

“A Story to Tell:
Life of a Teacher”
by
Clifford Earl Vitters
Milbank, South Dakota
Reminiscent Teacher Essay

I, Clifford Earl Vitters, was born July 5, 1943 in Miller, South Dakota. Our family consisted of 8 brothers and one sister. {Photo #1} People used to kid my father that we should start a baseball team and my sister could be the pitcher. My parents were Herbert F. and Hazel M. Vitters.

My primary education took place in the Sand Creek rural school {Photo #2} in the Wessington, South Dakota area and I completed the remaining elementary grades in St. Lawrence, South Dakota. {Photo #3} My secondary education was at St. Lawrence High School.

Sand Creek was a rural country school located about 14 miles southeast of Wessington, South Dakota. One of the earliest experiences I remember was crying when my sister and brothers dropped me off in my kindergarten classroom and then left to go to their classrooms. I didn't know anyone and the room seemed so big and scary. The teacher invited me to play in a sandbox located in the middle of the room, but she could not entice me to play in it.

The playground equipment consisted of swings, one old metal slide, and a teeter totter. {Photo #4} We would also play catch with a ball, play winter games, such as fox and geese, make angels in the snow, and yes, even throw snowballs at each other, including the girls. Playground activities today are much more elaborate and organized.

One day in the classroom, a little boy “wet” his pants and the teacher made him go down into the basement bathroom to “dry” out. Oh what teasing by the older boys as they used the bathroom. The little boy was none other than ME!

We lived just three miles (Photo #5 & 6) from Sand Creek school and our mailbox was a mile away next to the highway. We would get the mail by taking a shortcut through the pasture where an ill tempered bull would chase us. It's amazing that we never got hurt and managed to outrun the bull, and crawl through the fence. I ask myself, even today, why did we take such a chance? The “Good Shepherd” surely watched over us.

Our school bus was not a yellow bus, as they are today, but a couple's station wagon. One winter, the "bus" got stuck in the snow, and all of us were invited into a farmhouse to warm up next to an old black pot-belly stove. Those were the "good ole days."

I have so many fond memories of that rural school. Many years later the school had an auction and I purchased some memorabilia. The school was demolished the same year the auction took place.

The Young Citizens League (YCL) was an opportunity to learn and practice good citizenship. I took an active part in the activities of the YCL. It was also always fun to go to the State Fair in Huron, SD and view the student work from each school. I was so proud when my handwriting entry won third place.

The computer comes in handy these days. Don't you just love technology? It corrects your grammar and spelling. Other noticeable changes in the classroom today include technical advancements such as laptops in each classroom, distant learning and smart boards. I remember the early form of computers that required a cassette player with a cassette to turn on the computer. Times have certainly changed from the handheld small chalkboard to handheld computer.

We moved to St. Lawrence during the 1953-1954 school term. I thoroughly enjoyed my years attending school in St. Lawrence. {Photo #7} In high school, I participated in several sports, such as baseball, basketball, {Photo #8} track. I also enjoyed performing in several high school plays. Four students traveled to Huron, South Dakota to take part in the All State Chorus and Band performances. I was selected as one of the four students chosen. I will never know how that happened because I couldn't carry a tune or read notes; but I loved the experience. In my junior year, I was crowned King of our annual school carnival. Those carnivals were so much fun with so many games and neat prizes. I also remember so well the annual end of the year school picnics, when each family would bring all types of food for the potluck meal. The games after the meal were well organized with prizes awarded to the winners.

At our All School Reunion held each year, they gave a prize called "most children in a family", in which the Vitters family took home the prize having nine children total. Finally one year, the Robert Hall family edged out our family by one. That ended our family's claim to "fame."

I attended Boys State at Northern State Teachers College, now Northern State University, during 1961-1962. That was quite an educational and valuable experience. In 1962, after I graduated from St. Lawrence High School, the school doors closed. The rest of the students attended Miller High School of Miller, South Dakota, which was only two miles from St. Lawrence.

