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Interview with Frances Myers

Harry P. Disbrow III
Fort Hays State University

Francis Myers

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Francis Myers

Francis is a native Kansan, born and reared in Smith County. She taught in a one-room schoolhouses five years and is presently teaching in Smith Center Junior High School. Francis, now 64 years old, plans to retire from the teaching profession after the 1984-1985 school term.

Francis received her Normal Training in Lebanon High School. At the age of eighteen, she was ready to take a teaching position at Buck Creek, a one-room schoolhouse. She also taught at Union Two School District.

Figure thirteen shows Francis standing at the front door of the Union Two one-room schoolhouse. Figure fourteen is a picture of the Union Two schoolhouse now used as a residence by Mr. and Mrs. Jay Overmiller of Smith Center, Kansas.

Figure 13

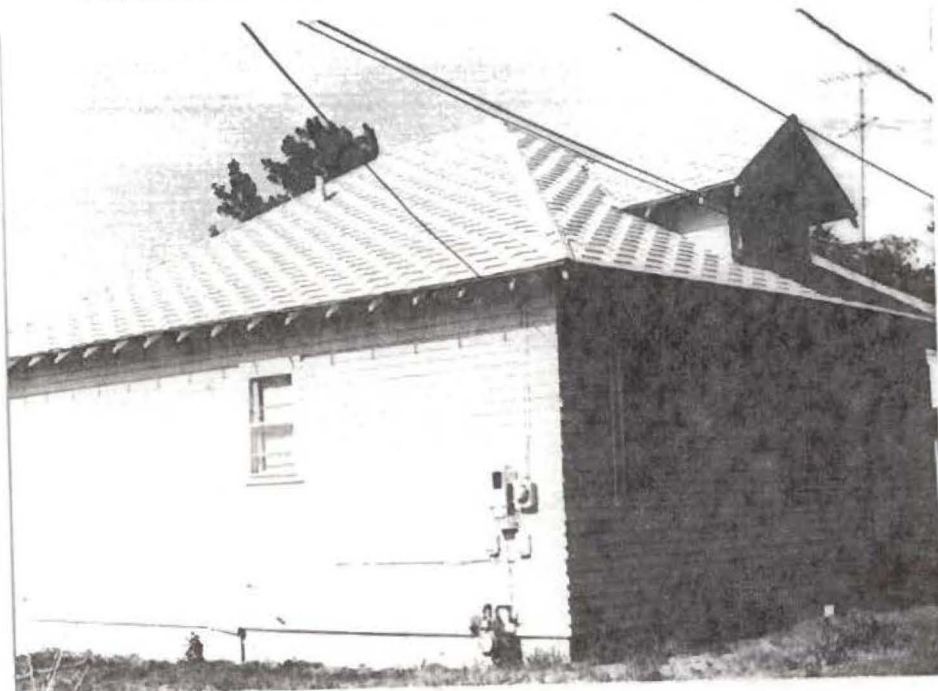


Figure 14

rural school. If you're done I got some coffee made.

Disbrow: I would really like to say thank you very much for all you help and I've really enjoyed this visit.

Mrs. Price: I have, too. I'm kind of dumb but--

Disbrow: No, not at all. I thoroughly enjoyed it and I appreciate these memories that you shared with me.

Mrs. Price: I've got a lot of good ones, just good old memories. Everybody was so good to me. I don't think I had an enemy, always good to me.

Disbrow: Well, I would sure like once more to say thank you very much.

Mrs. Price: You're sure welcome.

This interview is being taken with Francis Myers on July 7, 1984. Francis presently resides in Smith Center, Kansas, and at one time taught in a one-room schoolhouse in Smith County, Kansas.

Disbrow: Francis, can you give me your present age?

Mrs. Myers: I'm 64.

Disbrow: Are you a resident of Kansas? Have you lived in Kansas all your life?

Mrs. Myers: Born in Kansas and I've lived here all of my life.

Disbrow: How old were you when you first started your teaching profession?

Mrs. Myers: I was eighteen years old.

Disbrow: Now, when you started your teaching career, was that fresh out of high school or eighth grade?

Mrs. Myers: Out of high school. We took Normal Training in high school which was equivalent to the type of subjects that they teach in the block in college.

Disbrow: Where was that taken at?

Mrs. Myers: At Lebanon High School, Lebanon, Kansas.

Disbrow: How many years have you taught in a one-room schoolhouse?

Mrs. Myers: Five years.

Disbrow: What was the first schoolhouse that you taught in in Smith County?

