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Interview with Leona Becker

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Leona Becker

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ORAL HISTORY:
AN INTERVIEW OF FORMER ONE-ROOM
SCHOOL HOUSE INSTRUCTOR:

LEONA BECKER

This interview was conducted in partial
fulfillment of requirements for History
of American Education.

Dr. Allan Miller

by

Rick Keltner
Summer 1982

1 Q. How did you start out every day at school? I mean, did
2 you start out with poems or songs?

3 A. Well, the first thing was to put out the flag. We had a
4 flag salute. And in the wintertime, it was building fires.
5 We was our own janitor. We had to make the fire. And
6 sometimes we sang a song.

7 Q. Okay. What subjects did you teach?

8 A. Well, I had all the grades in school, excepting the fifth
9 grade. So it was seven grades I had. And reading was the
10 most stressed on, and then usually math. It was very im-
11 portant. And spelling. And penmanship, too, which you
12 don't hear too much of now. Of course, there was history,
13 geography, health, and everything.

14 So I thought there was no justice to the kids,
15 because when you have that many subjects--the classes--a
16 lot of classes were combined; and many were for five min-
17 utes--was all that you could give them. I had every grade,
18 and some of the grades only had one pupil, but still I had
19 the grade. Penmanship, every day that was a necessity.

20 Q. Okay. What kind of punishments did you have to give out
21 to discipline?

22 A. Well, usually they stayed in at recess. And if it was
23 something a little worse, they stayed after school, so the
24 parents would know that. And they would write something.
25 That was about it.

- 1 Q. How did you get paid, or how did you get your paychecks?
- 2 A. I received them from the president of the school board.
- 3 Q. How often did you meet with the school board?
- 4 A. We never met. I don't remember ever meeting with the
- 5 school board. I think the school board--they met among
- 6 themselves to choose the teacher, but that's as far as I
- 7 know.
- 8 Q. When you were hired, did you have to meet with them; or
- 9 did somebody, just one person hire you? Or did you have
- 10 to meet with the board?
- 11 A. No, I really didn't meet with the board. Well, they sort
- 12 of knew the teachers personally, you know, when you live
- 13 that way.
- 14 Q. Okay. How did you get your school supplies?
- 15 A. Well, the board gave some of the simpler ones, like chalk
- 16 and things like that. But the county seat at Osborne--
- 17 they would send out a few little books sometimes and
- 18 pamphlets; and that was about the extent of it.
- 19 Q. How much schooling did you have to have in order to teach
- 20 in this schoolhouse?
- 21 A. Well, high school. And then we had to attend a summer
- 22 school; and they also gave the teachers all a test. You
- 23 had to pass this written test before you could teach.
- 24 Q. Where did you stay while you were teaching?
- 25 A. I stayed with my uncle and my aunt, and I walked to school!

1 from there.

2 Q. Okay. Describe the school day and the curriculum and how
3 the regular day for the student went.

4 A. Well, I really don't know. The school day went very fast.
5 There were several subjects. Because I would try to com-
6 bine, let's say, like spelling. I had three classes of
7 spelling going at the same time in order to get it in.
8 And penmanship, of course, the whole school took that.
9 And normally geography, probably the sixth and seventh
10 grade took the same. That was allowed by the county.
11 And reading, too. Sometimes they would combine the fifth
12 and sixth grade so there would be less classes, because
13 you just could not work those classes in in a day.

14 Q. Okay. When you were working in a one-room schoolhouse, I
15 don't know how often you had the opportunity to work with
16 different types of teachers; but what types did you have;
17 and could you describe the types of teachers and their
18 habits?

19 A. Well, most of the teachers were just single girls. There
20 were a few men, but more women, or girls. Most of them
21 were just young girls.

22 Q. Okay. What kind of texts did you use?

23 A. I don't exactly know what you mean.

24 Q. As far as textbooks, what kind of books did you use?

25 A. Well, they came from the county, the books did.

1 Q. Okay. How did you study? Did you use your leisure time
2 to do that or--

3 A. Well, yes, I had to grade papers, if you're referring to
4 me. Graded papers at night. That was quite a little.
5 And tried to find some little extra work for the pupils.

