



~ Part 25 ~
Reflections on a Common Theme
Country Schools

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CLOUD COUNTY

Country School Days by JoAnn Cool Alban

I was a student in a traditional one-room country school in the late 1940s. There were so many of these schools in the late 1800s and the first half of the 1900s, enough to be within about a four-mile walking distance of every child in the county. Looking at an 1887 map of Cloud County, there were four or five schools in each township, in addition to schools in larger settlements. At that time a three-month school term was required to draw state funds.

According to E. F. Hollibaugh's 1903 history of Cloud County, there were at that time 106 organized school districts in the county. Some of these schools were taught by married ladies in their own homes. Hollibaugh talks about the amenities found in the schools at this time. "There is a Webster's Unabridged Dictionary in every district in the county but six, and a public library in all but thirteen. . . . The general character of the library books are historical works and nature studies. Twenty-seven or more school houses have organs."

The libraries and musical instruments were supplied by fundraising efforts on the part of the teachers, with community help. At the turn of the century around 29% of the citizens of Cloud County were enrolled in public schools, which included a fair number of adults who had never had the chance for an education.

We only lived half a mile from school so we often walked to school, carrying our lunch pails and books. The school had a pump for water and a couple of outhouses behind the school—no indoor plumbing of any kind, of course! There was a big old pine tree behind the school that may still be there—it, or an offspring, is still marking the spot. There was some playground equipment as well, some swings under other trees beside the school and a teeter-totter. The school ground was rather park-like and we did lots of running around and chasing at recess.

Our school day always started with the Flag Salute, then we moved on to our folding wooden seats and slid our books into its open-backed desk. Classes started, with each group reciting our lessons as the day progressed. With eight grade levels and a full range of subjects to deal with, the teacher was constantly at work. She was able to keep us quiet and busy while other classes were reciting with just a piercing glance!

We frequently listened to other classes reciting, which was a really powerful learning tool. We were able to see the things we were learning in a larger context. It also accommodated differences in learning readiness.

Our teacher was very music-oriented so we had many opportunities to work in that area. We sang many traditional American folk and patriotic songs, and even a few well-known songs from the earlier 1900s. I remember singing "My Grandfather's Clock," "Sweet and Low," and "Love's Old Sweet Song." We also had a Rhythm Band with each class playing specific rhythm instruments, accompanied by the teacher on the piano. The first graders played rhythm sticks, which were like drum sticks that we hit on the floor in time to the music, and others had triangles, tambourines, and assorted other "noise-makers." But we did learn about rhythm and to work as a group!

We sometimes gathered with other country schools for special activities. Each spring we had a track meet, spelling bees, and other contests of various kinds with students from other schools in the area.

Eureka, as many country schools, was very much a community center. There were PTA-type gatherings each month or so, drawing parents and neighbors for an evening at school. The students entertained with the Rhythm Band, "speaking pieces," or reciting a poem or two. We also sang a lot, so we could put on a pretty good show. Someone always brought treats for the crowd; that

communal bond of sharing food was so strong in rural neighborhoods. Then we would end the evening with the assembled community joining together to sing from the "American Sings—Community Song Book." It meant so much to all of us.

I don't believe I could have gotten a better start on my education. I'm sure I came up a little short in some areas but way ahead in others. I learned self-discipline, order, and the importance of community, along with the usual school subjects. And I have such rich memories of my early years in school!

MITCHELL COUNTY

Mitchell County Schools by Barbara Axtell

The following information about rural schools in Mitchell County was taken from Historical Moments of Mitchell County compiled by Waconda Chapter Kansas Anthropological Association in 1976.

As one travels around in Mitchell County, it is surprising how many of the old country school houses can be seen. As a result of progress, no school is held in the buildings any more, but many of the buildings remain. Most of the school houses in Mitchell County were not red as they are so often spoken of, but are white. A few are native stone or rock of some kind.

Some of the schools which can still be found in Mitchell County are Hays, Lone Hill, Victor, Naomi, Laban, Excelsior, and many others.

The first rural school in Mitchell County still stands two miles west and three-fourths mile north of the Beloit hospital corner, a small stone schoolhouse with a cellar under the stage platform and a balcony over the cloakroom. The school was built in 1896 at a cost of \$732.75. Lula Doyle Rawlings taught all eight grades and freshman classes.

