

Reminiscent Teacher Essay

Elaine Busch Brown
101 Spring Meadow Dr.
Dell Rapids, SD 57022
605 351-5492
elbro@goldenwest.net

I stood there that September morning in 1956 in front of a slightly in need of paint, white schoolhouse surrounded by fields of hay and corn with two small out houses in the background. A couple of swings moved slightly in the warm breeze. My emotions were all over the place as I was excited, proud, hesitant, and afraid that I wouldn't be able to do this well.

I was barely 18 years old, had attended one year of college at Mt. Marty College in Yankton, and was the recipient of what was referred to then as a one-yr. teaching certificate from the state of South Dakota. It qualified me for the next five years to teach in a rural school anywhere in the state. To teach in an elementary school in a town setting required a two-yr. certificate meaning that it required two years of college prep.

I had proudly signed my contract about two months earlier for the nine month contract period for 1956-57. I was to receive a total nine month salary of about \$2365, which, before taxes, would mean a monthly check of around \$263. As I said, I was 18 years old, one year out of high school, had never worked away from home and thought I was quite the wage earner. Luckily, I was living at my parent's farm yet, located a few miles east of Garretson, SD; actually in Rock County, Minnesota. I would drop off my younger brother at the high school in Garretson and proceed about another 7 or 8 miles to the Hegge School as it had been known since its beginning in 1894.

That year the Hegge School District No. 126 was formed by detaching some sections from other existing school districts south and east of it. The school was built in May of 1894 at a cost of \$470 for materials and labor. It was a rather small school with three tall windows on each side and two more windows on the front. There was a small room when you walked in and the larger room beyond that with desks, blackboards, an old burner stove (when I taught there) and a few bookcases and roller type maps above the blackboards. There was also an old upright piano in fairly good tune. This same building was there in 1960 when the school closed. It was later moved to a farm place and razed sometime after 2000.

As I got out of my car and stood there that day in 1956, I think I knew even then, that what would take me through this year was not my one year of college and a few weeks of "practice teaching" in a 3rd grade "model" classroom within the college itself. But instead, my "true North" would be my seven years spent in a rural school a few miles away in Minnesota and the three teachers of my memory in that school. One of those three, Mrs. Grace Fink, was my teacher for four of those years and became the model for all I hoped to be as a teacher. I'm sure at that time, she was already in her early sixties

and I thought that next to my mom, she was the wisest woman I knew. She was responsible for me completing my eight years of school in only seven years. And she was the reason my dream of being a teacher was born.

I was confident enough of my knowledge of subject matter, even 8th grade math and science. But how to teach 13 children in seven different grades, reading, writing, arithmetic, history, geography, science, health, English, citizenship and whatever else the state of South Dakota decreed; that was the challenge. I had three delightful little first grade girls, two fine boys in 2nd grade, two 3rd graders, two 4th graders, one 5th grader, two sixth graders and one 8th grade girl, about four years younger than I. She was a bright girl and became my “teacher’s assistant” you might say with the little first and second graders. Shirley was her name and we became friends as well as teacher and student. I had a wonderful group of children and I don’t recall discipline as being much of any problem at all. Much like myself, they were good, hard-working farm children, with good hard-working farm parents who wanted good educations for their children and did everything possible to help in that education. They got their children to school on time, neatly groomed, ready to learn and respectful of their teacher as the one in charge. During the winter months, every noon one of the families would bring a hot meal to the school for all the children, perhaps soup and crackers, a hot dish (casserole to some of you) and perhaps a sweet treat of cookies or cake. They kept the building in repair, the grass mowed, the fuel tank filled and always willing to help out with art projects, field trips, programs, or transporting children to another nearby school so a softball game could take place between schools. God bless these parents for what they gave their children so long ago.

During this school year, I used many ideas from my time in country school whether it be ideas for art projects, Christmas program organization, writing tests on the blackboard and covering them with the roller maps until it was time to begin, Friday spelling bees, math contests. And, of course, the students sometimes knew more than I did about the way things should be done. I was, after all, the newcomer. Many the time I asked myself “How would Mrs. Fink handle this?” My first Christmas program that December (and as it turned out, to be my last) was so much fun for all of us, and my children did a wonderful job, of course. Again, the parents did so much to make it a wonderful evening with good food, dressed up children, presents and community singing. A lovely memory!

Our recess times were often softball games, and traditional country games such as “pump, pump, pull away”, “ante I over”, “squat tag”, and “hide and seek”. In the winter, we bundled up and built snowmen, played “fox and goose” in the snow, and if it was very cold, we would play indoor games sometimes. Everyone played together and got along, the six year olds and the fourteen year olds because that was what you did.

The school year passed by very quickly with my children learning from me and I learning from my children. I did sign another contract that spring for the 1957-58 school year but I got married that June 1, 1957 and went to live on our farm west of Dell Rapids. I continued to teach that fall, but as my first son was to be born the following March, I

only taught until Thanksgiving vacation of 1957 as they had been able to find a replacement teacher at that time. I had much further to drive that year and felt it was for the best to not wait until Christmas to leave. I went back for the Christmas program that December which was a bittersweet time for me. As much as I looked forward to having a family, I think I was afraid that I would never get back to my dream of teaching.

Ten years and four children later, in Nov. of 1968, I went back to teaching when an opportunity came rather unexpectedly for me to finish that school year for a teacher at the St. Lambert Catholic School in Sioux Falls. I had taken a couple of classes at Sioux Falls College in 1967-68 as I was considering going for my elementary 2-year certificate. Within a year or two they phased out the 2 yr. certificate and I would have to go for my bachelor's degree but I could continue to teach in the school I was in as long as I continued taking courses toward my degree. And while my yearly salary those 10 years later was only a little over \$4000 that first year, I was able to take care of much of our living expense and still set aside money each month to pay for tuition and books so I could continue night school and summer courses. In the spring of 1972, in front of my husband, four children, parents and some of my brothers and sisters, I walked across the stage at Sioux Falls College and received my Bachelor of Arts degree in elementary education. And forgive this bit of pride; I was the only one of that class to graduate magna cum laude. And my dream continued on.

I signed a contract to teach at Egan Elementary School in Egan, SD that fall and stayed there for 19 years. The last three of those years I did double duty as elementary school principal as well as teaching half day. I had obtained my master's degree in administration at SDSU in Brookings, again doing night school and double sessions of summer school. In 1991, when Egan combined with Colman, I took a full time principal position at Doland, SD and worked there for five years. At that time, I took the elementary principal position at St. Joseph Catholic School in Pierre, SD and remained there for eight years. In the spring of 2004, I retired after 37 years in education.

I enjoyed every school I ever worked in, and made many lasting friendships in those various places. But no school or position has ever meant more to me than those brief months at the Hegge School and no students remain more in my memory. In my mind, I can see every face of every child I taught that first year and they are a part of what I have always seen as such a privilege; that I could go to work each day and love my job. Thank you, parents and children, of Hegge School District No. 126. Because of you, I grew up to live my dream.