6 Q. Okay. Was the schoolhouse used for community social
7 events as well as for education?

8 A. Not too much. But we would have box suppers. That was
9 very important. We raised money there. And we sometimes
10 would have spelling and syphering matches. And then the
11 parents would bring lunch or something. And also the last
12 day of school; that was always a big affair. They would
13 bring their lunches and we'd have races and that, you
14 know.

15 Q. They still have those box suppers at the high school. I
16 wonder if that's where that originated from? I never
17 heard of a box supper until I came to Tipton.

18 A. Oh, you didn't? That was a must. I think all the schools
19 had a box supper.

20 Q. Okay. What were the boundaries of your school's juris-
21 diction?

22 A. Well, around six miles square, I'd say, was the boundaries
23 of it.

24 Q. Okay. What was the usual age of the child when he began
25 school?

1 A. Six years, pretty well.

2 Q. What was the length of the school year and the approximate
3 length of the school day?

4 A. Well, it began the first Monday in September after Labor
5 Day; and it closed usually the last week in April. And
6 it started from nine in the morning to four in the after-
7 noon.

8 Q. Okay. Do you remember any changes being made in those
9 hours, as far as longer or--

10 A. No, I just don't. I think they were pretty well all the
11 same.

12 Q. Okay. Now, was this school for all children?

13 A. Yes, there was no distinction, no matter if you were an
14 owner of the land, or if you were just anybody. Everybody
15 who was within the district was welcome to come.

16 Q. Okay. How was this school financed? How did you get fin-
17 ancial support?

18 A. From taxes from the county, from the land owners. Also
19 from the county. I'm sure the county helped in some ex-
20 tent with money.

21 Q. Okay. How were teachers expected to conduct themselves?
22 Or did you have any kind of rules that you were supposed
23 to go by, as far as conduct?

24 A. No, there wasn't any rules; but the teachers were--I'd say
25 were looked up as a little bit something exceptional in

1 those days. And, of course, we were supposed to conduct
2 ourselves in the same way.

3 Q. Okay. What were some of the things you did for extra
4 curricular activity? For your own enjoyment, I guess.

5 A. Oh, I don't know, really not much.

6 Q. Was there a problem as far as teacher turnovers, as far as
7 you can remember? Were there--did they have trouble keep-
8 ing teachers?

9 A. Well, usually, so many of the teachers, as I said, were
10 young teachers; and after a few years they got married.
11 And in those days that meant staying at home. You know,
12 they just did not teach no more. Of course, there was a
13 few of them took up the career; and they did it for years,
14 but not too many.

15 Q. Who governed the school, or who supervised it?

16 A. Well, the county did through the school board. They work-
17 ed hand in hand with that.

18 Q. Okay. Did the school board then fire and hire teachers,
19 or who did that?

20 A. The school board did.

21 Q. Okay. What were some of the physical problems of the
22 building? Did you have trouble with heat or--

23 A. My school building was a rather new school building; and
24 it had a basement, which I don't think any other country
25 school had around here. And we had a furnace down in the

1 basement. So I was really fortunate with that. I had no
2 problem with heat.

3 Q. Okay. Who was in charge of the upkeep of the building?

4 A. The school board did.

5 Q. Okay.

6 A. Or the farmers who lived in the district, any of the
7 parents of the children.

8 Q. Okay. What special events happened at the school? You
9 mentioned box suppers?

10 A. Box suppers. And there was always a school play at
11 Christmas. That was a must. And we'd have our Christmas
12 tree, and we'd bring our food. It was a big event. And,
13 as I said, occasionally we'd have spelling and syphering
14 matches.

15 Q. Now, when was the schoolhouse built; and who built it?

16 A. It was built around 1914, I think.

17 Q. Okay. What kind of materials was it made out of?

18 A. Well, it was lumber. It was entirely lumber.

19 Q. Okay. You say that the county owned this schoolhouse, or
20 who owned the schoolhouse?

21 A. No, I think it was the district. I'm quite sure the
22 district owned the building. They maybe got some help,
23 but I really don't know. I think it just went through
24 taxes, but I'm not for sure on that.

