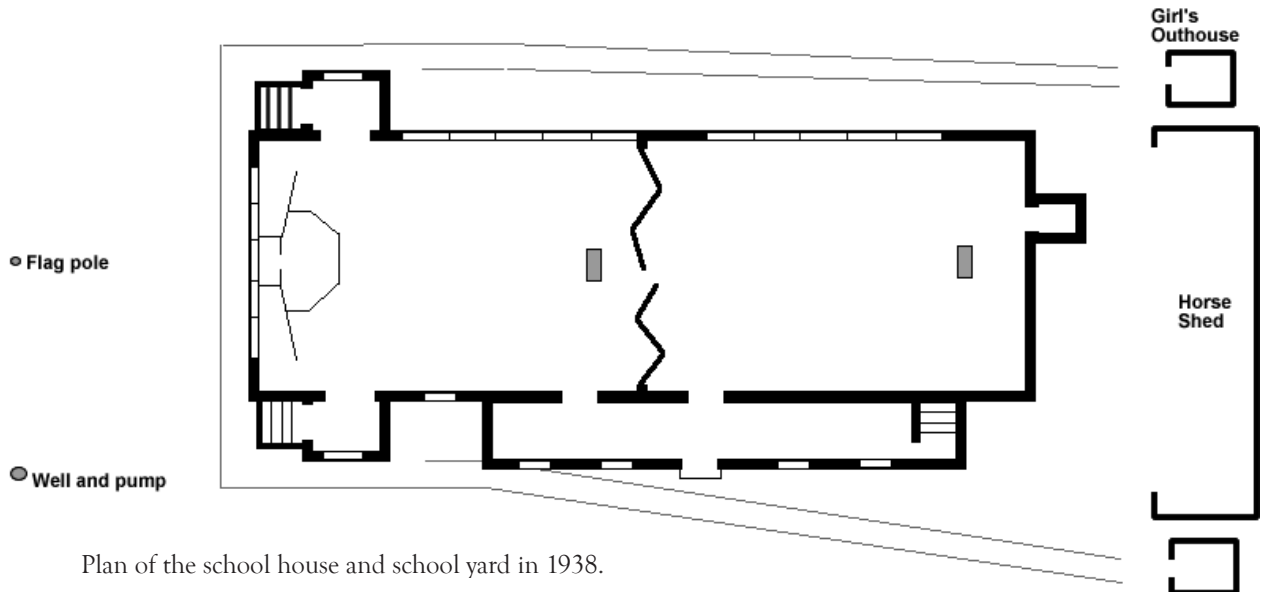
Epilogue:

Pete and Mae were the only owners of the house until it was acquired by Mercer County in 2003. Pete passed away in 1982 and Mae continued to live in the house until shortly before her death in 2003. Before she died, Mae arranged that the property would be acquired by Mercer County so it could be used by Howell Farm to enhance its interpretation of life in Pleasant Valley during its long history.

