

OL' BLAZE

By: John Halbert

Late-Summer, 1951:

"Well, there it is!" My dad steered the car to the curb and pointed at the long, low-slung building under construction. Look at it!"

I sat up and gaped at the bustling building site across the way, where, to the rumble of machinery, shouting workmen pushed wheelbarrows about; bricklayers slathered mortar and laid bricks; some were touching-up the landscaping; others toiled on the roof in the midst of oily black smoke, its rankling odor of hot asphalt reaching all the way to my nose. Even as I watched, a flatbed truck loaded with office furniture backed up to a rear door.

"Yep," dad went on, grinning, "before long you'll be starting first grade in there! Aren't you excited?"

I didn't answer him. A renewed feeling of dismay came over me as I realized my carefree days were about to come to an end. Lately, I had been obsessing more and more about what it would be like going to school, envisioning faceless women teachers pacing up and down between rows of student desks occupied by cowering children. Glancing at dad, I thought I detected a grin on his face. For a moment I imagined he might even be enjoying my misery.

The man put the Dodge in gear and swung the wheel of the big car. As my father shifted through the gears, I stared ahead glumly as the symbol of the most important development so far of my short life receded behind us. In desperation I wished something bad could happen to the school---maybe it could catch fire and burn down or something, putting off the agony now facing me.

In a few minutes, the car's tires crunched on the gravel driveway. When I pulled on the handle of the squawking front screen door and stepped inside, my mother's voice came from the kitchen. "Remember . . . we're going to *Belk's* this afternoon to get your school clothes!"

I took a deep breath and pumped up the stairs to the bathroom and its all-important throne. There---if for only a little while---I could insulate myself from the new reality.

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A few days later, I took a tight grip on my satchel of school supplies as my mother pulled on a heavy entrance door. Stepping inside the new school building, the first thing I noticed was a pungent, sweet, wood-like odor tickling my nose. As my eyes adjusted to the fluorescent lights of a long hallway before me, I spotted a Negro man nearby pushing with a wide broom across the tiled floor reddish-looking sawdust that seemed to be the source of the smell. All about, kids my age, most looking about as lost and confused as I was, stood by, most with a grown-up whom I guessed were their parent. A grim-looking woman emerged from a nearby room and in a strident voice ordered everyone to stop talking.

My mother led me down to a line of people standing at a doorway. While we waited, a trim,

tanned-looking girl with dark hair leaned back against the painted cinder-block corridor wall and eyed me. "I'm in the *second* grade," she grinned with an experienced air, "I'm 'Sandra Richburg'." Her name I would never forget.

Then a loud female voice called my name and mother tugged me through the entryway into a stuffy, good-sized room jammed with rows of small desks. There was a blackboard up front with wide, push-out windows along the outside wall---just like I had imagined it would be.

Behind a wooden desk in the front corner, an angular, graying woman looked me up and down with a scowl, then turned and spoke some clipped sentences at my mother, at the same time making notations on a card. I saw my mother's eyes narrowing.

While the two women went on talking, I looked around. A few other kids my age---some of whom looked awfully nervous, since for all of us, this was our very first day of school---were already sitting at some desks. Anxious-looking mothers stood by the wall, some wringing their hands at their offsprings' discomfiture. A tall, official-looking woman stalked up and down the rows, snapping her fingers and pointing. I guessed she was the second teacher. In the September heat, the stiff new denim shorts and the flannel shirt from "Belk's" I was wearing had set me to itching.

I spotted beyond two open doors at the front of the room the unmistakable fixtures of a pair of restrooms. At least they had taken care of *that* important matter, I thought.

". . . and those are the children's restrooms---" the woman was telling my mother just then, gesturing at the open doors, confirming my welcome discovery.

Then the woman pointed at *me*, and at an empty desk in the middle of the room. "Sit at *'that'* desk," she said, in her harsh, unpleasant voice. I slid into the unfamiliar-feeling wooden seat behind a gleaming new gray-metal-and-wood desk. While my mother stepped to the inside wall and joined the other grown-ups hovering about, the woman went on interrogating other parents. One-by-one, fledgling first-graders occupied the remaining desks.