25 Q. Okay. Now, did more than one teacher work at the school?

- 1 A. No, just one.
- 2 Q. Did you have anybody that you would classify as a princi-
3 pal that worked along with the school?
- 4 A. No. The county seat had a principal, and he would come
5 out and visit the school at least once a year. And out-
6 side of that, just the school board.
- 7 Q. Okay. Who employed the teachers? Would that be consider-
8 ed the school board?
- 9 A. Right. The school board did. I don't think the super-
10 intendent had anything to do with it.
- 11 Q. Okay. Was the schoolhouse used only for teaching?
- 12 A. Yes, almost entirely. Many of the schools had like when
13 voting took place, but the voting--these people went to
14 High Prairie School. It was three miles east of this one.
15 That seemed to be the central school for voting and things
16 like that, more than what this one was.
- 17 Q. Okay. What were the ages of the children at this school,
18 approximately?
- 19 A. Six to fourteen, about.
- 20 Q. Okay. What were some of the typical activities for a
21 school day?
- 22 A. Well, at recess and lunch hour at noon, baseball when it
23 was in season. That was very popular. And such games as
24 Drop the Handkerchief and Pom Pom Pull Away. And we had
25 the swings. And on cold days, as I said, we had the

1 basement. We could play some games down in the basement.

2 Q. How long was your school year?

3 A. It started in September and went to the end of April.

4 Q. Okay. What was the greatest distance of travel that any
5 student had to make?

6 A. Well, a little over two miles was about the greatest dis-
7 tance.

8 Q. So most of them just walked?

9 A. Yes, they all walked. I don't think there was any of them
10 that had any other way to come to school than walking,
11 unless the weather was bad, maybe.

12 Q. Okay, and we talked about this a little bit earlier. As
13 far as system of evaluation, you said that a superintend-
14 ent would appear about one day of the school year to watch
15 you?

16 A. Yes.

17 Q. Operating, is that right?

18 A. Right.

19 Q. Okay. What was the amount of different classes given at
20 one time?

21 A. Well, as I said, I combined all of the penmanship. That
22 was for all grades. And spelling, I would combine, you
23 know, two or three grades at a time. And the county did
24 this, like on a level, when there was too many grades in
25 one school, we could complete, like sixth grade geography

1 one year and seven the next year, combine them. And then
2 do the same with the upper reading classes. But outside
3 of that, it would be pretty well each class alone.

4 Q. As far as the type of heating and lighting and toilets
5 available, what would you say about that for your school?

6 A. Well, as I say, I had a furnace in the basement; and light
7 was just coal oil lamps; and water--there was a cistern by
8 my school. And I imagine before they built this school,
9 they had to carry their water to school, because there was
10 no well water. A lot of the schools had wells, but some
11 there was no water available. And they carried their water
12 from sometimes a half mile to school for drinking purposes.
13 But wherever the building was new at, they had a cistern
14 for their water supply.

15 Q. So before they had the cistern, a kid could ask the teach-
16 er if he could go get a drink of water and be gone for
17 quite a while?

18 A. Well, I think when I went to school, when I went to the
19 Hillside, usually one of the bigger boys would go to walk
20 about a fourth of a mile to go get a bucket of water.
21 And that's what they used. We all had our little tin
22 cups.

23 Q. Okay. What about toilets? Did you have an outdoor--

24 A. Outdoor toilet.

25 Q. Okay. We talked about the water. How did the community

1 raise money for equipment?

2 A. Well, it was through taxes; and, as I said, the box supper
3 was about the only event they had. This money went to the
4 school district.

5 Q. Okay. What was the size of the school's library? Did it
6 have any kind of library that you could use?

7 A. Well, a dictionary; and I was informed that we had a set
8 of Bopsey(sp) Twins. That's about it. Sometimes the
9 superintendent in Osborne would bring in maybe a few books
10 for the children, and they'd be at my school for a month
11 or two. They exchanged that to get a few books, but other-
12 wise the library was rather nill.

13 Q. Okay. Did any activities take place between the schools?

14 A. Usually towards the spring of the year, two schools would
15 get together and they would have, like a track meet, you
16 might say. And also they'd have maybe spelling matches
17 between them. That's about the amount of the schools
18 doing anything together.

19 Q. Okay. How were discipline problems handled? How did you
20 handle those?

21 A. Really, I didn't have any. I just--I don't know. I got
22 along with the children. Once or twice maybe one student
23 would maybe do a little penmanship or writing, and that
24 was it.

25 Q. Okay. Can you think of any traditions that might have

1 been peculiar to your particular schoolhouse, or something
2 you did that wasn't maybe in the normal, or anything like
3 that?