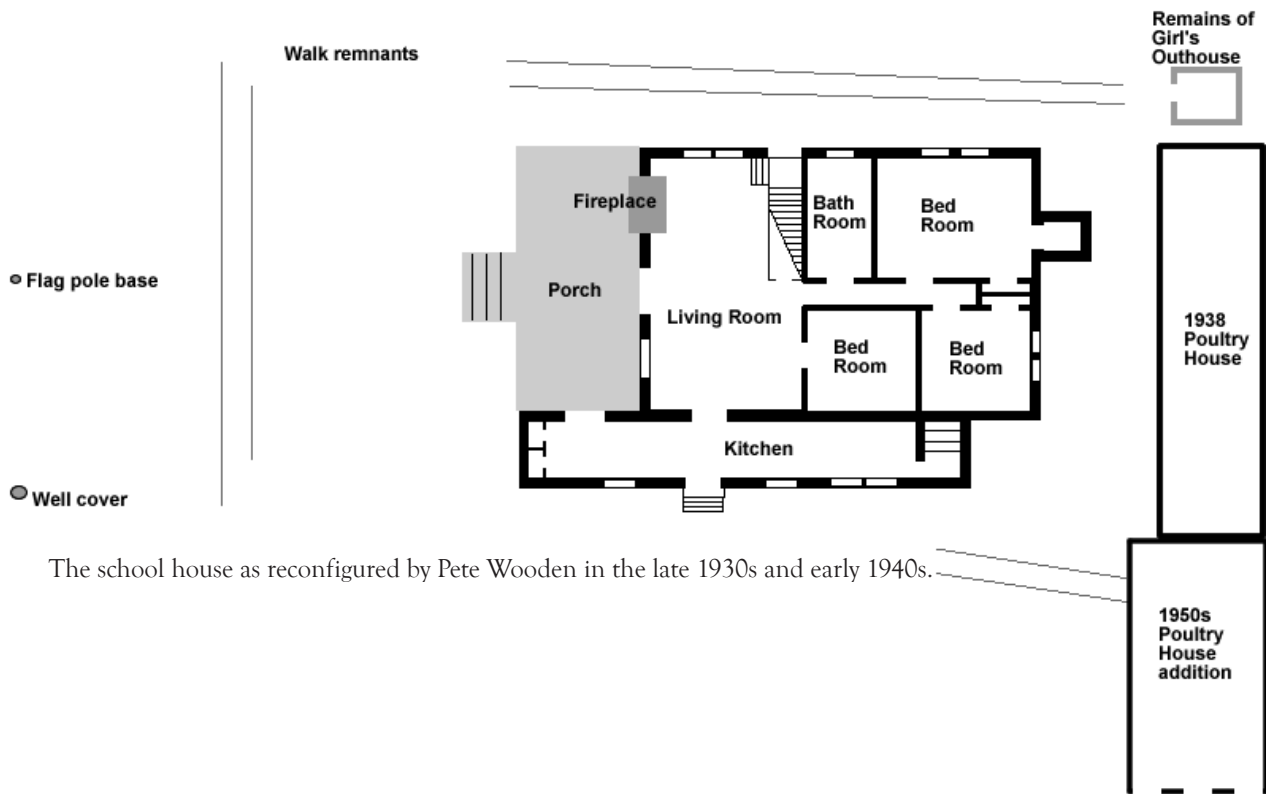
Sources:

The Hopewell Herald

Tom Wooden (son of Franklyn and Mae Wooden, provided information and family photographs)



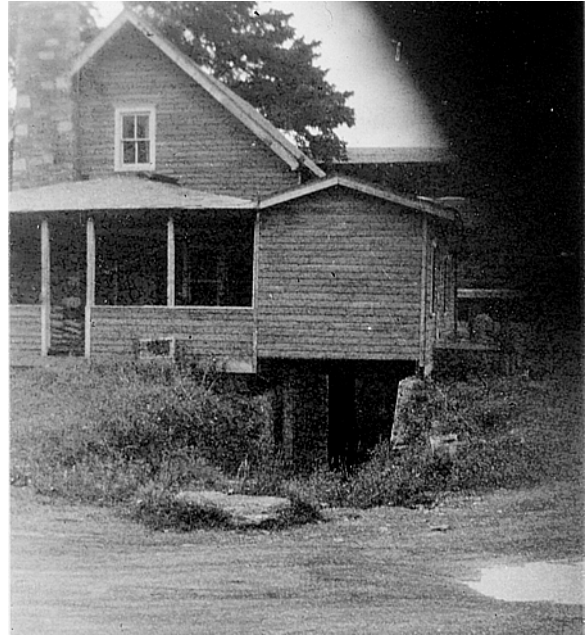
Plan of the school house and school yard in 1938.



The school house as reconfigured by Pete Wooden in the late 1930s and early 1940s.



Above: Conversion of the school house into a family home as of 1939. Note the front wall and front porch have been built and the original chimney for the old wood burning cooking stove is in place.



At Right: A 1943 photo showing that the wood stove chimney has been removed and the living room stone fireplace and chimney have been built.



Left and Below: Two views of the converted farm house in 1956. The old school basement has been completely filled in and the wood front porch replaced by stone. Note that the front gable end now has two windows on the second floor rather one as originally built in 1938. In the photo at left can be seen the drainage channel leading to Pleasant Valley Road for the old school pump.





A photo of the Wooden house and farm in 1955. To the right of the farm house is the brooder house built in 1942 that incorporates windows saved by Pete Wooden from the school house when he removed the front school room in 1938. Pete is standing at the end of his driveway at Hunter Road.



Mae Wooden's kitchen - the remodeled 1917 cloak room of the school. This is a contemporary photo showing the kitchen as left by Mae in 2003. The door at the back leads to the cellar.