By today's standards country schools may have seemed dull and uneventful, but actually they were not. Pupils who came to school early enjoyed a lively game of black man, last couple out, tag, baseball, or such, morning recess gave them a chance to eat a sandwich or apple and a few minutes to play. After lunch and last recess were the same.

An example of those activities was when Raleigh Weir sponsored an acrobatic troupe from 1937 to 1939. He was a rural school teacher for several terms and was Mitchell County Superintendent for several years. Raleigh loved children although never having any of his own. His original troupe was from the rural Star school in Jewell County several years before the one was formed in Mitchell County.

In 1932 there were 92 rural schools listed in Mitchell County. Also there were 8 graded schools listed, including Asherville High, Beloit, Asherville Grade, Glen Elder, Cawker City Grade, Scottsville, Hunter Grade, and Simpson Grade.

There were usually several schools in a township. Since the children usually walked, they tried to have the schools close to the farm homes.

The schools were overseen by a County Superintendent, which ended in 1969. Earl Marzolf was the last superintendent listed, beginning the job in 1954.

The teachers often had very little education. Originally they were just questioned orally about school subjects to get a certificate, but later they had to pass a written exam to get the certificate. Wages were poor. Usually someone in the district would room and board the teacher.

Since the law required that children go to school until they were through grade school or until they were fifteen, many of the pupils were quite old. Often they worked at home some so they didn't pass every year. Some of them were as old or older than the teacher.

The Iowa schoolhouse was located nine miles south and three miles west of Beloit. It was closed after the term ended in 1947. Knotts Berry Farm near Buena Park, California, bought the building. It was dismantled and taken apart in sections, then shipped by truck to California where it stands today as "The Little Red Schoolhouse" at the famous Knotts Berry Farm.

Beloit currently has a "Little Red Schoolhouse" located at the Roadside Park along Highway 24 in North Beloit, where the local SV24 kiosk is located. The schoolhouse is not open regularly at this time.

OSBORNE COUNTY

Blue Mound School by Carolyn Williams

This information came by way of Deanna Roach and John Robert Williams who wrote the article for the August 8, 2011, Alton Empire, a special edition published solely for the Alton Summer Jubilee. One of the interesting items in that information was the teacher's report written at the end

of the school years 1936-37 and 1937-38. The teacher was Zara Sharp who lived at Bloomington but boarded with the Burton Gregory family a mile from the Blue Mound School. Her salary was \$55 a month for the term of eight months.

The names of the eleven pupils represented four families—six Williams, two Lamm, two Gregory, and one Busby. School board members reflected much the same. They were Inez Lamm, Herald Williams, and Burton Gregory.

“The school building was prepared late each summer by a volunteer housewife who would spend a day cleaning windows, mopping and re-oiling the floor and polishing the desks and many times removing the mouse nests from them. The one acre school yard usually was mowed before school began, but in the summer of 1938 it didn’t happen.

“The school yard was a mess and hardly a fit place for the students to play, so one day the teacher and students decided to burn off the grass. In the process the wind rose, the fire got away and burned the entire school yard. The teacher was very worried that she would be fired but she kept her job and finished a very good year. From that time on the yard was mowed before opening day of school.”

One of the beginning school duties was to clean the water cistern and add fresh water to it for the students to have sufficient drinking water. One year the cistern didn’t get cleaned before school started and some of the children drank the stale water. Several of them got sick and the school board quickly had the cistern cleaned and refilled.

The daily program consisted of spelling or ciphering, bible verse, current events, arithmetic, agriculture, physiology (health), reading, writing, social studies, language, and penmanship. Bob Williams wrote, “We did not learn to print but started at the beginning to use cursive writing. The penmanship books were very practical and we had our own bottles of ink, a pen with a removable point and a set time for ‘writing’ each day.”

The teacher even enumerated the games the children played. Some being: wole, ante over, ball, dasher and punch the monkey, I spy, black man, fox and geese, clap in and clap out, frit basket, guess what, snowball fights, work up, catch, hide and seek, beckon, dodger, dare base, red line.

School lunches brought out a variety of lunch boxes and lunches. One of the students often had only a pancake left from the breakfast at home. Lunchboxes the students used were emptied syrup buckets (they had lids that could be fixed on tightly). Often times they became “footballs” on the walks home from school. “We had to straighten them as best we could and keep using them throughout the year.”

The last year school held at Blue Mound was the spring of 1944. On June 30, 1945, a terrible wind storm destroyed the Mt. Ayr stone church about a mile south of Blue Mound School. For a year afterward, the church met at the school building. Later the building was moved to Woodston.