Mrs. Myers: The first one was Buck Creek and it was the school that I had gone to country school and my father before me and then I came back when I graduated from high school and taught. I had one student that didn't return to school that year because she would have been older than I. I had gone to school with her before I started to high school.

Disbrow: How many grades did you have in that school?

Mrs. Myers: We had all eight grades and there were five-- I just had five grades, students that filled five grades with, must have been, nine or ten students. I can't remember exactly.

Disbrow: Can you give me a little idea what kind of curriculum you taught?

Mrs. Myers: Well, we had . . . the curriculum was . . . there was a course of study that was sent out from the state, particularly in the social studies. You had a guideline as to what you were to teach in math and reading, English, geography, and health. The newest program at that time was the social studies and so that manual was more extensive than the others were.

Disbrow: What year was that that you taught at?

Mrs. Myers: 1938-39 was the first year I taught. I taught there two years--Buck Creek, that's District 102 in Smith County.

Disbrow: What was the schoolhouse like?

Mrs. Myers: It was a one-room schoolhouse with a teacher's desk, an old-fashioned one that lifted in the middle and had places for your books on the side, an oak one. Had an old organ in it. The desks were double desks. In other words, there were two students could sit. They had a divider where two students could sit in each desk. At the back . . . the flag was up to the front of the room and the picture of President Washington. At the back, there were coat hangers. There was no cloak room, just hangers along the back and a little stand with a crockery water container. And they each one had to bring their own cup from home to drink out of it and we had to walk a quarter of a mile down the hill with an open pail to get the water and bring it back up. But I soon found a little cream can so we didn't have to have an open pail.

Disbrow: Now, was that from a well or a creek?

Mrs. Myers: It was from a well, the well still stands. I would give anything to have it because it's right at that corner of my grandparent's homestead.

Disbrow: What kind of lighting did you have in the schoolhouse?

Mrs. Myers: There was an old kerosene lamp but I think if it got that dark we probably, somebody came after us and we went home.

Disbrow: What kind of heating facilities did you have there?

Mrs. Myers: We had an old pot-belly stove that was right in the center of the room. It had a little jacket around it and we had some desks up around there, a coal skuttle, and of course it was my job to not only get the water, but also to have the fire going and do the custodial work before and after school.

Disbrow: Who was your boss or your person or persons you were responsible to while working down there at Buck Creek?

Mrs. Myers: There was a three-member school board. It was . . . you want names?

Disbrow: Sure.

Mrs. Myers: Emmett Miller, Roy Rakee, and Jay Long were members of the school board. They hired you, but actually at that time the County Superintendent, which was Bill Lee, was the one that did the supervising. Now,

my Normal Training teacher came out and visited me one day and then later brought her class out to visit my school the following year, the group that would be graduating.

Disbrow: How were they transported, how did they get out there?

Mrs. Myers: Just in a car and the district, I think . . . I'm trying to think how . . . it must have been about a two-mile square or something like that. I can't . . . I would have to go to the courthouse to look because I knew at one time.

Disbrow: A lot smaller than Smith Center is right now?

Mrs. Myers: Yes, definitely.

Disbrow: While teaching at Buck Creek, where did you stay?

Mrs. Myers: I stayed at one of the school board member's, Roy Rakee's home, and I walked back and forth. Lots of times in the wintertime I could walk, if it was drifted, I could walk right over the fence posts to get to school. I mean, it would be that big of drifts.

Disbrow: Was there any formal type of contract or anything given to you in order to take this position?

Mrs. Myers: No, it was a verbal contract. You went to all of the members of the board and applied and no doubt there was a contract of some kind if I'd have asked the County Superintendent or had asked them for one. But they gave you their word that they would do something and you did, and you did it.

Disbrow: You mentioned earlier that you stayed at one of the board member's homes while teaching there. Did you have to pay them any rent at all?

Mrs. Myers: Yes, you paid \$2.00 a week for room and board. Can you imagine? You couldn't buy a hamburger for that.

Disbrow: I'll bet you sure had good meals, too.

Mrs. Myers: Yes, I did. She was a good cook.

Disbrow: Was there any special guidelines or rules that the school board set for a teacher at this time that you had to abide by both professionally and also as a member of the community?

Mrs. Myers: No, I don't think so. Possibly in some schools, but I had grown up in the community and had attended the school before and they pretty well knew what I would and wouldn't do. I knew what was expected of me. They didn't expect you to drink and smoke. They expected you to set a good example for their children. Some districts, I know, they would say that they would want them to go to a certain church and things like that. Now, I heard other young teachers at that time say that, but I didn't. But they knew where I went to church, so that was. . .