"All right," she said at length, shuffling some papers and looking around at us, "my name is *'Mrs. Creel'*, and I am your teacher here at *'Blake School'*."

She called the roll of students, and for the first time I was introduced to my new classmates, some of whom would remain friends with me for the rest of our lives. Among them, *Amanda Bloss . . . Tommy Tank . . . Penny Duffey . . . Kathy Meadows . . . Jimmy Ballentine . . . Dwight Jones . . . Beckie Mayes and Eleanor Colson* answered the roll-call.

Mrs. Creel's bony hand gave a dismissive gesture. "That is all for today . . . we'll start the regular school tomorrow."

Relieved, I pushed back my seat and shuffled up the narrow aisle between the desks, still shaky from the new experience. Mother met me at the doorway and patted my shoulder. I could tell she was as emotionally drained as I was. The two of us joined my new fellow students and their parents as we all trooped up the bright, shiny new corridor toward the doors leading to the outside.

The same woman who had berated us earlier in the hallway frowned at our group as we went by. "Stop talking!" she blared in her overbearing voice. My mother glared back at her.

The next day, before the first full day of class, a petite, very pretty brunette seated directly across from me turned and gave me a missing-front-tooth-smile. "I'm 'Eleanor Colson', she lisped, and I was promptly captivated by her for all time.

Up front, Mrs. Creel was unloading an armload of papers onto her desk. It was then I realized that she would be the lone adult in the classroom---the tall, aggravating woman of the day before was nowhere to be seen.

Right from the start, Mrs. Creel had it out for me, confirming a suspicion I had picked-up the day before from her not-so-subtle body language and the *hateful* way she had spoken to my mother. As the year went on, the vocabulary she directed at me grew ever more pithy and intense; her beady eyes, framed by a pair of crinkly eyelids, gave her a perpetually-angry look, which was natural, since she *was* perpetually angry.

My new buddies and I soon came up with ways to get back at her, including secret hand signals across the aisles, disdainful gestures, and the ultimate: chewing gum without being caught. But before long, I found myself looking across the huge desk of the principal, Mr. Beck. A pudgy, unsmiling man with thinning, sandy-colored hair, Mr. Beck's preferred method of discipline was his wooden paddle. Although I had several "sessions" with him that first-grade year, I never felt the sting of his "board of education" on my bottom. `But plenty of other boys did.

One of the few times I managed to overtly get one over on Mrs. Creel was one day when we were learning how to read the hands of a clock. She didn't know my dad had already taught me how to tell time, but I went along like I was actually learning it for the first time which involved drawing hands on mimeographed sheets of a clock-face, following her example. "Now, children, you can show a time that is very special to you and you can explain it." All of us drew arrow-like clock hands on our papers. When the woman called on us in turn to tell what time we had and why we selected that particular time, most of the other kids' clocks were about unimportant things, I thought.

"John?"

I held up my clock drawn at "1:30".

Mrs. Creel frowned. "Why 'one-thirty'?"

"Because that's what time school gets out!"

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One day when I was out of school sick, my mother had a conference with Mrs. Creel during school hours. Since grandma was staying with another relative for a few days, she brought me along, bundled up in the back seat of the Dodge. Of course, she just *had* to park the car next to the playground, and it just *had* to be the very time my classmates were at recess! Sure enough, when I heard voices and opened my eyes, *there were all my schoolmates, looking through the windows, laughing and pointing at me!* After what were probably the longest minutes of my life, the driver's door opened and my mother stuck her head inside. "This little girl wants to say 'hello', to you."

Eleanor, standing on her tiptoes on the car's running board to see me through the window, grinned her single front tooth at me, waving. "Hi, John---!"

Groaning, I rolled over, dying of embarrassment.

"You're John's mother?" I heard her say.

(A pause while my mother was probably nodding.)

"He's my boyfriend!" Eleanor said. Then I heard her skipping away to join the others, who were returning to the building after recess.

