

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

The old box car schoolhouse of Edom

Tracy Conrad

Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

Cradled by Harry Oliver, the diapered, one-year-old Todd Willis, looked up, to where the famous writer and publisher pointed, at the leaky roof of the old box car schoolhouse. The picture of the old-timer desert rat and the youngest resident of Thousand Palms was published in the Press-Enterprise newspaper with an associated article written by baby Todd's mother, Ardis Kay Willis, in 1955.

The box car schoolhouse had been in the news before. "The fascinating tale of the box car school is one which was widely publicized at its time, but which is now unknown to anyone but old timers even in this community. Probably not one of the school children of today knows the historic significance...."

It had begun in 1928 when Long Beach school teacher Della Lindley moved to the desert and wanted "desperately to resume teaching." There were 17 children in the area of Thousand Palms, then known as Edom. The parents of these kids "were weary of transporting them to Indio" for school. There was no school bus and the daily trek was tiresome. The parents and Mrs. Lindley appealed to the County School Superintendent E.E. Smith who authorized an "emergency" school at Edom which opened on January 2, 1929. "The school had no funds, no building and no properties—just 17 kids and an eager teacher."

Kay Willis, who would also teach school, explained in her article, it had been Mrs. Lindley, "more than anyone else, who spark-plugged the opening of the school and brought it (to) nationwide prominence within a year after it was established."

Early desert residents were resourceful and often made do. "At Mrs. Lindley's suggestion, Edom parents got permission from the Southern Pacific Railway to renovate an abandoned box car which stood among the section houses west of the tracks from where the present



Harry Oliver and little Todd Willis inspect the leaky roof of the box car schoolhouse. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Thousand Palms school is located. Desks for the box car school were provided by the county; otherwise most of the school properties were bought by Mrs. Lindley herself. In a well-meaning but mis-guided effort to please the teacher, the parents bought Mrs. Lindley an expensive oak desk and chair as their contribution to school essentials."

"In spite of its humble housing," and perhaps also because of it, "Edom's box car school soon made a name for itself. Under Mrs. Lindley's inspiring supervision, the pupils—from first through eighth grade—produced achievements which received recognition in state and national education journals, as well as in local newspapers and magazines."

Kay Willis queried Mrs. Lindley regarding her spectacular success in coaxing remarkable achievements from her pupils. "I believe...that every child is an individual and he must be treated as such. That's why I think small schools are better for the children than consolidated ones. I always analyzed each child to determine his interests and then made certain that he had the materials



The box car schoolhouse pictured in its dilapidated state before demolition.

and opportunities to develop these interests."

There was no school district from which to requisition those materials though. The children made do. "From clay they found in the desert, Edom school children made pottery. They wove rugs and baskets of native materi-

als; they raised vegetables outside the schoolhouse. Shortly before Walt Disney's version of 'Snow White' reached the majority of the public, Mrs. Lindley's pupils dramatized the story in an original production which was regarded as a masterpiece of juvenile creative expression."

About two years after its opening, the box car school was moved to the location of the present Thousand Palms School at the request of the railroad, which wanted it out of their right-of-way.

For some ten years more, the children of Edom attended school in the made-over box car. A new school building was ready by 1941 but the children were reticent to move. They had become sentimentally attached to their unusual school. Mrs. Lindley finally retired in 1945, having been absent from her classroom just two and a half days in almost two decades. "I could have taken advantage of the sick leave I had coming, but I just couldn't stand the idea of having some substitute teachers messing with my children." She is honored with an eponymous elementary school today.

Little Todd Willis and his older brothers, Steven Chad Willis and Lynn Barton Willis were photographed by their father, Everett, in front of the old box car before its demise. "As for the old box car, until this week it remained on the school grounds—giving mute testimony to the pioneer spirit of the past." The box car would have several other short-lived uses as a Sunday School and a youth group headquarters, but eventually fell into total disrepair. The dilapidated building became a hazard and made the news one more time with its demolition. "Today no trace of it remains save only a darkened spot of earth where once there stood a lowly box car schoolhouse."

Tracy Conrad is president of the Palm Springs Historical Society. The Thanks for the Memories column appears Sundays in The Desert Sun. Write to her at pshstracy@gmail.com.