Disbrow: How about some other social meetings or parties or things like that? Were you expected not to go to those?

Mrs. Myers: No, now there were districts that did but I didn't have any restrictions that way. They did have about two or three times a year there were social things

at the church or at the school and at the church over east of us. But at the school, they had like spelling matches, box suppers and they had sort of . . . well, now we would probably call it a Parent-Teachers' Association, it was nothing formal. But they all came to school. They'd have a covered-dish dinner most always at the end of the year. It was sort of . . . that and the church were the focal point for social activities.

Disbrow: How was the attendance then, with the parents coming to your school?

Mrs. Myers: We had good attendance. Do you mean the children?

Disbrow: The parents coming to these activities?

Mrs. Myers: Oh, they came. They were all anxious to get together. Everybody came, but it was a community that did participate in things, so . . .

Disbrow: Can you remember any particular types of series that you taught?

Mrs. Myers: Bobs Merrill Readers, Human Geography and I cannot say who the author was, I can see the book. Hausmann Writing series, Stone Arithmetic and I can't remember the Health of Habits, I can't remember the authors of those others.

Disbrow: Did you have music also and art?

Mrs. Myers: No, we did . . . I had a record player, an old one, and we did things like that, but we did art.

Disbrow: Great! What kind of salary did they start you out with? Well, I got the highest salary that a first-year teacher was getting in the county and that was \$50.00 for a month's work and it was an eight-month school so I got \$400.00 for teaching that year and no doubt I make more than \$400.00 in a week now teaching.

Disbrow: Was there any other benefits that they gave you besides that \$50.00 a month?

Mrs. Myers: Nothing, nothing. There was no health insurance, no . . . if you were ill, you didn't go to school. There were no substitutes, so you had to make those days up at the end of the year, so you didn't plan on being ill and there just wasn't any sick leave. If the weather was bad, the board called school off and they would call each other. There was no phone in the schoolhouse at that time so they did not want you and their children at school with a blizzard. If the weather was bad they would come and take everybody home.

Disbrow: Did you have any storm cellars or anything like that close by that you could go to in case of a tornado, maybe?

Mrs. Myers: No, we had a ditch over the hill. Since I had gone to this country school before I knew the lay of the land and we had a little cave down there that we had had and that's where we would head for would be down in that ravine.

We did more nature. The art was the outdoors and it was things that we would do with things. We would collect projects that way, more than drawing. We had some of that but not as extensive as the science projects.

Disbrow: What kind of materials did you have as far as an aid to your teaching profession? Now days you have a lot of master sheets and run-off sheets and things like that. What did you have then to help you out?

Mrs. Myers: Your own ingenuity. You usually or I made worksheets at night but you just had to make one for each child. And the enrollment was approximately eight, I would say eight to twelve in all five years that I taught. I couldn't tell you exactly but you just did according to what that child . . . and there were such a few students that you could have each one a different program going. If I wasn't available and the little ones wanted to read, well then, if somebody else had their lesson done, they listened to them read and I could do the other and also listen to them. So that sometimes they had an extra reading class.

Disbrow: How did you take a grade at . . . did you take a grade at a time to instruct them or did you take just a group of students like fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth graders? How did you--

Mrs. Myers: I did both. For the most part, like in reading if we were teaching . . . if I was teaching phonics,

or I was teaching some aspect that they, come concept that the rest of them, some of the older ones didn't know, I would group them all together and try to make a game out of it. I don't know, I had every class every day and you didn't have time to have over a ten or fifteen minute class. You really had to organize what you were doing in order to listen to all of those classes every day. And so, if there was something that somebody did really well in, I would let them work on it if there was just one student in that class. And then they wouldn't have to do maybe that class that day and they could to . . . they'd get rewarded by getting to do something different.

Disbrow: Did you follow lesson plans? Did you make up your own lesson plans and follow them then?

Mrs. Myers: Yes. A lot of teachers don't like to make lesson plans and I can't always follow what I make even today, but I like to plan what I am going to do and know about where I'm going to be and look at what I am doing so that I know if I have to leave something out--What do they know? What can I do that will get the basic things across?

Disbrow: At that time, was there any special age requirement in order to begin school?

Mrs. Myers: No. It began coming in and the reason I remember was my sister started when she was four. She graduated from high school when she was sixteen and I

when I was seventeen. I had a birthday before very long after but no there wasn't. We discouraged them from starting early. Most parents would then because of transportation and it was so cold and when I had gone to school in this district I had had to walk better than two miles every day and so when it was bad weather lots of times Dad would hitch up the spring wagon and take us and we were told to stay in the building until he came after us. But my uncle lived a half mile from school the other direction and so we could go there if it was bad weather. We could go there and stay at their home.