From their direction came an adult female's voice. "Stop talking!"

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It was right after the spring holidays, and Mrs. Creel was glowering at me. "John, just for *that*, you must stay after school, today!"

But I sneaked off, eluding her, and walked home, congratulating myself on not staying. But the next day, Mrs. Creel shook a knobby forefinger at me. "For not staying, you're confined to the classroom during recess the rest of this week, and the next! You're lucky I didn't send you to Mr. Beck's office! You deserve a paddling!"

A few days after that, on a Saturday afternoon while I was tooling around the front yard in my "Radio Flyer" coaster wagon, a green, brand-new, 1952 Chevrolet hardtop pulled up to the curb across the street. My eyes narrowed at the car---something about it looked awfully familiar. Then the driver's door opened and my eyes went wide. *The always-angry-looking Mrs. Creel, her angular arms laden with file-folders, was striding with purposeful steps straight toward me!*

As I stared stupefied, the upright schoolteacher bustled right past me without saying a word and rapped on the front screen-door.

Slumping over the wagon in despair, I listened as an acrimonious conversation broke out in the living room between the teacher and my mother that went on for some time.

Then Mrs. Creel stormed out of the house, slammed back into her green Chevy and drove off with a furious clashing of gears.

While I debated whether or not to run away from home, my mother came out and glared at the car as it swept around a corner up the street and disappeared. She laid her hand on my shoulder. "I put that 'Ol' Blaze' in her place . . . I really did----"

"*Ol' Blaze?*"

"That's what I call her---not to her face, of course---but that's what I think of her. She's mean."

I looked up at my mother. "What did she say?"

Mother grinned. "She started-out on what a bad boy you are, and I didn't like the way she was talking about you. She wasn't being fair. So I told her what I thought."

"Won't she take it out on me at school?"

"Maybe, but I doubt it." My mother shook her head. "How dare she come to our house---and on a Saturday, no less!" Her hand, still on my shoulder, guided me around. "Let's go inside and get some frozen custard!"

I laughed. "'Ol' Blaze!' I *like* that!"

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In the spring, we had our class picnic at "Glenview Farms", a dairy where the locally well-known "Moo-Horn" milk trucks originated. The farm gave each of us little bottle of milk and a bag of potato chips. That day, Mrs. Creel practically gagged when she saw I had brought for my picnic lunch my favorite food---a "mayonnaise sandwich".

While Eleanor, Beckie Mayes and I all sat together on the sloping lawn, eating our lunches along with the other kids and watching the cows grazing across a nearby fence, we overheard Mrs. Creel tell another adult, "We let the children 'romp' like this once a year!"

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One morning near the end of the school year, when we assembled at the building's main entrance for our class picture, I couldn't find Eleanor. "Where's Eleanor?" I asked Mrs. Creel.

"You didn't know? She moved away!" Seeing my look of dismay, the woman gave a cynical grin. ". . . and to where she moved, the school is already out!"

"What! Their school is already out?"

"Of course!"

I always believed she said it like that to aggravate me.

But I never again saw Eleanor.

The next school year, we moved to 30th Street and I attended the "Atlanta-Annapolis Avenue School" for the next seven years until high school.

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May, 1963, Eleven Years Later:

My friend Jerry Hargett and I checked-out of high school during last-period study hall, like we usually did once or twice a week. "Where do we go, this time?" Jerry asked, starting his car. Over the past few weeks, as our graduation drew closer and there was not much more to accomplish in the classrooms, the two of us had been going around to all the radio and television stations in the area, meeting their on-air personalities and comparing their control rooms and studios with "WVNA's" palatial layout, where we both had weekend jobs.

"Let's go visit 'Ol Blaze'."

Jerry swung the wheel with a half-grin. "Who's 'Ol' Blaze?'"

"My old---and I do mean, *old*, by now---first grade teacher at Blake School . . . I don't know why, but I want to see her, again."

Jerry laughed. "Ol' Blaze!" He headed the car out of the high school parking lot onto the street. "We did have a few nick-names for the teachers, didn't we?"

