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Interview with Elsie Wagner

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Fort Hays State University

Elsie Wagner

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HISTORY OF AMERICAN EDUCATION

Requirement for the Stone Schoolhouse Project

by Steve Mollach

Guest Speaker: Mrs. Wagner, from Cimarron, Kansas

S: What years did you teach?
W: I taught in 33 and 34.
S: What was the pay when you started teaching?
W: My first year I got \$55.00 a month, and ten of that I had to pay to another teacher who had a car and taught at the next school south. So I really got \$45.00.
S: Was that alot of pay in those days?
W: It was depression day, it was good pay.
S: How did you start out your day?
W: Well we had the prayer and we had flag salute. I don't think we ever had show and tell. We were busy, we didn't have time for all that. But we always had the flag salute and a prayer.
S: Did you have it outside, the flag salute-or inside?
W: No, inside.
S: What subjects did you start the day off with?
W: I don't remember. I had all eight grades and I suppose it was reading. I know thats what your suppose to start off with.
S: You started off with religion each day? I mean reading?
W: Reading.
S: Did you ever have any religion?
W: No.
S: It wasn't allowed?
W: I had-Well nobody ever said anything about it. I didn't know enough to think about it anyways. I had some Mennonite kids, you know, and my little first grader was a little Mennonite kid, and he died the first-during that first year. I don't know what was the matter with him, but anyway, I told somebody, we were talking about you coming up, and I said-I shouldn't say this, but it was probably the best thing for the kid and me too. I know he wasn't learning anything. First grader. (Laughter)
S: How did they pay you?
W: Just every month.
S: Just every month?
W: Check.
S: They gave you a check?
W: Check. Yes.
S: O.K. Did you ever have to meet with the school board?
W: No.

S: Not even when you took the job?

W: Well, when I took the job I had to go and see each one of them, and interview them and go around to their farm and interview them and then they never talked to me after that. Until I got ready to quit and they wanted me to stay on. They use to come to all of my school parties. You know you had parties all the time. Box suppers and things like that. And they'd all come and they'd have-they just loved it! They were nice. And then I knew them after I got married and quit teaching-you know they were friends of my husbands.

S: So you had school parties all the time?

W: Yes, At least every six weeks.

S: About every six weeks.

W: You know we would have one when school started-soon after school started, and then we would have a Halloween and we'd have a Thanksgiving program and a Christmas program, you know, and Valentines Day box supper. I didn't know how to organize them, I don't know how I got by.

S: So the community was pretty involved in your school?

W: Oh yes. Oh yes.

S: Did you ever have spelling bees? Community spelling bees?

W: Yes.

S: Did the parents participate in them?

W: No. Just the kids.

S: Just the kids, but they came to watch (parents)?

W: Yes.

S: Did you have to buy your own school supplies or did they supply them?

W: Yes.

S: You had to buy them?

W: Oh yes.

S: And that got a little-

W: We didn't have very many, I'll tell you that.

S: Well what did you have?

W: Well we had colored chalk, and we of course crayons, and water colors and I think all teachers use those old newspaper-catalog-you know those big newspaper-sample books?

S: Oh yes, like the Sears catalog, or something like that?

W: No, the big newspaper-I mean wallpaper things.

S: Oh, yes- I know what your talking about. Yeah.

W: They're great.

S: Sample book.

W: Sample books, yeah. Wallpaper sample books. Oh, I used those.

S: I use to use those too, when I was in grade school, that how come I remembered. Did you have to go to get a degree to teach out there? Or could you have taught out there without a degree?

W: Well, see when I graduated from Emponia, that was the last year they gave those certificates that you never had to go back to school.

S: Oh.

W: You know. Now people do. But I had one of those. I had a bachelors degree in, with a major in History and Government and a minor in English. And here I was teaching a one room school with all eight grades.

S: How many students did you have?

W: I had eight.

S: Eight?

W: Nine.

S: Nine students?

W: I had two in the fourth grade.

S: Were they mostly girls or boys?

W: Boys.

S: Boys? How long was your school year?

W: Well, I guess it was eight months.

S: Eight months?

W: Ug-hugh.

S: Thats-but they got off to work on the farm?

W: No, we just went straight through. We started in September and then the school was out in the spring-before town school was out. I don't know, I think it was eight months. And we had -you know, nowadays teachers rely on their principals you know, and our person we relied on was the county superintendent. Since I lived in Cimarron, why I'd go down to the court house and she'd give me books and hints and tell me what to do and what not to do.

S: When you first started teaching, were you single?

W: Yes.

S: Did they make you stay any particular place?
W: No.
S: There was no rules they set down for you?
W: No, I had a very liberated school district. In fact-they were very liberated!
S: Very liberated, they were pretty liberal with you then?
W: I guess.
S: But some of the school districts around here weren't.
W: Well I don't know about that, but my people were just great. They all came to our school picnics and box suppers and then if I'd go to a dance out in the country on Saturday night, why they would be there.
S: It was O.K. for you to go to a dance?
W: Yes, yes.
S: Well that is-that's pretty liberal. What type of books did you use?
W: Well the school furnished-we had the books there, and they were really battered up. Let's see- I had-well I just don't remember about the books, I don't even know the name of the publisher. They were old beat up books.
S: Old beat up books.
W: And I had to do my own janitor work. And I'd get out there in the morning and start the fire-and we had a pump. Now I was talking to a lady today, who taught in a one room school and she said there was a farmhouse-they didn't have a pump and so she'd send two of the big boys a quarter of a mile to this farmhouse and they'd bring two buckets of water first thing in the morning and then that would last them all day.
S: But those were your duties first thing in the morning?
W: Yes.
S: You had to bring your own water in?
W: Bring the water in, sometimes I'd let the boys do it, but we had to much to do.
S: Did you have a chalkboard?
W: Yes, one chalkboard, in the front of the room, and I had a piano, and I could play with one finger-but we sang anyway. Played the piano-I remember one time one of the boys was making everybody else laugh-I thought he was mimicking me when I was trying to play. So I said "Francis, why don't you take over this music?" Oh, he didn't want to so I said "Oh, come on-I'm tired." So Francis took over the music-he never did make fun of me trying to play the piano again.
S: Was there a general age that most of your kids were when they came to school?

