

COUNTRY SCHOOL DAYS REMINISCENCES OF COUNTRY SCHOOL TEACHERS

By Doris Shipley

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I am Doris Eaton Shipley, a Butte County, South Dakota rural school teacher of the 1930's

Butte County rural schools are my background. My mother, Rosa M. Easton, was a Butte County rural teacher intermittently for thirty years from the time of her marriage in 1911 – previously 10 years in Camp Crook, Harding County and areas around Capitol, Mt. paying back her debt to her two uncles who had financed her education at Spearfish Normal – until her death in 1946. My father, Thomas W. Eaton, served in some capacity on the school board of the Fruitdale Independent School District for many years. We lived near Ingersoll School which I attended for six and one half years, finishing my seventh and eight grade years of Fruitdale, another school in the same district, both two-room schools. During the 30 years she had taught in Butte County half her time had been spent at Ingersoll and Fruitdale.

With eight years of rural school background, I was sure I was ready for rural school teaching when, in 1933, I received a provisional South Dakota State Certificate from Dakota Wesleyan University at Mitchell, South Dakota. The drought and depression years had affected most school district. Jobs were scarce and wages very low. Experience was essential even for the poorest of jobs so beginning teachers were willing to take most any job that was available. I knew I was lucky to have the opportunity to get a contract for the primary grades in a two-teacher school in the Empire District at the Empire School six miles east of Vale, South Dakota. It didn't matter that I would receive only \$50.00 per month in warrants (cashable only at a big discount), and that I would board almost two miles from school. I was just lucky again to be able to live with my Mother's teacher friend and get my board and room for \$12.00 per month.

The S. D. Provisional Certificate issued after completion of 2 years of college and a semester of practice teaching under a qualified teacher. Following 2 years of teaching and with a County Supt's recommendation the full State Certificate was issued, and supposedly good for all time.

There was never such an education as comes with the first year of teaching! Our school at Empire was fluctuating between fifty and sixty students, quite evenly divided between the two rooms. The upper four grades were taught by another beginning teacher, Mildred Williamson, whose home was in the community. Her high school age brothers helped our situation by stopping to build our fires for us in bad weather and cream cans of water were hauled and put into our coolers for drinking.

One of the first problems we had to cope with in all grades was sugar beet harvest and absenteeism. The Vale/Empire area was one of the biggest beet growing sections of the country. The German/Russian beet farmers were determined to succeed and every family member was required to do their part. Little folks in the primary grades were kept at home to help care for younger brothers and sisters while mother worked in the field. Older sons and daughters were in the fields doing the topping. School was just nicely under way when in late September the harvest began. State law required that children be in school, but an occasional day back would satisfy the requirements.

Work weary children who had gotten behind were in no condition to catch up, and there began the division of grades. There were those who never missed any school and were eager for each day's activities, and there were those who were making so little progress that school had to have been only a great resting place. So, shortly, we were each of us working with almost eight grades instead of four!

Halloween was approaching, and it was expected that there would be a program and some sort of money making event to raise funds for the extra supplies for children's arts and crafts, for special seasonal decorations or for new play ground supplies or what ever was thought necessary. The program and money raiser was under

the auspices of Y.C.L. – Young Citizen’s League. This organization was a real gift to rural teachers for it was truly a developer of young future citizens. Each teacher in our school put together plays, singing, recitations or whatever seemed interesting for parents and friends to have altogether for about an hour and a half of program.

The school house was divided into two rooms by sliding doors. For special occasions these were opened making one big room. Cooperating parents brought planks to be placed on wood blocks to make benches for extra seating. Sheets were borrowed from patrons to be strung on wire to make curtains for the stage. Lights for the evening were gasoline lanterns. Thus, we were ready for the school program.

After the program came the social event of the evening! In our case it had been decided to have a box social. The women and girls decorated their lunch boxes (a shoe box or one of comparable size) in any fancy way that suited the maker and packed in it a delicious lunch for two. Some man in the community with auctioneer abilities would be master of ceremonies and the bidding would begin! Coffee was made in a big pot on the oil stove in the front entry hall. Even in those days of little money, a successful box social would net nearly a hundred dollars. Imagine this young teacher’s chagrin when her box was bought by an old bachelor in the community who wouldn’t follow the rules of the game, but tucked it under his arm and left, leaving her with nothing to do but count the money somewhere back of the curtain while everyone else was having a good time over supper. I’ve always been leary of box socials ever since!

