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Interview with Florence Wilson

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Florence Wilson

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Florence Wilson

An Era Gone Past

An oral history transcription in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for Education 700.

Patti Ansley

Educ. 700

Summer 1983

I am interviewing Florence Wilson, a former one room schoolhouse teacher from Kansas.

Fatti: What years did you teach in your one room schoolhouse?

Florence: I taught from 1940 to 1979 and four years of my teaching have been in the one room rural school.

Fatti: What was your pay? How much did you make?

Florence: My first term of school was for a eight month term and it was for \$60.00 a month. My contract was for \$480.00.

Fatti: Boy that is amazing when you think of what teachers make now.

Fatti: How did you start out the day? What was your routine for beginning the day?

Florence: In season, when the weather was nice, the children would be playing outside on the playground and I would stand on the porch and ring my school bell and they would line up without any question. They would line up in boy and girl lines and I would have already put the flag up and we would say the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag. Then we would march into the classroom. Sometimes I would even go to the piano and play some march music and they would come in marching. Of course they would stop in the cloakroom to hang up their coats, in season, and to put their lunch pails away. Then, when the weather was cold, those little things would have already happened. They would have already had their coats hung. Still, we would always start out with the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag. Then the next thing, without fail, was reading from the Bible. I would always read some scripture from the

Bible. I had a Bible story book, Ebimeirs Bible Story Book, and I would read a story every morning from that and we would always have prayer. Sometimes the children would pray and every morning I would pray and we would have a good day . I would tell them that God was guiding us, which he was, and that is why our day was so fine. For thirty years as I taught I never did fail to read a Bible story to my children and have prayer.

Patti: What subjects did you teach and what order did you teach them in ?

Florence: I taught all subjects and in the rural school I had all grades: grade one through eight. The eighth graders were going to be tested at the end of the term with a state test and I knew that a teacher's life almost depended on what her eighth graders would do. So you would devote quite a bit of time to those eighth graders because you would like your job back next year. If your eighth graders failed that meant sometimes, depending on your board of course, that you were not as great a teacher. So, I would always start out my day with the little folks, the young ones because they are a little fresher of a morning. I always tried to have first grade through fourth grade, having had their recitations, because we would come to the recitation bench. We would have the recitation from the first through the fourth by noon time, hopefully. In the afternoon the little children would have more sandbox play and more art work and quiet activities that they were able to do without my guidance that much while listened to the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth graders do their recitations.

The subjects I taught for the lower grades, of course, were the three R's: reading, writing, and arithmetic. We had very little, as such, science but at recess time we did more science studies than you can imagine because we knew about all the bugs and the birds and all these things that we would see about us. So, the upper grades was where we got a lot of text. We always had a Kansas history. It was required; a state requirement. Of course the reading, writing, arithmetic, civics, (deep government study), and geography without fail. The fourth graders had geography in fact. We had a formal text for that and lots and lots of map study. We had lots and lots of drawing maps which children don't do today. They have their maps already run off on duplicators. In those days children drew their own maps because we didn't have duplicator service like you have today. I taught as well as I could because at times I wanted the same job back next year.

Patti: While the first through fourth grade were having recitation what did the sixth through eighth do?

Florence: They were doing seat work that had been assigned to them the day before. I sent very little homework home. The assignments that I would make in an afternoon for the upper grade children would be what they would be doing the next morning while I listened to the little ones. When those upper grade students would go home they had the cows to milk, they had plowing to help their dads with and all this so it wouldn't have gone over to well with the families if I would have sent homework home.

Patti: I can assume then that discipline was not much of a problem.

Florence: Not much of a problem. In fact in all my teaching I used the paddle five times and two of those five were

on the same child because he cussed and swore. I had to threaten him and of course I had to carry out my threat. It bothered me. I always had the paddle handy. They knew I could use it but down deep I knew I wouldn't except in that rare case where I had to. But generally, children in those days, couldn't stay after school to work because their parents would complain so the worst punishment they could get would be to miss a recess. I know now that wasn't good. I was a young teacher and I didn't realize how important it was for them to get out to wiggle around on the playground. That was about all I could do because I didn't believe in paddling. I had children stand in the corner-isolation. But I would usually send them to the cloakroom for them to think about what they had done. I would go out and visit and we would end up good friends. I can't remember ever having to be very cross with any child, except this one person who pushed me too far. It is a long ugly story.

Fatti: How did you get your paycheck?

Florence: The board members were frequent visitors at school because they would bring the drinking water in cream cans. Many times a board member would have my paycheck at the end of the month with him when he would bring water that day or in some of the years we had government commodities that were brought to school. I prepared the noon meal also. On the pot belly stove would be a big kettle and in that kettle, generally, I'd be cooking beans or a vegetable stew or whatever the government commodities were and then the families sometimes would supplement some of the things. But it wasn't any problem with the paycheck because the board

came often. They were good friends. Oh yes, it is pay day today and they would rip out the check.

Fatti: How did you get your supplies to teach?

