

# Nursery school was a frolic in the country for the kids

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**H**ER SHORT, gray, ponytail caught up in a satin ribbon and briskly bobbing, 74-year-old Ethel Brant spends a few minutes vigorously riding a rocking horse left over from her recently-closed pre-school out on Sims Road.

Smiling with delight, her words spilling enthusiastically all over the place, Brant seems as fresh and wondering as the scores of little kids who went through the portals of her Frolic Farm school from the late '40s until she closed its doors in June.

A neighboring rooster crows in the late morning sun — and Brant notes that the sound is about all that is left of the truly rural atmosphere surrounding the little school she and her husband, Ferd, built in 1949.

"Sims Road was a dirt road then," Brant recalls, standing in the school yard and looking out over the surrounding area. "I used to take a long rope and put knots in it. The kids would hang on to the knots and we'd walk all over — there were horses and cows and pigs on the neighboring farms — but when this road came in in the '50s, all that was changed."

In the country-style living room of her small house located above the school, Brant goes over pictures — and memories.

Classes were limited to 12 per session, she says. Some kids came one morning a week, others, two mornings per week.

In 1972, when she started taking things a little easier, Brant hired teachers to come in and help. But she continued to have classes of her own.

When Brant and her husband built the one-room school in 1949 it cost them \$400. She says the neighbors told them at the time they would be lucky if they ever got their money out of it.

But it was the first nursery school in the county, she says, — and a success from the start.

Asked what changes she saw in pre-school-age children through those years she says the biggest change came with the advent of television.

"Kids used to like to read — but you can't interest them anymore," she says. "They could read and get something out of books but now they just can't amuse themselves."

Brant says she always tried to keep things simple and back-to-nature in her activity planning.

Every Friday the children brought their lunches — and Brant incorporated a little teaching of table manners. Often they took their lunches along when they explored the surrounding fields and hills — and Brant worked in some of the finer points of leaving these sites the way they found them.

"I'm sure none of my kids are litterbugs or that kind of thing," she says, proudly.

"I tried to get in a little common sense — things they wouldn't learn in school. You can go overboard in nursery school — then the kids are bored when they get to school."

She remembers the excitement of the students — most of whom were from fairly affluent families — when they put together an imaginative train. The "cars" were made from orange crates and the "engine" from a barrel.

"We painted it and it looked great," Brant recalls.

Plenty of Brant's former students still live in Santa Cruz and many remember her.

"Everybody still calls me 'Teacher', she says. One such student, a local businessman, recently saw her on the street, called out, "Teacher!" and gave her a big hug.

She liked that a lot.

Santa Cruz attorney James Ritchey, who was in Brant's first preschool class in 1949, looks back into his childhood to the Friday picnic-hikes out in the woods and sand hills.

"It seemed like it was so far out in the boondocks then," he recalls, "but it was probably where Brook Knoll School stands now."

Recalling the nature walks, where Brant pointed out the growing things around them, Ritchey says, "I always wondered where I got that early environmental training — I realize that must have been where it started."

The petite, blue-jeaned Brant looks up from her picture collection and allows herself one more backward glance.

"I always had summer classes, too," she says, a little slowly. "This is the first summer I haven't had a class."

But there's no time to be wistful, because Brant has been wielding saw and hammer, helping a nephew transform the school building into a cottage where he will live.

She did a lot of remodeling last winter, too — on a small house she's purchased in Boulder City, Nev., near her son and his family and where she will live part of the year.

"They gave me a skill saw for Christmas," she reports, looking forward again.



First Frolic Farm class included, seated, from left, Adrienne Marquess, Lizzie Christie, Patti Allegrini and Diane Haber. Back row, from left, David Wilson, Billy Cowden, Jimmy Ritchey, Jerry Ritchy and David Fessler.