

## Access Press

# Christmas at Crowley School: Cookies, carols and tradition



This month's History Note is from the book, *A Collection of Teacher Memories, 1910-1960*. The book was compiled by the St. Paul Association of Retired Teachers.

The book includes dozens of stories from former teachers, including the late Ann Covart, who taught what were originally called "special classes" between 1921-1965. "Special classes" were for students with physical and cognitive disabilities, as well as students with speech disorders and learning disabilities. When Covart began teaching in St. Paul, students with disabilities had classes in separate buildings.

Covart was considered a pioneer in special education, pushing for students to be offered more opportunities. She was beloved by former pupils and took pride in their accomplishments as they went out on their own and found gainful employment. But her memories show practices that would not be used now. How students were classified for education wouldn't be acceptable today.

Students were classified by I.Q., without regard to the nuances and complexity of their disabilities. Students with the lowest I.Q. levels were called "betas" or "trainables." "Subnormals" were considered to be capable of getting a basic education. Students with the highest I.Q. levels were considered "alphas."

Over the years Covart taught at long-gone schools, including the original Washington, Jefferson and Monroe, as well as Crowley. This Christmas story is from Crowley, which was located on the city's West Side. Covart taught at Crowley for 23 years, during its years as an all-girls and then co-ed school.

While we wouldn't have a school holiday program with religious overtones today, the Crowley programs were a pleasant memory for former students.

*During the year we sang Christmas songs, including O Tanenbaum (sp) in German and Silent Night in Spanish. Every Christmas, the whole school gathered in the lovely, lower hall of the Crowley building. The principal or the sewing-cooking teacher played the piano and I led them. Sometimes we had readings. It was beautiful as we sang Silent Night going back to our classrooms.*

*For many years we had a program at Christmas time depicting the birth of Jesus Christ. It was really the best program I had heard, including those done in churches. It was a tradition when I came to Crowley so we continued until the (Department of Education) said we could not have programs of a religious type.*

*We had a cradle and the baby. The students voted on whom they'd like for Mary and also who should be Joseph. I bought some beautiful white dresses for the angels. We had a chorus to sing the appropriate songs. Our best readers read the Christmas story from the Bible. We typed sheets for them from which they read.*

*The little ones marching in singing Away in a Manger. The boys sang We Three Kings and came down the aisle in costume to present the gifts. It was a touching presentation. The cooking students served Christmas cookies and coffee or punch.*

Covart stayed in touch with many students before her death at age 100. Interestingly, she was opposed to mainstreaming students with disabilities, saying "every one of us needs to be best in something and they don't have a chance."

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