Florence: Before school would start I would kind of estimate what I would be needing in art supplies. If once in a while I would need something over and above what I had mentioned in the beginning of the year I would get it. Sometimes, if the bill would be several dillars, because that was alot of money in those days, I would present my bill and there was no problem ever. Sometimes I would buy things and pay for it myself rather than mention it because it made me feel good.

Fatti: How much schooling did you have in order to teach?

Florence: I finished high school in 1938 here in Garden City and then I went on to junior college. I finished two years and got a continuing certificate. That sixty hour continuing certificate was equal to a lifetimeas long as I would teach five years out of every six and I always did. In fact, when I got my degree in 1964 I could have applied for a degreed certificate but the superintendent of Garden City advised me not to because he knew if I did I would have to keep going back to school to renew and renew whereas my lifetime certificate, the sixty hour continuing, would get me through all my teaching career. It isn't that I didn't go back to college. I certainly did. I went back almost every summer and I audited lots of classes, but I didn't have to. I did it because I wanted to.

Fatti: Could you describe a little bit the kinds of texts that you used in your school?

Florence: When I started to teach I was amazed to find the texts that were on the shelf in the library

were some of the very texts that I had studied from when I was a little girl back in 1925 when I was a first grader. But in those days parents always bought their children's books and when I started to teach, my first term of school, we were using the Bob Merrill series. It wasn't long after that, oh, two or three years after I had started teaching we shifted over to the Houghton-Mifflin series: Tip and Mitten and The Big Show.

Patti: Did you have a math text or was reading the only text you had a text for?

Florence: We had a text in math too. We had the old Stone Arithmetic. I don't know who the publisher of that was but it was called the Stone Arithmetic. I have a feeling that Stone was the author of it. The Human Use Geography Book was the one we used in the fourth through eighth grade. We used Mason's United States History. It was a very popular book for the history class. The History of Kansas was a little book that children used. It was a small book but it was power packed. When we were finished with the Kansas history we knew all about our state.

Patti: What age did the child usually begin school?

Florence: They had to have had their sixth birthday by the end of the year whenever they started. Now that law changed and they had to be six years old before the first day of September. When I started teaching I could have five year olds in first grade. Just as long as they were going to be six before the end of the year. I would like to regress here just a minute. When I started to first grade, back in 1925, I was four years old. I was four for six weeks. My birthday is in October.

I became five in October so you see we really had progress by the time I started teaching in 1940 because we had to be six before the close of the year. There was no law about that when I started. My parents held my brother back a year. He was seven when he started and they pushed me up a year to save transportation. I was always the baby of the class. All through high school I was the youngest one in the class.

Patti: Probably one of the areas that we as teachers know find so different was how teachers then were expected to behave as far as their personal life and their social life. Could you talk about that a little bit—the expectancies the community had of you because you were their school teacher.

Florence: I was the one they looked up to—the young people. The young girls especially would watch me because I was to have the best courtesies of all. I remember my boyfriend, who is now my husband, would come out of Fridays and we would go to Cimarron, Kansas because I was teaching in Gray County. We would go to a movie and I always felt squeamish about that because if some people would think that movies were not the thing for school teachers to do I didn't know, but maybe, I would be called before the board and asked about the movie I had attended. So there was that feeling that maybe I shouldn't be at the movie at all because there was a certain stigma in those days attached to the movies. But I looked forward to every Friday evening when he would drive out from Garden City, twenty-five miles, and we would drive on twenty miles to Cimarron and go to a movie and have a Coke before he would drive me to my farm home where my parents were. I was certainly watched. When we would have our community

gatherings, especially a pie supper or a box supper, the teacher's boyfriend, they called him the beau in those days, was expected to be there of course. I had a beau, or boyfriend, and he would come and then the young fellows who were trying to beat his time, when they found out which was my pie or box, they would run it sky high. The teacher's box always brought the most money. The boyfriend would certainly come equipped with money because he didn't want some of those young whipper snappers of the neighborhood to eat with his sweetheart.

Patti: Well, can I assume then, when you mentioned your home that you lived with your parents while you were teaching?

Florence: My first year I did. My first year, on the weekends, I would go to my parent's home. My father had asked that I use my education and teach at least one year before I would marry. The Friday when school was out in April, was the Friday before I came Mrs. Wilson. The following Sunday we were married because we had waited the one year that my father had asked.

Patti: How did you get your job? Who found you and hired you for your position in the school?

Florence: There was a girl in my zoology class who I hadn't really gotten to well acquainted with. She seemed so busy with studies and I liked to skate and do these extra things on the side that she didn't want to do. I never had become to friendly with her

because she was so aloof. One day I got to zoology class early and she said, "I've signed my contract to teach next year."

well I hadn't even applied because I knew that I would be teaching at Solid Rock School, which is east of Garden City about twenty-five miles. I hadn't even applied because I knew I had it in the bag. My mother had taught there and I had gone there as a first grader myself. I said, "what school will you be teaching in?" She said, "Solid Rock. I have signed my contract."

Immediately a little bit of hate grew. The girl I hadn't gotten too friendly with anyway was going to be teaching at the school I dreamed of. Then I got busy. That very evening I called the school five miles south and talked to one of the board members, who was a very dear friend, and asked him if I might be an applicant for his school. He said, "Florence, if you want to teach at our school the contract will be in the mail tomorrow." So, it was that easy. I signed up to teach five miles of the school that I had dreamed of all my life.