The weather was getting colder and the short two miles to Doud’s where I boarded was getting longer. The saddle horse that had been provided for me was now needed on the sheep range so I was afoot to walk to and from school. Less than a half mile away was an older couple who had sometimes kept the teacher and were willing to have me stay a few months in mid winter with them. When they went to California in February, I made a third move and stayed with even closer neighbors for about six weeks. Finally in the Spring I went back to Doud’s to finish the year. My horse came back to me and I didn’t mind the two mile ride.

Each school room was heated with a big old jacketed stove. The jacket deflected the heat into the room. The first year there we were responsible for building and keeping our own fires. That was when we appreciated the contributions of Mildred’s brothers. The school boys split the chunks of wood that had been brought and dumped in the back yard and carried in the coal. These chores were part of the Y.C.L. duties of service. Cheap coal was hauled from the Slim Buttes area. It burned down to huge clinkers and was not noted for its heating ability. My second year at Empire better arrangements had been made for the fires to be build by a young man who lived less than a quarter of a mile from school. What a joy to be able to get to school at 8 o’clock and have a nice warm room to come to. Of course, keeping up the fire during the day was each teacher’s responsibility.

After the Halloween program was over there was again the serious tending to the business of school through the month of November. The absentees had returned and were again trying to do their numbers and attempting to progress in reading. Children and teachers knew each other now – a good time in the school year. And I kept finding out how little I knew about so many things! I was studying more that I ever had before to have a background in social studies for the 4th graders. I was a year of learning to be a “jack of all trades”!

It was a harsh lesson in economics when the first pay day came around. Pay was in the form of warrants that could not be cashed at face value. The Empire District was in such a bind financially that the banks would not cash their warrants, and neither would any of the usual buyers of warrants. A jeweler in Sturgis made a business of buying warrants at discounts of 10% to 15%. He was dubbed “Old Shylock”! Seven dollars and fifty cents off our \$50.00 reduced our meager wages to just \$42.50 per month. Chases Store in Sturgis would take them at face value if the money was used to buy merchandise. Mother was teaching in a more solvent district so she could reimburse me for family clothes bought at Chases those two years at Empire. I still had a college loan to be paid off so it was imperative that those warrants be turned to cash. To get our pay in the first place was an adventure that wouldn’t be tolerated today. Empire was a Common School District and was not required to have monthly meetings. So, the board members who lived great distances apart, but who had to sign the warrants, expected the teachers to bring the warrants to them for signing. On Friday following school after

the last day of the month the warrant could be picked up by the teachers and taken around to the three members for signing. Maybe they would be available when you got to their homes and maybe not. The route covered some twenty miles – quite a distance even when gas was cheap!

Before Christmas vacation began another program was prepared for patrons and families of the children. At Empire this program was put on at the little community church of the Quaker Faith, which was a mile south of the school. A big Christmas tree was brought to the church and decorated by community people. Names had been drawn among the children and their gifts were taken to the church and put under the tree. Santa Claus came with bags of candy for every child in the community. Teachers had remembrances for each school child. It was a fun celebration marking the beginning of the Christmas holidays. Gifts were brought from the families to the teachers, too. I still have vases, dishes, pillow cases, handkerchiefs, that some caring mother gave in her children's name in appreciation of friendship.

After Christmas vacation, when one was really ready to settle in to some serious school work, the epidemics began! Measles, chicken pox, mumps, even the itch, make their rounds. I had never had the mumps; so now when the school children came down with them, I took my long, miserable turn having them, first on one side and then the other! I missed two weeks of school that spring of 1935. Since I was sure my sore throat was not the mumps, I exposed several young adults in the community by going to a barn dance the night I began coming down with them.

One young couple, Early and Elsie Alexander, who had three school age children, were special friends to the teachers, often having us in their home for meals. They enjoyed dancing and would ask us, Viola Kayrasvopio my second year teaching partner, and me to go with them to the Bear Butte Valley barn dances. They were fun times and friendships were begun there that have continued these many years. There was a family or two who frowned on teachers going to dances, but jobs were not in jeopardy so we continued.

Helen Rehorst was County Superintendent in the years I was in rural teaching. One of the requests she made of all her teachers was that as soon as possible in the fall a visit be made to the homes of the pupils. This was so we would better know and understand the child and his family situation – a good idea, but a hard request to fill in some cases. Some of the families were not in accord with the State law requiring school age children to be in school until they had completed the 8th grade and they wanted nothing to do with schools and teachers! Some were of foreign background, German/Russian in this community, and were shy about meeting teachers. But most of the patrons were eager to know the teachers and have them come to their home. Some good times and enjoyable evenings were a result of the requested mingling.