- W: Well they came-everybody started school when they were six then.
- S: When they were six?
- W: Ugh-huh.
- S: In first grade?
- W: Yes.
- S: O.K.
- W: And of course some of them didn't make it and were- I know those big boys were about 17 , 16, when they got out of eighth grade, you know.
- S: In eighth grade. Did most of them stick it out through eighth grade?
- W: Yes, mine did. I didn't even have one that quit.
- S: What were some of the physical problems of the building?
- W: Well...
- S: Was it cold in the winter? Or did you have a big stove?
- W: No it was pretty good-I had a big stove and we burnt coal and I use to start that fire with kerosene, I don't know how I kept from blowing the thing up. But I didn't know any other way to start it, so I did. And in the summer or the spring it would be awful hot in the fall. But see I was right in the sand hills, this old sage brush and sandhill country out here. There wasn't a tree around me, we had one tree out by the boys toilet and it was a pretty beat up old thing, I don't know what it was-mockselder tree or something. Thats the only tree we had on the playground.
- S: What teaching methods did you use?
- W: I really can't describe them, I'll tell you what we did. I'd get the little kids started or get one class started, then I'd have to go help get the other groups started, and the bigger boys- and I had two girls who were reliable, then they could help the people in the lower grades that needed help. You know, really everybody was helping each other. One thing about country school where all the classes are together, I do think they gain from the other group-you know because my little girl in the sixth grade, she was catching on to alot of things that went on in the eighth grade, you know I think that helps. And those little kids in the second grade, they'd listen to the third grade recite and they'd learn from them.
- S: Did you do alot of repetition work?
- W: We had to.
- S: That's because of the age differences?
- W: Yes, ugh-hugh.

S: That would have been pretty tough.

W: Oh, boy.

S: Did you do alot of spelling?

W: Oh yes, spelling I love spelling and I've always liked spelling and I put alot of emphasis on that.

S: Did you use Webster's Speller, by chance?

W: I can't remember what speller we used. But we always had spelling bees, you know, Friday afternoon we'd have a spelling bee and that was great. One time when I taught at Montezuma, I had a girl win the county spelling contest and the word she went down on was hyacinth, and I'd never thought about the word being on the list, and this was a real smart girl, and for years after that any time I'd see her on the street or anyplace she'd say, "Mrs. Wagner, and then she'd spell hyacinth.

S: That was quite an honor, winning a county spelling bee, wasn't it?

W: Yes, really, I was really thrilled about that.

S: Did any of your student travel a great distance to come to school?

W: Oh no, I think about four miles was about the farthest any of them came, they umm-some of them walked, and most of them rode a horse, bareback. They'd tie the horse out under that tree, you know, during the day. None of them came by car, unless their father was going to town and...

S: How were the discipline problems handled?

W: Well, ..

S: Did you get that paddle out?

W: No, I didn't have a paddle then, but I didn't have much trouble with discipline with those kids out there. I guess, I don't know. One time, I started to tell you about the boys hiding out in the boy's restroom out in the yard, and so one day they didn't come in and I rang the bell again and they didn't come in-so I just walked out the door and started walking out there. I got about three feet from the door and here they all came-I think they had the door open a little peeking out. And they thought well that old gals going to come right in here, so they left. I didn't have any trouble with them after that.

S: Was there any outstanding features of the school you taught at, I mean was there a bell at your school?

W: No, I just had a little handbell.

S: What was the building made of?

W: It was wooden. I've thought so many times, had a child gotten hurt, see I road out with another teacher-and I didn't have any way to leave there until she came after me, after school was out at four o'clock. I suppose I would have had to send

- W: one of the big boys on horseback, you know, and there wasn't a house in sight-just out there in the sun.
- S: How far from town were you?
- W: I think we were, see we were about ten miles. Eight or ten miles.
- S: So you were virtually by yourself out there.
- W: All day long.
- S: Were most of your students from a particular religious background or nationality? Were they German immigrants...
- W: I had this one Mennonite family, was all. The rest of them were prote-or you know Americanized.
- S: Did any of your students go on to become outstanding individuals?
- W: None in that group, but they all - I know several still live around here and are conscientious, outstanding people, you know. None of them, I don't think any of them ever went to college, I'm just sure they didn't. But Francis Miller might have gone to Jr. College later, but I doubt it.
- S: Did they have a chance to go on to a highschool after eighth grade?
- W: Yes, they could come to Cimarron, to highschool if they wanted to.
- S: But that would have been unusual if they did?
- W: Yes.
- S: Most of them went back to the farm and worked?
- W: Well see, this was right in the middle of depression, and they just didn't have money to do alot of things like go away to Jr. College, or take some vo-tech, or anything like that.