Patt: How did you observe the special holidays? Did you have a Christmas program?

Florence: I was totally responsible for all these gatherings. For instance, country children don't know about Halloween parties so we didn't any of that celebration. At Thanksgiving time we would always have a Thanksgiving program. Generally, in connection with that,

we would have a pie or box supper which would raise money for the Christmas treats for our Christmas program. The next month we would have quite a party and quite a program, we would have dialogues, readings, songs, you name it. Santa Claus would come with his pack on his back full of candy that had been purchased with the money we had made at our November party. Then we would always have a spring program. I was totally responsible for that. We had a rhythm band in several of the schools that I taught in. We had quite a rhythm band. I taught them tonettes which is a stepping stone to the clarinet. The little children would beat on triangles and sticks. We had the cymbals and the drums. We had fun. Those bands were really pretty nice because it was a stepping stone when they would become older and take band.

Patti: I have to ask this question. Did you have a spelling Bee?

Florence: Oh yes! That was in connection with the track meets in the spring. Track meets were a great time when several, sometimes five or six rural schools, would get together at a particular school. We would take turns going to the different schools. We would have all the races and the broad jump and the high jump and all of these things you can imagine. Then there would be a potluck dinner. Everybody would bring in potluck. In the afternoons, when all the racing was over in the mornings, because it would be warm in the springtime, we would have a

spelling bee. We had teachers pronouncing the words and we would spell down by schools. We would have a winner for each grade. There would be a spelling bee winner. That was really big news.

Patti: What teaching methods were used ie. individualized instruction, did you lecture ?

Florence: Well, the upper grades, I am afraid to say, had to do more writing than the upper grades had to do today because we didn't have that much project time. A lot of the work that they would have to do would be so that I could be busy with my first four grades. When we would have the recitation time, which meant I would call eighth grade civics. My eighth graders would come forward and sit in the recitation bench and I would have studied the lesson and searched for questions that I felt might be asked in that state test coming up. I would maybe write a test on the board and they would give the answers. They would come up and we would talk about the answers. So, I lectured. I questioned. When they had the answers, I hoped. The county superintendent was the one who would check to see that I was truly following. I had to keep lesson plans. Following the state outline. The state would send out a book each fall that was to be used as a guideline for the lessons that I would teach. It wasn't like I was out there in the country doing what I wanted to do. I had to

teach the lessons that were prescribed by the state.

Patti: So, it was the state then or the county superintendent that would evaluate you to make sure that you were doing what you were supposed to. How did you evaluate the children? Was it through their recitation or did you give them grades?

Florence: Oh, yes. I tested. I wrote my own tests because the state didn't furnish tests. They gave us what we should teach but the teacher would write her own tests. If they would have given me the questions for the test that would not have been an evaluation of my teaching in the end when they would be tested by the state. The testing was kind of up to me. I needed to pick up the pertinent facts and test to see how well they had learned what they should have so that, when they would take their state test, they could grade me by what my students had done.

Patti: So, unlike today, you weren't observed teaching?

Florence: Yes. The county superintendent would come in at least once a month. I never did know when. She would just drop in and she would watch me and take notes. It was kind of a nerve racking time because all the time she was there she would be writing. At recess time she would visit with me. If there were things I was doing that she didn't like she would tell me and by the same token I always had good county superintendents. If I was doing something wrong she would tell me. I never did dread

her coming that much except for her constantly writing. I was always wondering what am I doing? Is it good or bad? I am thankful that I generally got a pretty good rating. My students were always on their best behavior at the time.

Patti: What happened to those children who didn't pass the eighth grade test?

Florence: You know I, in my experience, only taught in rural schools four years. In my experience, and I don't say this boastfully at all, I never did have one that failed. I don't know whether I was a lucky teacher or I was doing things right. In those days, I don't know, they didn't have the speech clinic, the slow learner class and all these departmentalized things you have today. I have a feeling that some of those students learned from the others. I know that first graders would be tuned in on what was going on in other classes, which made them stronger for the next year. They would hear these same questions for their own class.

Patti: Did you use peer tutors? Did you use the older children to help the younger ones or not?

Florence: No, I never did. Not until I came to town school. I certainly did then.

Patti: Well, when they finished the eighth grade in the country did they go into town for the four year high school?

Florence: Yes. I have a feeling that rural patrons of those days would have frowned on their child having to help another child because the parent whose child was being helped would feel inferior- would feel that their child was weaker than their neighbor's child and there was more of that going on among the parents in the rural community then.

Patti: Was the school used for other things besides school or was it used exclusively for school?

Florence: Well, no. I am trying to think if at election time we might of had a day off. I can't remember that. I do remember one time we had to dismiss school because there was to be a funeral held in our school because there was a graveyard nearby. I do remember that one occasion, but school was pretty much school. On Sundays there would be Sunday school gatherings.

* Parts of the original tape are not included in this transcript as they were not relevant to the questions being asked.