Dorothy Alexander, an eighth grader, prepared a paper about the state laureate poet Badger Clark. Her teacher Viola Kayrasvopio was sure she didn't have the ability to coach Dorothy in both preparation and presentation and wouldn't I do it for them. It was something I could try – sort of a "I think we can, I think we can" and we did. Dorothy was a winner in that division, one of the big accomplishments of that year's contest. We were proud. Other contests were conducted that same day and others made good showings, too.

I felt, after two years at Empire, I was ready for the next step. The rumor came to me that there would be a vacancy at Horse Creek, another two room school west of Newell and in both rooms, so maybe...? I applied and was accepted, expecting to have the primary grades again! Not so – they were bringing back the 9th grade and that was the room they offered me – 7th, 8th and 9th graders. For two years I had been teaching a primary room at Empire, my practice teaching had been 4th grade in Mitchell, South Dakota, Longfellow School. Could I possibly make such a drastic change? Teacher friends said, "Of course you can do it." My Mother, an experienced teacher of many years said, "Do it." The County Superintendent Helen Rehorst said, "Go to summer school, get advice and help and be prepared." Temptations were a big raise in wages and no discounts, a teacherage, and a fine almost new school. I knew my teacher partner Elma Schipske, but there was Algebra to teach! Still sharp on my mind was my freshman high school year and the struggle I'd had with that old devil math. I signed the contract, said to my Empire little folks, went to summer school (the first of many sessions)

and prepared for another phase of being a country school teacher – next level. Seventh through ninth graders — 3-8th, 4-7th, 9-9th graders.

The Junior High experience kept me studying, especially, that math. Always, and in remembrance, too, I have been grateful to Mr. Johnson, and his tutorship in Algebra when I would need assistance. Strangely to me math became my favorite subject to teach. A sad event of that first year at Horse Creek was the riding accident of one of the 7th grade boys. He was thrown from his horse and died from a broken and severe concussion. Death of a pupil and fellow school mate was an unexplainable tragedy that over shadowed many months of the school year.

Teaching conditions were most pleasant. We were in a three classroom building with a fourth room for a teacherage for we two teachers, a full basement used for community activities as well as school purposes, a steam heat furnace to keep us comfortable, telephone service, water hauled to and filled into a cistern and again very friendly patrons.

The weather, as at any time in rural South Dakota, was a factor to cope with. The winter of 1936 was one of a great snowfall, bitter cold temperatures, and blizzard after blizzard. Many school days were lost that winter because of blowing snow and closed roads. Friendly neighbors and patrons kept track of teachers. One of the outstanding events of the year, and of world wide interest, was the Stratosphere Balloon flight the a.m. of Veteran's Day. My teacher partner had a car and an enthusiastic brother on the family farm eager that we should go watch the preparation and lift off. An event and night to never be forgotten.

Both years at Horse Creek were successful years of teaching. These were the Roosevelt years in US history – struggles with very hard times when if one partner in marriage had an income it was likely the wife would not be hired. In the spring of my second year, I was asked about my future plans. My job was mine if I did not plan to be married, but if I were planning a summer marriage, I would have to give up the school. I gave up the school.

One more rural school was in my future – a most primitive position I had ever experienced. A school for some half dozen children being taught in a renovated granary in the farm yard of one of the patrons. This building was easier available to the three families whose children came. The teacher hired for the term gave up a Thanksgiving time and I was asked to take over. The children and families were most pleasant to work with in spite of circumstances. I drove the six or eight miles from my home in Belle Fourche and could stay with the local family in bad weather when I wished. I expected to finish the school term, but fate decreed otherwise with a sudden and very severe attack of appendicitis that put me into the hospital and immediate surgery in mid April. Longer terms of recuperation in those days made going back to school out of the question.

My rural teaching career ended, and later began my years of teaching in Newell Grade School and Spearfish Jr./Sr. High School as school librarian – wonderful years of working with school age children from beginners through high school.

My Mother, Rosa Hall Eaton's grandmother, who had been a Black Hill's pioneer, was eager that someone from her family would be a teacher. When Rosa was six years old grandmother presented her then only granddaughter with a small schoolbell with the wish that when she grew up she would be a teacher. Again when Rosa's daughter Doris was six, the same gift and the same little speech. Both Doris and Lloyd Eaton spent most of their working years in the field of education.

Lloyd's daughter, Margaret Eaton Andrews, now teaches in Los Angeles, Ca. now completing her 16th yr in a Private School in the City, teaching Science to elementary classes. Little could the Pioneer Grandmother have guessed what of a family of ten, eight of whom spent some time as teachers. Some of her cousins followed – some of this 5th and 5th generation continue!

Putting our family teaching years all together we represent at least a century and a half spent in the classroom living up to President Bushes dictum: Let no child be left behind.

Ours is the Saga of the Bells.