I remember many times when my nieces and nephews visited at our parent's home, I found myself entertaining them with school worksheets, such as math problems, geography, history, and other subjects. I had always enjoyed attending school and loved working with children. Teaching seemed to be in my blood, and also my older brother, Richard, and my only sister were teachers/ superintendent/principal, who encouraged me to pursue teaching. I attended only one winter quarter in 1962 at Northern State Teachers College. My oldest brother was living in Aberdeen at that time, so I stayed with him. In exchange for room, board, and tuition, I was to do the cleaning, laundry, and other chores. The next year my brother accepted a Chemistry teaching position at Huron High School of Huron, South Dakota. I transferred to Huron College to finish my college education. In 1966, I graduated with a degree in Elementary Education.

One very precious memory to me, while living in an apartment owned by Dewey & Hazel Van Dyke of Huron, SD, a special visitor arrived. That afternoon my brother, Richard, was sleeping and I was going about my business, when I heard a knock on our door. WOW, was I shocked, totally "blown away" and surprised when I saw who was standing on the other side of the door. It was none other than our Vice President of the United States of America, Hubert H. Humphrey. Dewey Van Dyke had a great influence on Hubert Humphrey's political career. They had always kept in touch with each other and visited the Van Dykes whenever they were in the Huron area. On the radio program of Paul Harvey we will write the rest of the story. And here is the rest of the story. The Secret Service had wanted to search our apartment before the Vice President entered, but the Vice President said "No need to search!" What they didn't know was that my brother always kept his hunting shotgun in the closet. What a relief a search was not made. My brother was just a "little" upset that I did not wake him up to meet the Vice President of the U.S.

In the summer of 1966, my father and I were in Huron and he spotted a 1961 green and white Ford for sale parked at a gas station. I needed my own transportation now that I was on my own. I thought the car was a real steal for only \$75.00. My father knew that was all I could afford until my first paycheck. On the way to Sheldon, Iowa, the engine started acting up. I had to keep my speed right at 30 mph otherwise the

engine would sputter. When I arrived in Sheldon, a rebuilt engine was installed. What an expense for a first year teacher. My first teaching experience in 1966 was in the Sheldon, Iowa School District. I taught fourth grade in Archer, Iowa which was part of the Sheldon District. The following year, I was asked to take a position teaching fifth grade in Ashton, Iowa which was also a part of the Sheldon School District.

During the first two years of my teaching career in Iowa, I lived in an upstairs bedroom in the home of Eva Mitchell. She allowed me to keep milk in her refrigerator, which I used for a powdered energy drink each morning. I was happy that I could eat a hot lunch every day at school. For supper, the A & W Root Beer Restaurant was my favorite spot to eat.

For the two years in Iowa, two women teachers and I carpooled. One wintry day along with icy roads, my faithful Ford slid on the ice and into the ditch. The three of us hitched a ride into Sheldon. In spite of it all, my Ford served me well for six years. When I had saved enough money, I traded my faithful Ford in for a brand new green 1972 Chevrolet Impala. I was so proud to be the owner of a new car.

Before moving to Iowa, I told my parents I would never return to South Dakota. A fellow teacher in Iowa was moving back to her hometown of Huron. I also decided to return to South Dakota and I applied for a teaching position in Milbank, South Dakota. Reuben Walkes, principal in Milbank had interviewed me while attending Huron College, and offered me a position but I had declined. One reason I decided to apply at Milbank goes back to the interview with Mr. Walkes. He impressed me as a sincere and kind man. In the summer of 1968, I drove to Milbank, South Dakota, for the interview with Mr. George Smith, in the old Brite Spot Café on Highway 12. He “grilled” me with many questions. It was a real third degree experience. Then we drove over to Koch School to meet with Mr. Walkes. Then and there I signed the contract for the 1968-1969 school year. I took a pay cut to teach in South Dakota. It has been said that money isn’t everything and money can’t buy happiness. I would agree. I met a wonderful gal from Doland in the Koch School Teacher’s lounge, who later became my wife.