Bob added, “During the last year school was held at Blue Mound one of the farmers provided a sack of potatoes for us for hot lunches. At the first recess someone peeled and diced potatoes and put them on the heating stove to cook. Each student provided their own plate and bowl and tableware. Sometimes a student would bring butter and condiments. Occasionally the students would provide milk and onions to make potato soup for everyone. This whole process was a project of the students, thus they had to do the preparations and clean up each day. We thought we were doing great with some hot food in cold weather.”

“There was religious education in the schools then. Occasionally a pastor would come from the Rural Bible League who would encourage us to memorize scripture. For that, the students would receive a small New Testament. Other times a local pastor would come to speak which was always encouraging to this young man who would eventually become a Friends pastor and later a Christian church minister.” He said, “These efforts helped all of us morally to have basic beliefs that held us well in tough circumstances of life such as the stresses of the depression and the drought of the ‘Dirty Thirties’ and then the war years with all the rationing everyone endured.”

Bob ends his remembrances of the Blue Mound District 86 school by saying, “I have always been proud that in the one room school we learned to read well, write legibly, and could stand before guests and share in the literary programs and thus reflect the family backgrounds from which we came.

“As I recall, I never went to school a day in my life but that my Dad was on the school board both at Blue Mound and at Alton. That didn’t provide special advantages, but made us feel responsible to do well and behave respectfully toward teachers and other students.”

Oh, that our students today could say that!

ROOKS COUNTY

Country Schools from Jean Lindsay contributions

At one time there were 104 country schools in Rooks County, plus 7 high schools and 8 grade schools. The first 5 started in the eastern area of the county near the Solomon River in 1883. Most were closed or consolidated in the late 1940s and 1950s. Many of the buildings were sold, moved, and made into homes or used as outbuildings.

The following are excerpts from John Colburn, Dorothy (Sprick) Keith, and Jean (Grover) Lindsay:

(1) 1914 - John Colburn: I was just a lad of 6 years when I collected my new books and lunch bucket and trudged up the road to the rock school house—Dist. #16, Ash Grove, about 6 miles west Stockton. The school building sat in the valley beside a country road. You had to cross a small bridge to get to it. The school yard, large enough to encompass a baseball diamond, was surrounded on the south by a fence to keep the cattle out. Behind the schoolhouse were rolling hills covered with hackberry trees and big rocks, a good place for boys to play. Near the building was the coal shed and behind them two outhouses which were prepared for us with old catalogs to be used for toilet paper, and usually plagued with wasps.

The yard was full of sandburs which clung to your socks. It took three-weeks-worth of intensive games of steal sticks, prisoner's base, Anti-Anti-Over, kick the can, and run sheep run before they were trampled down. Ash Grove was one of the few school buildings constructed of native stone. Wooden steps led to the door. When you stepped through it you were in the school room. There were rows of old fashioned desks screwed to the floor, no lift up tops, just shelves underneath for your books, writing pads, and pencil box. The seat of the desk in front was attached to your desk. Carved initials from years past could be found on some of the desks.

In the front of the room was the old upright organ with cracked veneer, chipped ivories, and two broken foot pedals. In the right corner was the old oaken dictionary stand. The teacher's desk, oak and impressive, had two drawers for keeping confiscated objects not permitted in the schoolroom. A long recitation bench was in front of her desk. Behind it stretched across the entire back wall was the blackboard, just painted boards, not slate. Coat hooks sprouted from the rear wall. Iron brackets holding coal oil lamps were fastened on the window frames. A big old potbelly stove was in the center of the room. On a small stand was a stoneware water cooler. Each morning one of the older students took an old tin pail to the pump in the yard to get water for the day, dumping it into the cooler. We all used the same dipper for our drinking water. Two things about the schoolroom that stick in my mind—the smell of chalk dust and sweeping compound and the pictures of Washington and Lincoln that hung on the wall. Years later I returned to that old schoolhouse, the weeds almost hiding the building. Climbing through the fence I saw that the door was gone, windows were out and nothing inside. Ash Grove, the institution of my learning had been turned into a cow shed!

