

Esther L. Kirton

I graduated from Woonsocket High School in May 1949. On June 8, my 18th birthday, I enrolled in Summer School at the Free Methodist Junior College at Wessington Springs. Teachers were in short supply for rural schools. By the time we finished ten weeks, we called ourselves “The Ten Week Wonders”. We go to school 10 weeks, write resume, send or deliver them – then wonder – “Will I get hired?”

“Yes,” three days before school started, three miles from the Hitchcock town school. Wages! We thought we were rich! They were \$150 a month minus the 10% (\$15). When school ended, children’s test scores recorded; then you received the 10% and a recommendation from the school board.

Mortimer School closed because 3 children graduated from 8th grade. That left only 4 students. Not enough. So school closed. The school building was also moved to make an extra class room in Hitchcock.

Back to Wessington Springs College for summer school to finish the first full year. By taking 2 extra classes, I finished year one! I LOVED TEACHING!

It was easier to get my second school with more education and a good recommendation. The people I stayed at in Hand County wanted to know if I could help their second grade child. She had memorized all the first grade books but couldn’t read! This made me to think back to another little 2nd grader who couldn’t read either. Me!

My new teacher, Miss Morris, had huge charts at the front of the room to teach phonics. She had made me do 1st and 2nd grade together. Before the end of the year, I was doing well. I moved on to third grade.

I told Mr. & Mrs. Frank Wiand my story. They said “Do it!” I made flashcards and used them in the first three grades. The parents were happy, the children were happy, and I was happy to do a good job. This country school chose to put 2 schools together and trade buildings every other year, so I had no school. Domsch was closed.

I went to my college graduation to receive my certificate with the other teachers for completing one college year.

I was offered Dale Center School in Jerauld County. The people I roomed with moved out of their house in December 1951. No place left except the school house. This turned out to be a good thing! It started to snow. It snowed and it snowed!

The school had a coal storage that was accessible from the classroom. That made it easy to fill the Warm Morning Stove. I had a rollaway in one corner, a hot plate and radio. Families knew where I was.

Every other weekend, my father or my father-in-law came to get me so I could get my necessities. The roads were blocked for a mile around the school. Walk in, walk out. My husband, Robert “Bud” Kirton was at Ft. Knox Camp.

Snow was piled to the tops of the shelter belt by spring. In our hearts we knew he would be picked to go to the “Peace” Action in Korea. He got hurt in the service so in the 1954-1955 year, I taught Dale Center again.

By 1958, we lived in Huron, SD, so I took summer classes to renew my credits. Broadland was a 2 teacher school. (That was for 2 years). From 1961-1964, I taught Miner School for 3 years and Cain Creek in the same county for 1 year. (The wages were raised about \$10 a month each year.

In 1965, I applied for another 2 teacher school. They talked me into taking Riverside Colony School. (They would give me a real good raise!)

Margaret Long, County Superintendent, gave me a book on Hutterites to read; before “Bud” and I went to visit them. We talked to John Grosz, the German teacher. He approved of me so the contract was ok’d.

Before school started in the fall, I was in the classroom getting books lined up for all the classes; a little shorter older fellow walked in, came to my desk and, “Are you the new teacher?” (good English)

I replied “Yes.”

He brought out a big red shiny apple, polished it with a cloth, set it on the corner of my desk and said, “An apple for a good teacher.” I thanked him. Later I learned his name was also John Grosz. He was the German teacher’s father.

The first morning of classes the German teacher introduced me to all the classes. Then he gave the students their instructions of behavior. I’m standing beside him, looking at the sea of students. “Was I crazy or just “money” hungry?” Thirty-four students in 8 grades. I looked at the 8th graders (7 were taller than I was).

Then I looked at the 1st year first graders. I’ll never forget them. The little girl tilted her head from side to side looking me all over. One little boy slid down under his desk to hide from me, and the other one put his head under the desk, put his little hands over his face and peeked through his fingers at me.

How could I teach all these children?

The beginners spent 2 years in first grade so they could learn better English. (There were no kindergarten classes in rural schools at that time.)

The 2 first grades and second grade had 2 reading classes a day. Reading, spelling, arithmetic, and language were every day.

Geography and health were taught one-half the year, with history and science the other half. Art, spelling test and penmanship were once a week

on Friday. I put my subjects on a rotating schedule so in one week, nothing was missing.

The German teacher came 30 minutes before school every day to see if the pupils behaved. The children were taught respect and they wanted to make sure they were doing so.

The children also had a certain time before and after English School to do their German lessons. (The Bible and church were German but they spoke a Trollian dialect) John Grosz didn't want me to learn German. They wanted their children to all learn English to deal with the world around them.

That school year was my most interesting and challenging one!

The Colony people were good to their teachers, even though they were in financial troubles.

Before the end of the year the school board from the Lake Byron School asked me to take the 5th through 8th grades in their 2 teacher school. John Grosz said, "Take it." I did.

After 2 years it was made a one teacher school. My co-worker, Alice Tschetter, was placed at Huron Colony School. I finished the last 2 years.

A law was made that all teachers must have a four year degree before the start of the 1970-1971 school year. I was short credits so I went to Huron College for the 1969-1970 year. I graduated with a Bachelor of Science. I taught a special Summer School class.

I tried to get a town school classroom. The Superintendent said, "You're 39. You're too old for the City Schools, but John Grosz from Riverside Colony School needs 2 teachers. He will take you as a teacher. Their school is divided into 2 classrooms and you may have either one."

Another teacher was hired; she insisted she had to have the lower grades (K,1,2,3) and I would have to have 4-5-6-7-8. I didn't argue. We also had teacher's aides to help in school. My students were now the younger ones from 1964 and 1965. This was great! Wages were much better -- \$1000+ a month, year round, in place of the starting \$150 in 1949.

We ate in the dining room at our own small table.

I taught 17 years here before I resigned in May of 1987. The colony gave me a wonderful retirement party; a special decorated cake for "Bud" and me, special gifts from every family and I still felt young at 56.

Thirty-two years and I enjoyed every one.

I LOVED TEACHING! But still roads to travel.