We both laughed, reeling them off aloud, as we rode along: "'Shaky' . . . 'The Gray Ghost' . . . 'Giant' . . . 'Coach Mole' . . . 'Horse' . . . 'Snake' . . . 'Rocko'----"

In a few minutes, we drew up at the rear of the rambling, one-story building, where, a dozen years earlier I had started my school career. Compared to the gleaming new place I remembered from the past, the structure, now looked somewhat shop-worn. But as I had also put on some changes since those scrawny first grade days, I could hardly complain.

When we stepped inside, the first thing I noticed was the smell that in an instant took me back to the first grade: the tangy aroma of the sawdust-like floor-cleaning material. Over in a corner, next to a push-broom leaning against the painted concrete-block wall, was a pile of the red stuff.

Turning into the main corridor, we stepped down to the open door of the next-to-last room, which I remembered to be my first-grade teacher's. An elderly woman I recognized as a much-older-looking Mrs. Creel looked up and spotted us. She came to the door, with the same frown I remembered from all those years ago. For a split-second, I thought she might try to have us thrown out of the building.

I told her my name and gestured at Jerry, explaining we were graduating from high school, soon, and were re-visiting some of the places from our past.

The woman looked up at me and brightened. "Oh, yes . . . I remember you, now . . . you used to---" She diplomatically left the sentence unfinished.

I decided to pass on wondering *how* she remembered me and turned to my friend. "Jerry, this is 'Ol' Bl---ah, 'Mrs. Creel', my first-grade teacher." While she and Jerry shook hands, I

frowned at her forehead, where the horns I was sure she had had in my first-grade days had only existed in my imagination.

"Won't you come inside and see the children?" The same little desks we had sat in were now occupied by equally-tiny youngsters, a startling reminder of the diminutive size I had been in the first grade, compared to now. I had come a long way since those days, all right.

"This is a student of mine from a long time ago," Mrs. Creel said, motioning to me. "Study hard, and you'll grow-up good, just like him." It was a startling statement from a woman I had once detested.

She glanced at the clock over the front blackboard. "School now lets out at two-thirty," she said, "we still have a few minutes."

Jerry and I stood by as Mrs. Creel read from a book about "Dick and Jane", their dog, "Spot", and their cat, "Puff." It was all coming back, but without the stress of the former times.

Then the bell rang and as Mrs. Creel nodded at them, the tots made for the door. When they were all gone, she put out her hand and shook Jerry's and mine. "It was *really* good to see you again," she said, in a voice lacking the edge I had remembered. "Why don't you drop by and say 'hello' to Mister Beck, while you're here?"

Taking leave of the woman from my childhood days, my friend and I walked up the hallway to the main office, where we told the secretary why we were there. She flipped a lever and spoke into a little wooden box on her desk.

A portly, balding man with a round, searching face stepped out of an inner office and came toward us. I recognized an older Mr. Beck, whom I thought looked a lot like the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, who had recently tangled with the Americans over Cuban missiles.

When we introduced ourselves, the man smiled. "Boys, come into my office," he said in a calm voice, completely unlike the pounding principal of the past who had once thundered threats at me.

Looking back, I don't remember what we said across his big desk, but the conversation that afternoon was far more cordial than words that had passed between us in the long-ago.

At length, Mr. Beck shook hands with Jerry and me and wished us well. Trooping up the broad, shiny corridor toward the doors leading to the outside, the two of us exchanged comments about our visit. My viewpoint had completely changed from the time I had been here in the first grade.

But one thing had *not* changed. As we stepped along, a glaring middle-aged woman bustled out of a classroom, wagging her finger at us. "Stop talking!"

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EPILOGUE:

---Mrs. Creel and Mr. Beck passed away many years ago. My father died in 2003; my mother passed on in 2005.

---I never again saw or heard of Eleanor Colson, although I never forgot her. At one time, I located an "Eleanor Colson" in Texas, and, although she was cordial, she was not the girl from my first-grade.

---The Blake School building was torn down in 2006 to make way for apartments.