(2) - Dorothy Keith: The Fairview Dist. 99 school property was just north of Highway 24 in Belmont Township, one mile east of our home. The School faced south with a small building just north to store coal and corncobs. Two outhouses were north of these buildings on east and west corners of the school ground. There was a Merry-Go-Round and swings west and water cistern which was filled by School Board members hauling water for it. The teacher's desk and chair were at the front of the room with a map case on the west wall. I always had a problem thinking that the top of a map was supposed to be north. The room was heated by an old fashioned pot-bellied stove in the center of the room with a coal bucket and shovel nearby and a few corn cobs to help start the fire. Sometimes in the winter we had to thaw our ink bottles before using the old fashioned pens. We had a water cooler which was filled with water from a cistern east of the building. We all drank from one tin cup and brought our own lunch, usually carried in an old syrup bucket. Games we liked to play were: Andy over the school or coal house; New Orleans; Pigs in the Pen; Red Rover; Still Waters; I Spy; and Steal Sticks.

I attended Fairview Dist. 99 through the 8th grade—walking every day, except in a blizzard my dad would take me by horse and wagon. Then I taught there in the 1940s.

(3) - Jean Lindsey: I attended District #99 country school from 1941-1947, 1st through 6th grade. My family lived just across the road, maybe a two block distance where I walked across a field, crawled over a fence, and was there, so I had none of those "walked 2 miles to and from in all kinds of weather." The first two years my aunt was my teacher, and I thought she must always look to see when I was coming then ring the bell. But probably I was late anyway and if anything she was giving me a chance to make it on time.

That last year there were only 6 students, my younger brother and I and four children of John and Olive Roy's family. It and the other country schools in Belmont and Rush townships closed that year and we were transferred to Union #3 Webster Consolidated School.

At that time the Webster Methodist Church had recently burned and was holding their services in the Webster High School. The Church Trustee's purchased the school building for \$500, April 28, 1947. It was moved for \$211.00 by Bigge House Movers in October of that year into the town site of Webster where it was remodeled for their church. In December 1949 church pews were purchased and in January 1950 it was wired for electricity. On May 21, 1950, the Dedication Celebration of the Webster Methodist Episcopal Church was held.

In November 1952, due to impending plans to build the Webster Dam on the town site, the church trustees received a Land Purchase Contract that the United States shall purchase the Philander Mott Memorial Church, legal successor of the Methodist Church of Webster, said property in the Town of Webster, Kansas, and pay the full purchase price of \$18,742 for the five blocks which included the church, parsonage, and several small buildings. After many meetings with head church conference negotiators, they repurchased the church and parsonage from the government for \$11,340, then selling the parsonage which was later moved to Stockton.

After town meetings about where to relocate the town and church meetings concerning disposition of church property, items were put up for bids. On June 25, 1953, out of several higher bids, the trustees chose the bid for the church and contents for \$25.00 from the Webster Community Association. The agreement was that said the church building would not be used as a public dance hall and that any other type of activity or business would not be conducted there which is contrary to Christian principles.

The building was moved to New Webster in Rush Township. It served for several years as a place to vote, hold special church services and family get-togethers, etc. It was later sold by the Association to Clarence Spencer of Webster. He sold it to Louis Wiggins who did more remodeling. Now, in 2016, with more remodeling and landscaping, it a beautiful Webster home now owned by the Tracy Payne family.

GRAHAM COUNTY

Nicodemus School by Angela Bates

Education was important to the settlers of Nicodemus. They had been denied education as slaves, and few had attended Freedmen Schools established by the Freedmen's Bureau for African Americans after the Civil War. If caught with any written materials, a slave could be beaten, severely punished with facial branding, or even loss of a hand. When the settlers arrived in Nicodemus, it was paramount that they educate themselves and to do so they needed to establish a school.

Jenny Fletcher, the wife of Postmaster Zach Fletcher, held school in their dugout. With just a few books donated by the Kirtley family (1 math book, 1 speller, and 1 health book) and several bibles, Jenny began teaching children and adults that wanted to learn. Although she provided education with limited resources, it wasn't until Rev. Meyers of the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church encouraged an official organization of a school that education was formally offered.

In 1887 the first school was constructed and Miss Lizzie Niles was the teacher. That first year there were 19 students in attendance. Also, during that first year, a bell from the A.M.E. church was installed and trees planted around the grounds. Nicodemus School District #1 was the first school district organized in Graham County. The first term was under the direction of J. E. Porter, a former principal of Leavenworth High School. Porter taught at District #1 from October 31, 1887, to February 7, 1888.