4 A. No, I just can't think of any.

5 Q. I would imagine most of the schoolhouses had a lot of simi-
6 larities.

7 A. Oh, yes, very much so.

8 Q. Okay. Did the curriculum of your school change very much
9 as far as the subjects you were supposed to teach? Did
10 they--

11 A. No, not while I was teaching; and I don't think they did
12 a whole lot at all during the period, really. The stress
13 was always made on the three, spelling, arithmetic, and
14 reading.

15 Q. There's a question here that says how did female teachers
16 handle discipline problems as compared to male teachers.
17 We talked about how you handled discipline problems. Were
18 there very many male teachers, or were you aware of any
19 male teachers?

20 A. No. There was a man taught in the High Prairie School,
21 which was three miles east of me; but otherwise, I think
22 they were all girl teachers around there.

23 Q. Okay. How did the people decide on the location of their
24 school?

25 A. Well, I imagine it was according to the number of pupils.

1 I really don't know how to-- See, the farms were small
2 at those days; and most families were large; and I think
3 that's the reason most schools were about three miles
4 apart. Because the only way they had to school was walk-
5 ing. And, you know, we walked a couple miles in the
6 wintertime; that's about as far as a child wants to go.

7 Q. Did the school have any particular problems that you can
8 think of that created hardships for you?

9 A. No, I sure didn't.

10 Q. One of the questions here is what is the significance of
11 the school's name. What was the name of your school?

12 A. Well, I found out that the first settlers in this commun-
13 ity came from the State of Iowa, and they just called the
14 school the Iowa School. It's kind of an unusual name,
15 but that's what it was called.

16 Q. Okay. Were there any physical changes in the schoolhouse
17 during the years? Did they build on or anything?

18 A. No, see it was so new that it just stayed as it was.

19 Q. Okay. And you mentioned there wasn't a water well near
20 this school. You had a cistern.

21 A. No, cistern. There was no--I don't know of--the closest
22 well I know of was about half a mile away from the school.
23 I don't know how they got it before they had the new
24 school built.

25 Q. Okay. About how many students went to this school?

1 A. Around 14 when I taught, but many of those country schools
2 didn't have that many.

3 Q. When did the school open, and about when did it close?

4 A. You mean the year?

5 Q. Yes.

6 A. I wouldn't know when the first school there opened; but
7 it closed, I think, around 1940, I'd say.

8 Q. What district was it in? Was it in a particular district
9 that you can remember namewise?

10 A. Well, I think the district was just the one school. I
11 really don't know.

12 Q. Okay. These one-room schoolhouses may have been very
13 easily just grouped into very large areas.

14 A. Yes.

15 Q. Okay. Was the land that the school was built on, do you
16 know, was it purchased or given to the school?

17 A. I think, I'm almost sure it had been given; and when the
18 school closed, this land was given back to the owner of
19 the land at this time, not back to the original owner,
20 because, you know, that would have been an awful hassle.
21 I know that's the way we got ours over there.

22 Q. That's interesting. Can you describe the interior of the
23 school, anything that you had? You had blackboards, I
24 would imagine.

25 A. Yes, we had nice blackboards; and there was two little

1 cloak rooms at the front of the school. On the side
2 there was a little build on, and there you could go down
3 into the basement. And that's where we kept our water
4 cool and sweeping supplies. And there was also a side
5 door there. Now, most schools didn't have that.

6 Q. Okay. The students that you taught at this school, what
7 kind of occupations did most of them usually take up?

8 A. Most of them took up farming.

9 Q. And most of these students, I would imagine, being from
10 the Tipton area, were probably Catholic and of German
11 extraction, is that right?

12 A. Yes, they were mostly German extraction; but there were
13 some Catholics, but not all. There were some, I don't
14 know, Protestants; some of my best pupils were.

15 Q. What kind or type of graduation exercise did you have?

16 A. They didn't have any. You simply got your diploma from
17 the county.

18 Q. Okay. Were there any kinds of special classes or unique
19 educational services that you can remember the school
20 offering?

21 A. No, there wasn't any of those.

22 Q. Did you ever have any juicy controversies or anything
23 like that surrounding the school?

24 A. Well, not with me; but I do think there were several of
25 the farmers that disagreed at that point; and that was

1 kept, you know.

2 Q. Yes. Who would you say started the movement to build that
3 school? Was it pretty much state mandated, or did the
4 people in the area want the school?