A lower salary was not a big disappointment to me. I believe salaries can’t be compared from state to state because of such things as state income taxes and cost of living. Most of all, I considered the quality of life we have here in South Dakota.

I taught fourth grade at Koch School for thirteen years, then second grade for the remaining years as a classroom teacher. From the

classroom, I was asked to develop and implement a computer lab for remedial math and reading. I was excited about the opportunity to implement the first computer lab for students. Technology use today has certainly impacted how we teach and learn.

Playground duty was quite a challenge especially during the winter months. It required all of us to slip into heavy coats, gloves, overshoes, and a scarf which took plenty of time. Students went out to play regardless of the temperature. Life on the playground was better on some days than others. You just never knew what the day would bring. One day on the playground, a boy caught an injured bird, and before I arrived on the scene, he had ripped a wing off the bird. School counselors would have been a valuable resource in that situation. I have always wondered what happened to that young man. On another occasion, a student came running up to me to report a girl had fallen. It turned out that this girl was a diabetic, so I picked her up and carried her to the school nurse, Mrs. Shaw. These are a couple of my memories as a playground supervisor.

During the noon hour, I was patrolling the bathrooms when I found two fifth grade boys holding a small see through plastic bottle. I asked them to give it to me, and they were reluctant stating that that it was shampoo. They eventually handed it over to me and when I opened it I could tell by the smell it was alcohol. Needless to say, the principal contacted the Superintendent and parents. A disappointment to me was to see some students making poor decisions.

In 1968, a young woman, Sandra Wipf, accepted a teaching position in Milbank. She had just graduated from Northern State Teachers College of Aberdeen, South Dakota. After many visits, I asked her for a movie date. After 4 years of dating, we were married at the Ebenezer Church of rural Doland, SD on June 24, 1972. We have two sons, Darwin and Daniel. Our oldest son, Darwin is a cashier at Target in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Dan, our youngest son, is the manager of the Alltel Store in Huron, South Dakota. He is married to Sarah Kirchmeier. They have three children: Identical twin girls Taylor & Brooke and a son, Hunter. {Photo #9}

After retiring from the teaching field in 1987, I went to work as an employee at the Grant County Public Library. I have also worked with my wife as the custodian at Valley Baptist.

I have thoroughly enjoyed teaching children. It was very satisfying to see the eyes of children light up when a concept was understood. It is also gratifying to watch former students making a difference in communities across America. I have seen changes in school buildings,

from the old two story brick with the fire escape stairway, to new modern buildings. School buildings have had to be adapted and modified to meet added features for students such as ramps for disabled, special education space and more rooms for added staff such as counselors, Chapter program, and nurses and more.

In summary, I consider myself lucky to have taught in such wonderful school systems. All teachers that I worked with were always so friendly and helpful. It was so much fun to share stories and ideas with each other. I give thanks to God for the gift of teaching and the love for children.

I continue to be involved in the community, serving this year as the President of our Milbank Area Retired Teachers Association. (MARTA) In addition, I have served as the Community Service chairperson and assistant treasurer for MARTA. My church is an important part of my life. I volunteer in any way I can from preparing bulletins to visiting nursing homes and giving devotions. I have enjoyed many years teaching the junior fourth, fifth, and sixth grade Sunday school class. My volunteer work also includes volunteering at our local library, working with the AARP Driver Safety Program and monthly volunteer work at the local Thrift Store. Driving elderly people to the hospital, clinic and the airport are routine activities as needed. Meals on Wheels delivery is rewarding and an opportunity to visit our shut-ins.

Clifford Earl Vitters
Elementary Education Teacher
1966 – 1987
515 South Third St.
Milbank, SD 57252
vjmking@wat.midco.net