The building was lost to a fire, 1916-1917, and in 1918 the present building was constructed. Nicodemus School District #1 closed in the early 1960s when enrollment dropped below requirements. It was purchased in 1983 by the American Legion and served as their meeting place and for social functions until the early 1990s. In 1996 the building was designated a National Historic Site, in conjunction with four other historic buildings within the Nicodemus Historic Landmark District. Nicodemus is one of five National Parks in Kansas, celebrating the 20th anniversary as a National Park this year.

SHERIDAN COUNTY

Two-Room School by John Schlageck, Kansas Farm Bureau, Reprinted by Permission, with special thanks

One of the misfortunes of progress in education is the demise of the small country school. As I look back on all the attributes of attending a two-room school during the first eight years of my life, I wonder if we may have lost something we can never replace.

The small school I attended was located in western Sheridan County. The name of the community was Seguin. Our little German Catholic community boasted 50 hardy souls.

While mostly made of wood, our two-room school sported a stucco coating on the exterior. No bell tower adorned the top of Seguin Grade School. Instead, students took turns calling us to class, announcing recess and signaling the end of the school day by ringing a large, brass bell fitted with a black wooden handle.

The Sisters of St. Joseph provided us with a solid, top-notch foundation during my early years of education - nearly 55 years ago.

The main subjects included reading, writing, arithmetic, and English. The last subject I enjoy even to this day. I especially liked to diagram sentences on the black board and they were black back in those days. I wrote as neatly as I could with a piece of long, white chalk.

Because we lived in the sparsely populated western part of Kansas, we looked forward to school every day. It was fun to be with other kids. More importantly, we enjoyed learning.

After attending mass at St. Martin of Tours, we walked approximately a quarter mile across native buffalo grass to our school located at the northwestern corner of our small prairie town.

We entered school through double doors on the east side of the building and climbed up the stairs to our classroom. Huge, double-hung windows covered nearly every inch of the west side of each classroom. These rooms were located on the second floor of the building so we could see for miles. Some days we could see the Colby elevators 24 miles to the west.

Each room contained approximately 20 ink-stained wooden desks. Each had a hole in the upper right-hand corner to hold a bottle of black ink.

A large American flag stood in the right corner in the front of our school. The black board stretched the entire length of the front wall and a portrait of George Washington hung in solitary splendor on the left side.

Every day we began the day with the Pledge of Allegiance. We included the phrase, "One nation, under God," and each one of us stood at attention with our right hand covering our heart.

I'll always remember my first day at school. Once I found my desk, I promptly began to whistle. I'd grown up listening to Mom whistle while she worked around our house, so I just naturally began whistling at school.

This conduct resulted in a visit to the cloakroom where we hung our coats and stored our lunch boxes. Here the door was closed behind me and I spent the next few minutes crying aloud.

How was I to know a happy student wasn't to whistle while he worked?

Well, that unhappy experience hardly proved a bump in the school highway. I loved reading, listening and learning and most of all my teachers.

Throughout my eight years in Seguin, enrollment at my two-room school never exceeded 35 students. I spent all three years with two classmates, Dorothy Meier and Virginia Wegman. I can't remember a class with more than five children.

With such a small enrollment, each room combined classes. First and second grade studied the same subjects while third and fourth did likewise. Because we were in the same room, I could listen to and learn from both classes. Something I did with gusto.

As a youngster and throughout my 18 years of education, I have always been a sponge absorbing everything I could sink my teeth into. Learning and listening has always come naturally for me. Although I don't think it hurt that our teachers, the Sisters of St. Joseph, were strict. In fact, talking in class resulted in an automatic ticket to the cloakroom, or time spent at the chalkboard after school.

One of my favorite periods throughout grade school occurred immediately following lunch. That's when students read aloud. Books came from our extensive library.

The first book I chose to read during my 5th year in Seguin was Lorna Doone by R. D. Blackmore. I couldn't put this book down and I wanted to share this story with my classmates.

Lorna Doone is a simple tale about the outlaw Doone family who lived and pillaged deep in the depths of Bagworthy Forest, the blackest and the loneliest place of all that kept the sun out. Here the beautiful maiden Lorna Doone lives and weds John Ridds, whose father was killed by the Doones on his way home from market.

Quite a read, if you haven't already.

And who can forget all the games we enjoyed during recess?

We played circle, pom pom pull away, fox and geese, Annie Annie Over, and of course every one of us turned into a monkey on the steel playground equipment.

What a wonderful time. What a wonderful place. What a wonderful experience.