5 A. Well, I imagine the people in the area wanted it. I don't
6 know really when that first school was built. It was
7 before my time, I know.

8 Q. Okay. Would you say that the school made any lasting con-
9 tributions to the community it served?

10 A. Well, I don't know. I imagine it would have been the
11 children's education. If they wouldn't have had that
12 school, there just wouldn't have been any.

13 Q. I'm sure that's an important contribution. Now, those
14 people that were in that school, probably some of them are
15 still around here, aren't they, in the area?

16 A. Oh, yes; you've got some up here in high school that are
17 parents of some of the kids.

18 Q. Is that right?

19 A. Yes.

20 Q. That's interesting. Okay. How many levels, I believe we
21 kind of touched on this, school age were incorporated into
22 the educational program of the school, as far as grade
23 levels?

24 A. First through the eighth.

25 Q. Okay.

1 A. Of course there was no kindergarten.

2 Q. And the cultural or heritage background of this school
3 district or community, we kind of touched on that, too.

4 A. Mostly German.

5 Q. And what is the function of this schoolhouse today? That's
6 a kind of interesting question.

7 A. Well, when the school closed, I understand it was moved to
8 the--they have a school over here called the Holy Corner
9 or Saint John's. They had two schools there. There used
10 to be a church in the school, and I guess the one--they
11 moved this building there; and it served in that district
12 for some time. And it presently is used as a garage by a
13 man over there in that neighborhood. Most of those
14 schools are used as a garage nowadays.

15 Q. We may have touched on this earlier, too. When and how was
16 it deemed necessary to build this school? When did they
17 build it?

18 A. Well, when I imagine there was enough settlers settled
19 there; and they had to have an education for their child-
20 ren. The very first schools were very simple. And that's
21 the reason the schools closed later on, is the farms just
22 got larger and there was less pupils. And you just
23 couldn't maintain a school with one or two pupils. And
24 then the mode of transportation and travel was so much,
25 you know, after the cars came.

1 Q. Okay. About what was the average number of years a stu-
2 dent spent in school? If he went to the eighth grade, I
3 would imagine that probably a lot of them--

4 A. When I was teaching, most of them pretty well finished
5 the eighth grade. But not too many years before that,
6 many of them quit around the fourth and fifth grade. A
7 lot of them did. They just did not complete the eight
8 years.

9 Q. Could you think of anything unusual that happened during
10 the time that the school was open?

11 A. No, I really don't know.

12 Q. How about, and we kind of touched on this, too, why did
13 the school close down?

14 A. It was mostly, as I said, that there was less pupils. The
15 farms got larger, and there was less pupils there.

16 Q. Okay. Do you know if any of the original equipment that
17 might have been in that school as far as desks or anything
18 like that is still available?

19 A. I don't know.

20 Q. Okay. Are any of the people that served on your school
21 board still in the community?

22 A. No, there isn't any of them. They've all passed away.

23 Q. Did any of your former students or teachers in your commu-
24 nity go on to become outstanding people, in your opinion?

25 A. No. Most of the pupils just turned out to be nice, good

- 1 farmers.
- 2 Q. Okay. That's good enough. What could you say about the
3 average class size, the length of time a teacher worked in
4 your school?
- 5 A. Three was a pretty good number to have in one class. And,
6 of course, as I said before, the time was very short for
7 classes. Really you didn't have the time, I didn't think.
8 You can imagine with those subjects and the few minutes
9 we had with them.
- 10 Q. What were some of the rules of the school? Did you have
11 some set rules that the kids were expected to adhere to?
- 12 A. Not really.
- 13 Q. How about the dress and overall appearance of the students?
- 14 A. Well, I think my pupils were all quite neat. There was no
15 problem with dress.
- 16 Q. There was no dress code?
- 17 A. No. They were glad to have a pair of shoes or suitable
18 dress to wear.
- 19 Q. Did the students have to pay to go to school?
- 20 A. No.
- 21 Q. Was there any organization similar to the P.T.A., or a
22 thing where the parents and teacher got together?
- 23 A. No. There was no P.T.A.; and just like I said, the last
24 school day and things like that; but there was no organ-
25 ization.

1 Q. I think that pretty much covers the questions. I sure
2 appreciate you talking to us, and I'm anxious to see how
3 this all comes together. It's been really interesting.

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