Disbrow: How long was your school day?

Mrs. Myers: We started at 9:00 in the morning and dismissed at 4:00 in the afternoon.

Disbrow: What kind of recess breaks did you have?

Mrs. Myers: Fifteen minutes in the morning at 10:00 and then we had a forty-minute noon unless the ballgame got too good and then it might be an hour, and then fifteen minutes in the afternoon.

Disbrow: How many months out of the year did you teach then?

Mrs. Myers: Eight.

Disbrow: Eight months for a school year?

Mrs. Myers: Eight months and I know my mother taught 1917-1918 at Crystal Plains and they had a four-month school year that year because the people got the flu and

it was . . . they only had four months of school and all of them at that time had six-months so . . . and then just after I quit teaching in the rural schools they had to go, I think, to nine-months in the rural schools because people felt their children weren't having a fair advantage.

Disbrow: At your school building there, did you have any facilities at all for restrooms?

Mrs. Myers: Yes, nice little outhouses. And, of course, at Halloweentime they were upset and so the ravine, one at a time, was the way you took care of that until the board got them upright which was usually one day. And they sent their catalogs to school for tissue, toilet tissue was unheard of. Now, that's ironic but it's true.

Disbrow: Are there any other special features that you can think of about the school buildings that you've taught in?

Mrs. Myers: All of them were about the same except Union Two. It did have a cloak room and I went there in 1940-1941 to teach and they had just started what is the school lunch program now. Do you know Stella Roush at Lebanon?

Disbrow: Sure do.

Mrs. Myers: Her husband was on the board and she would come over to Smith Center on the day that the truck or whatever came in and pick up commodities and I was expected not only to get the water, take care of the furnace, but

to have hot soup for those kids and teach all morning. I didn't ruin it too many times, but it was something else.

Disbrow: How did you get all that work done?

Mrs. Myers: We just learned to organize and get things done. I had just . . . must have had eight students there at that school.

Disbrow: Now, Union Two, what was that district's name, can you remember?

Mrs. Myers: That was it. They had started . . . that was after they started consolidating the school districts and it was always called Union Two. My mother had taught that district, too, in that district, also.

Disbrow: What time did you usually get to work in the morning?

Mrs. Myers: I always planned to be to work between 7:30 and 8:00 so that I was there to get the building warm and be there so that there wouldn't be any child standing outside.

Disbrow: And your day ended at what time?

Mrs. Myers: Probably all the way from 5:00 to 6:00.

Disbrow: Made a pretty long day, didn't it?

Mrs. Myers: Yes, it did. You usually had work to take home, too.

Disbrow: At the end of the day, what was some of the things that you would do?

Mrs. Myers: Oh, we would play cards after the chores were

done in the evening. I like to be out on a farm and so I always helped if I got home early enough to gather the eggs and do things and would help with the meal and setting the table and doing the dishes and that, and then we would play cards. The neighbors sometimes came over and played cards. At that time the radios were the big thing and if some of them would come over they would listen to the radio if their's was broken or something, but there were no radios in the schools or anything that way. Very few schools had telephones even at that time.

Disbrow: How did you handle discipline problems?

Mrs. Myers: Usually by appealing to the student: Is that what you really think we should do? I didn't have many discipline problems. If I needed to, most of them knew well enough with the rapport on the playground that I could crack down and be very firm with them.

Disbrow: Have you ever had to paddle any of your students at all at that time?

Mrs. Myers: Not until I came to Smith Center. Not until I came and had a big class and they had run a teacher out the year before and I didn't know it. I did, I had somebody watch me but I paddled.

Disbrow: Did you yourself set up some rules at the beginning of the school year for the students to follow?

Mrs. Myers: Usually, but they knew. Such as there weren't two of them going to the restroom at the same time

and they would sharpen their pencils in between time. If not, I had pencils on my desk and they knew that they could come and get one and use it. Just to not disturb the others and I let them speak as long as it was about work. If the little ones needed help and I was listening to someone else, I would let them ask and most of them knew. If they didn't know it, to say you'll have to ask the teacher. Discipline has never really bothered me much. I try to treat a student as I like to be treated, with respect, and generally speaking you get respect from most of them unless they have a real problem.

Disbrow: I believe you're right, I like that philosophy. Are there any special memories that you can share with me at all that you encountered while teaching in these one-room schoolhouses?

