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Interview with Esther Berland

Lois Mason

Fort Hays State University

Esther Berland

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Teaching in the Early 1900's
an
Oral Interview

by
Lois Mason

History of American Education
July 27, 1982

Mrs. Esther Berland was interviewed on July 12, 1982. At that time she was residing at 2111 Ash Street Hays, Kansas, where she had lived for the past thirty one years. Esther was born on May 26, 1900 in Zurich, Kansas. She is the daughter of Patrick McCauley and Jesse Adams. She married Fred Berland Sr. (deceased) on November 28, 1923 at Plainville, Kansas. Their two children are Fred Berland Jr. (deceased) and John Berland, Professor of Art, Fort Collins, Colorado.

This oral interview begins with Esther's background information of her schooling and teaching experiences in the early 1900's. It is followed by questions from the interviewers, Lois and Robert Mason, granddaughter and grand son-in-law of Esther's.

I first attended the Zurich Elementary School then to Colorado for high school and later to Western State University, Gunnison, Colorado. I took several summers of work at Fort Hays State University.

I began my first teaching job at a one room school about twenty six miles north of Ordway, Colorado. I was paid seventy five dollars a month. I was hired with no written contract and after three and one half months teaching, the school was closed because of the 1918 flu epidemic. I returned to Kansas, and went to Fort Hays State University where I wrote on a teacher's examination and taught a rural school in 1919 on the South Rooks County line for ninety dollars a month. I had twenty-eight

students. School started at nine and closed at four p.m. I had grades one, three, six, seven and eight. This was a German settlement. This school had no library, no maps or globes for teaching. We decided to have a box supper to raise money for maps, and we did. Most students hadn't been out of the county. I had had classes in methods that helped me to prepare classes. The first years of my teaching, I had to study as much as the older students, to prepare to help them with their work and explain it. There was no equipment for the play ground. The children just played catch, blackman and in the spring, marbles. We were always paid with a check from the school board. There were no rewards for good grades. A student just seemed to be happy to please his parents and teacher. Later, they were given a star for perfect attendance, this star was used later for good spelling. For past time in this school, we sometimes had a spelling bee. To avoid having to discipline students, we kept them very busy turning in well written work, neat essays and other work. They were graded carefully for spelling, writing, neatness and later for English. At the close of this one-room school year, I accepted a position teaching in Zurich school. This was in 1920-1921. I was hired by a school board. We had a principal but the board was consulted. This school was a frame-two story building with eight grades. I taught third, fourth, and fifth grades for ninety dollars. My students ages were from eight to fifteen years. I had forty-three students. This was my most difficult year. Trauant officers had to be called to keep children in school. Older ones had missed a lot. We had no system of evaluation. We just tried to give each student all the help we could. At

this school we had a furnace but out door toilets, we got water from a pump. No money was ever raised during these early years for equipment. At this time math, English, history, spelling, geography and penmanship were stressed very much. At these schools I insisted on world maps and a globe, but could never get any books for a library. I often selected a book and read to them for fifteen minutes after the noon hour. In the morning, when school started, we sang a few songs to start the day. As for discipline, this school had all the problems. You just had to be firm. For punishment, I would give extra work and stand the child in the corner.

At the end of Zurich school I accepted a teaching position, third grade in a consolidated school at Boone, Colorado. My uncle was superintendent. There were twelve teachers. This town was eighteen miles east of Pueblo, Colorado. Here I had all the equipment use I needed in every way. Recess time and noon were supervised by a teacher. School ended at three thirty. Here I had about twenty-five students. They had better advantages and were a delight to teach. Our school was a two-story brick building with an auditorium. We teachers, were responsible for P.T.A. programs and gatherings. I was a pianist and with the voice teacher, we were expected to help out with church services. During these years, community gatherings were very important. This was 1921 and the first that I saw buses bringing children to school. In this public school we had several Mexican children. In the year 1918-1922, a teacher had the highest respect from the community. You were made welcome by the parents and students. Each

year I taught, the schools had nine months of school. This was decided by the tax payers of the district who voted on it. I don't remember a teacher in the early years ever being fired. They were hired by the school boards.

Who did the janitorial work in the schools?

Each teacher was responsible for his room.

Did you put the firewood in the stove?

No, I don't recall. In Zurich there was a furnace. I assumed it was the job of the principal.

In Colorado, you said you saw the first buses. How did the children get to school in Zurich?

They drove buggies.

How did you get to school?

I rode in a buggy or walked three miles. I lived in a home in Zurich a few blocks from the school.

What type of clothing did the students wear?

Pretty much like they do today, But were made of a more rugged material.

Did the girls wear dresses?

The girls definitely wore dresses. No girls wore slacks in those days.

Were the boys able to leave school to help with farm work?

They could get permission from the teacher to leave school for that purpose. A child was not allowed to go off the school grounds without permission during school hours.

How long was the school open before you taught?

It had been there for years.

Where did the money for maps if possible come from?

You went to the school board. The money was there for the school board to write a check on. School boards in those days were really wonderful to a teacher.

What type of text books did you use?

Well they were general textbooks, I don't recall if I were to see them I could say "yes" we used them.

What subjects were taught?

Pretty much done in the area of English, arithmetic, reading, the basics, they really wanted a kid to have that.

Did you change textbooks?

No, absolutely not. You each bought your own books, no books were furnished.

What did the textbooks cost?

I don't recall, but not much compared to today. A child kept his books and passed it to the next child. Because they never changed books in those days.

Did the parents ever visit the schools?

Some did but an awful lot didn't. A school in those days was a community affair.

To prepare for school, did you have to go extra early or stay extra late?

I took work home. When you had upper grades, you had to work awfully hard to get ahead of them to prepare to ask questions and help with answers. Younger children, was planning for them what you were going to do. And of course you had papers to grade. With forty-three students, you had to place in your mind who they were.

What type of living quarters did you have?

In the country it was rugged, but in Zurich, I lived in a modern home. In fact it was a new home.

Did you ever have spelling bees like we read about?

Yes, but it was never more than the children in school. Within the school, no exchange with other schools. There was not much traveling in those days.

Who served on the school board?

At Zurich, I remember a man by the name of John Casey, and another by the name of Ganyon. I don't know the others.

Were there farmers?

No, they were business men. The rural schools, they were just farmers on the board.

Did you have a lot of illness during that time?

Not really, just the epidemic which was throughout the United States.

You talked about having three Mexicans in school were there any blacks?

They were just like other children. No blacks. Most kids were related, as I recall they played together.

What did you enjoy most about teaching?

Being with the children. Working with them. I felt like you were molding their character, you had every opportunity in the world to make better children out of them.

What did the children become?

All occupations. The nicest thing about being a teacher, when they come back, they just have to see you there all there is to it, which means I had students tell me that I was the best teacher they ever had which I know I couldn't possibly be, but they had that warm feeling towards me. I think you had to help them some to have them feel that way.

In closing, I would like to Thank grandma for the time involved in presenting her teaching history. I will always remember how you have stressed the importance of education. I feel very enriched in having the opportunity of knowing such a unique person.