

## A Teacher Remembers

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When I was in third grade in a West River country school I had a very imaginative teacher. Our Social Studies unit on Hopi Indians provided us an opportunity to make adobe bricks from grass and mud and to dry them in the sun. We made a tepee of gunny sacks and laths big enough to accommodate one child. Because 1932 was the George Washington Bicentennial year the US Post Office Department issued a set of ten postage stamps picturing Washington at different periods of his life. We collected those stamps from our parents and our neighbors and at the same time learned about our way of communication. (It also provided me with a lifetime hobby as well!) On Friday afternoons the whole school played "Grocery Store" and learned to write out grocery slips and count out change. School was fun. Why wouldn't I want to be a teacher? The fact that my mother and three of her sisters had also been teachers was probably influential too.

However, in my freshman year at high school I was also impressed by a demonstration of a stenotype machine with which one could transcribe words as fast as they were spoken. I thought it would be interesting to be a stenographer or maybe a court reporter, so I registered for all the commercial courses available: junior Business Training, Typing, Shorthand, Bookkeeping, Business Arithmetic, business English and Business Law. My first job after graduation was in the AAA Office in the county courthouse. My plans changed when my minister asked me if I wanted to work in the courthouse the rest of my life. He told me that if I would like to go to college he could get me a scholarship at his alma mater. I have ever been thankful to him for that 450 scholarship! It marked the beginning of my teaching career.

Two years later with practice teaching behind me and with a Teaching certificate in hand I began teaching English in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grades. Unfortunately, I thought children of those grades would be serious about their work. I was wrong. Three weeks after Christmas vacation I resigned and bet my best friend that I would never teach again! I returned to college and finished the spring term. In the summer that followed a member of our local School Board came to my house and offered me a contract for teaching my home school. I accepted, and September found me back in country school with seven grades and 15 students (three boys and 12 girls). (I lost my bet!)

We had good times together. The three first graders learned about sounds and with a collection of old magazines recognized and cut out the pictures for alphabet books. The fifth grade girl asked if she could read the Ichabod Crane story that the eighth graders were reading. She could and she did! One advantage of the one room rural school was that it provided annual review lessons painlessly without students realizing it. Another advantage was that big sisters provided "reviews" when they played school with little kids at home. We had penmanship practice every day, sent in copies of their work to the publishing company and received awards. (They didn't know it was "cursive" writing!)

At Christmas time we had the traditional Christmas program with a visit and a sack of candy from Santa Claus. One of my biggest successes occurred when an 8<sup>th</sup> grade girl read the Christmas story from St. Luke and the boys sang "We Three Kings", each one singing a solo verse. Parents said "How die you get them to do it?" but I think they were proud of doing something they had never done before.

What were the teacher's responsibilities? First and foremost they were to teach all the subjects listed in the South Dakota Course of Study. They were to be aware of what was happening on the playground and any falls and scrapes were to be attended to. It was always good to have a first aid kit available. It was a good idea to monitor, if necessary, the children's relationships with each other and to be sure to keep parents apprised if there were discipline or classroom problems. Also, the teacher had the responsibility to build fires, to keep the classroom clean and to ask the School board to supply the necessary teaching materials. The School Board member who hired me said if I needed anything to let him know. My first request was for an up-to-date World Book Encyclopedia. Which brings me up to salaries. It is as difficult to compare today's salaries with the salaries of which I write as it is to compare the cost of today's automobiles. I was happy to receive \$1800 per year for 1946. Later, after receiving my BA degree when I was teaching in a city school a hometown neighbor was surprised to learn that I was receiving a salary as large as the hometown bank clerk. He obviously thought teachers were overpaid. In Graduate School in Denver in the 1950s a Library School classmate from South Dakota announced that South Dakota teachers always say "Thank God for Mississippi" because otherwise we would have been lowest paid in the nation. That's not quite true anymore.

Our school house was built in the early 1900s. I know because my aunt's grade attendance record was still on file in a cupboard when I began teaching there. Originally it had a basement, a furnace, a coal bin, and a large septic tank which served two toilets upstairs. However, the school was moved to be near more students when I was in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and the School Board chose not to dig a new basement so the toilet facilities were built on either side of the barn. (Why a barn? Because many students rode horseback.) the schoolroom had windows on the north and east sides, high up as students wouldn't be tempted to waste time looking out? The furnace was replaced by an old wood-burning pot-bellied stove. A three room teacherage was attached to the west end of the schoolhouse. When winter blizzards made the roads impassable I occasionally stayed there myself. How wonderful cell phones would have been!

Another element of country school missing today is the Young Citizen's League, a club devised for teaching responsibility and respect for the flag. Parliamentary procedure was introduced, officers were elected and work committees were appointed: Blackboard Committee, Coal Committee, Flag Raising Committee, etc. The League also sponsored speaking contests when schools competed against each other. I still remember my first grade "piece": "I Have a Little Shadow". The League lost its popularity when some educators determined it was modeled after Hitler's youth movement.

One of the deficiencies in our school was a library. What books we had were tattered and torn. We had a basket social, invited everyone in the community to come and used our profits to buy books. Because I let the children make their own choices we ended up with almost all the Louisa Mae Alcott books and several of the Pony Rider Boys series. I also wrote to the South Dakota State Library to borrow books, listing the students' ages and sexes. When the mailman delivered the first box of books I excused classes and we all went out to the road and carried in the big box which wouldn't fit the mailbox. We opened it at once, made choices and could scarcely wait to begin reading. During the year we had many such happy occasions. I'm sorry to say that this borrowing service begun long ago by State Librarian Mercedes MacKay no longer exists as the State Library now only serves State Government.

After two years of teaching “home school” I returned for two more years of college, taught third grade in my college town, took my college librarian’s advice and went to Graduate School. I was a high school librarian for six years and then came to the University of South Dakota to become a Reference Librarian and a Professor of Library Science. I have been proud of my library students who in many ways are furthering the aims of the public school by providing at their libraries education for the lifelong learner.

Now, I’ve told much about country school except my experience riding horseback to get there.

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