Mrs. Myers: Well, the first year I taught, of course, I was frightened to death when the County Superintendent was going to come and visit and I don't know whether my nervousness was transmitted somehow to the little first grader who wet her pants. She never ever did anything like that. Things like that. Then, book salesmen were about at that time also and one of them came and we were out at recess playing along when they came. And he wanted to know where the teacher was and I was standing right there and one of the boys pointed, but he thought I was one of the students. And it was . . . Oh, one time,

one of the boys . . . most of them did funny little things, one of the boys ran a trapline and on the way to school he was taking care of one of his traps and he had caught a skunk--

Disbrow: Oh, no!

Mrs. Myers: --and he had to sit in this double desk with a girl and everyone was pretty much gagging, the teacher, too. And so, I let him go home for the day, excused him for the rest of the day or until his folks could bring him back. He lived probably a little better than a mile, and as I recall, she gave him a good bath and he smelled like kerosene when he came back. So, I don't know which was worse.

Disbrow: Can you tell me a little bit about some of the special programs that you held out there at your schools?

Mrs. Myers: You mean like the . . .

Disbrow: Christmas programs. Was there a fall program and a spring program?

Mrs. Myers: There was always something at harvest time. It was usually a box supper and all the people in the community were really good, they would put on plays and pantomimes.

Disbrow: Could you tell me a little more about your box suppers?

Mrs. Myers: They would string a line across the front of the school and there was sort of a platform at the front,

then they had curtains. They would bring sheets or something like that, and they did pantomimes and plays. I remember one was when the lights went out and one of the boys upset something and the lights didn't go out. They had kerosene lamps. Nothing happened but I was frightened. But we had people in the community that played like the violin and music and they would come and play and then there was one member of the school board had a sale barn and he'd do the . . . he'd auctioneer the boxes off and lots of times they'd . . . even if you didn't have anything like that planned, they'd want to spell, have a spelling match or a ciphering match and really were proud of the fact that they could spell as well as they could and work math as quickly as they could.

Disbrow: Is that what your ciphering contest was?

Mrs. Myers: Yes, it was this math contest and most of those people did alot of mental arithmetic and that's why I learned to estimate like they did with some of this new math when I was a kid. My dad was a horsetrader. You had to be able to do some things like that and, I don't know, we just had a good time. There always was a Christmas program and they'd have their pieces and sing and that. I didn't play the organ so they sang with a record or something. It wasn't in very good working condition anyhow and there were people in the district that liked to do readings, Christmas readings, adults as

well and they were really very cooperative. The second district I taught in, they didn't have anything like that. They were close to town, so they didn't have that as much. Disbrow: Francis, can you tell me a little bit about the end of the year, when it's time to close up school?

Mrs. Myers: At the first country school I taught, they always had a basket dinner at the end of the year and everybody came. It was just a nice social gathering and then they stayed the afternoon and the men played ball, softball. They'd stand the kids and the women would sit around and watch. Then in the next one I went to, at the end of the year I took all of them fishing by myself in an old '37 Ford and we went down to Dentonia, down in there by Ionia. There was a lake right down there and they went fishing. We didn't catch very many fish but they had a wonderful time and good sunburns. Today I wouldn't dare take that many, they would go straying off over the country. No accidents in any of the three. That was very fortunate. No one ever broke an arm. We played ball and went on hikes and one thing I didn't tell you was . . . Doris Shields over at Lebanon? She taught Custer at the time that I was teaching Union Two and we tried always, about every month when the weather was nice enough, we tried to have ciphering match, math matches, spelling match and then the thing that I think, geography match. Those kids didn't get to go, a lot of them hadn't

been to Smith Center, but they knew about where places were in the world. You run up against somebody today, some of these kids don't know where Washington, D.C., is in respect to Washington state. They did know all around the world and that was something. Then we would have a ballgame. We would take a half day once a month and do that. That was really a fun time and the times where the students did have a good social learning experience. Over to Custer there was an Indian burial ground. When it would rain real hard, we might change our plans and go there and we might let them hunt for arrowheads for an hour. We had a terrific time, found some of those scrapers and various things like that. But we tried to utilize what was around us and do some things that would help them get along in their community.

Disbrow: Sounds like a lot of fun.

Mrs. Myers: It was! We had a good time.

Disbrow: Well, Francis, I would like to take a moment here to thank you for this interview. I've thoroughly enjoyed it and I'm sure this will help me a bunch.

Mrs. Myers: Thank you.

This interview is being taken with Mildred Lull on July 9, 1984. Mildred Lull presently lives in Smith Center, Kansas, and at one time taught in a one-room schoolhouse in Smith County, Kansas. Mildred, can I ask you what your present age is?