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Interview with Lois Ely Johnson

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Lois Ely Johnston

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Recommended Citation

Zook, Herbert D. and Johnston, Lois Ely, "Interview with Lois Ely Johnson" (1985). *College of Education One-Room Schoolhouse Oral Histories*. 55.
<https://scholars.fhsu.edu/ors/55>

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AN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

By HERBERT D. ZOOK

A Transcribed Interview
Prepared for Dr. Allan Miller
History of American Education
Education 700

HAYS KANSAS

Fort Hays State University

December 17, 1985

An Interview with
Lois Ely Johnston
Retired school teacher
McPherson and Harvey
counties, Kansas

This is an Interview with Lois Ely Johnston

Retired school teacher of McPherson and Harvey counties in Kansas

Lois would you describe the first school that you attended in Kansas?

"I went to a country school in McPherson county near Inman Kansas from the year 1917 - 1925 during this time we were in an old box type building, and then in my last year there in the 8th grade we moved to a new building which was quite modern for that time. Most of our fun times were games on the play ground. I especially remember one thing after 55 years. Our teacher would allow us to go out into the pasture and pick daisies during the recess and noon periods. We'd come in with tubs full of daisies. It was a rare experience to find a pink daisy."

Would you describe the curriculum the way you remember it at your school?

"As I remember we studied history, arithmetic, reading, writing, spelling, physiology, geography, art and music, and most of our study was just from text books. We did not have any other books to get materials from, so if we learned the material in the text books we were considered well taught."

Could you describe the play ground and the grounds around the school? How about the water supply?

"The water supply came from a well near the school house. During the warm weather (the warm part of the year) every one went to the well with their own tin cups and got their drinking water. In the winter months water was carried into the building in a big bucket and we all drank from the bucket."

What do you remember about your teachers. Were they lady teachers? Were they men teachers?

"As I recall I had three men teachers and five lady teachers and I can't remember a one of them that I did not love in this 8 years."

So you had several teachers then during that time?

"Right."

Was this typical? Did school teachers move on after they were there for a year?

"I can't answer that."

Tell us something about how the board was organized. Was it a district board that took care of the school or how did they do that?

"It was a district board. I can't remember how they were elected. But I'm sure they were elected by people from the district some way."

Alright, you were inspired somewhere during your experience as a student perhaps to later eventually move into the teaching profession. Did that come gradually or don't you think you were particularly inspired by your elementary school days in the one room elementary school?

"I'm sure I was inspired there too. I'm not sure when I made the decision to be a teacher. But some of those happy days of my elementary school days inspired me to be a teacher too. To inspire other students."

That is super. Can you tell us what years you taught?

"Yes I taught from 1930-1935. Then I stopped and was married and had a family of two daughters. I began teaching in 1950 again and taught until 1973."

Alright, could you tell us what the pay was in those teaching positions?

"In 1930 I started with \$85.00 a month. The next year I got \$90.00 a month and then I moved to another school and came down to \$85.00 a month - and then the depression was here and I taught two years of the time with \$75.00 a month."

Can you tell us what kind of training that you had; particular teacher training that you had for teaching?

"In 1929 and 30 I took at Hesston College, in the high school a course which was called "normal training." At the end of the year of 1930 I had to take a very stiff examination and pass it to get a certificate, and I passed it. The first year I taught right out of high school on a normal training certificate at the age of 18."

Do you remember how you started out when you began to teach, how you started your day off in the morning.

"Yes I faced my children, I hope with a smile, probably gave some interesting anecdotes, and then we settled down. I read the Bible, had prayer and flag salute and this continued all through my 28 years of teaching. There were some differences. Sometimes I read from a religious book or children repeated bible verses or similar things."

Can you tell what subjects you taught? Were they the same as what you had when you were a student in a one room school?

"They were the same subjects, just different names. When I went to school it was arithmetic but when I taught it was mathematics, ~~language and grammar was~~ english, geography was social studies. When I think about it there was industrial arts, drawing, and music, and art."

And these were in your teaching years in a one room school: Industrial arts, drawing, music, and art.

"The industrial arts was not a regular period. It was more of a one time a week to build simple things. It was not a type of Industrial Arts you find in high schools. Physiology was another subject we now call health or more just studying the parts of the body and that sort of thing. And history was U.S. history, I believe."

How did you get your pay checks?

"We drove to the president of the school board's home to pick them up. We also needed to buy our own materials with our own money, for school, then hand in a bill to the school board and they paid us when we picked up our checks."

And did you stay at your own home while you were teaching, or how did you do that?

"My first school which was north east of McPherson, 30 miles maybe, I stayed with

a swedish family. My second school I stayed at home with my parents and drove 6 miles to school in the mud!"

What kind of vehicle?

"It was a 1929 or 1930 four door Ford."

Can you say something about your text books at that time? Did you have state adopted text books or was this up to local board or how did you decide what your books were going to be?

"My first schools that I taught, I can't recall. The books were there and I used them these 5 years. We used them during hard times, they were there and I can't recall the names. The last school at Hesston the teachers chose the text books for the entire school. The elementary school I am talking about."

When you were teaching in one room school, you had all 8 grades is that right?

"All five years, all eight grades."

Did you have any leisure time as a young school teacher?

"I had no leisure time but I had great help in the older students to help with younger students. Another thing that would be interesting to put in here. In the German culture school I taught the first year there were six first graders and four of them couldn't speak english. I often wonder to myself how they learned to read, but they did. I had to have help from other students who could speak both languages."

Was there any hassle in the communities you taught about religious backgrounds. Was there any particular group that was dominating or was it pretty well balanced out?

"In the first school they were all swedish people, and they were all Lutheran or Lutheran types. Second school I taught was Holdeman (Mennonite) and German group and there might have been a little friction there. I can't recall anything to talk about."

Did the school house get used for anything besides school?

"I want to talk about the swedish school first it was used for PTA once a month. And I mean we had - - this was the community thing, social thing. The school would be packed every time! Then they would have supper or maybe just deserts. But such food you couldn't believe. This was once a month. Everybody turned out. There were two old bachelors in their 50's. They wouldn't miss it. They were the first ones there with the lanterns, to light the lanterns for me. Then we'd have christmas programs, we'd have programs on the last day. We'd go all out to decorate. I mean I don't know how we did it. They'd bring a christmas tree almost to the ceiling of the building and we put lighted candles on this thing! I shudder to this day ~~with~~ the building packed, and I remember the kids wanted to decorate the ceiling with snow, like it was snowing. They had this whole building and they worked out how to do this. They ran threads all around and pasted on balls of cotton and it looked just like it was snowing. Maybe you don't want this sort of thing?"

No thats good.

"The back of the stage was decorated with sheets tacked up. It was all homemade you know."

So you did have activities with children and parents together, right? Were children there?

"Yes we didn't talk children problems. We had a program of some sort and then each time visiting and just a social time."

What age did most of the children begin school?

"Well I think six was what we were supposed to be. They didn't keep you out like they do now. I started when I was five. I wasn't six until the next February but I always felt it was wrong for anyone to do."

To get in too early?

"We always talked against it. Even when I was teaching."

Did you have a 180 day school year like now?

"We had eight months. I don't remember the days. We had eight months. And it started the day at nine and went to four with an hour noon, and I don't know how long - when the ball game was finished we went in."

You were out by May.

"Right."

How did you spend your summers as a young teacher?

"Alright I had this normal training certificate and I had to get nine hours of college every two years. So I had to go to college, and you look back at the wages." So you had to take a few years to save up to go to school?

"I would always have to borrow money to go to college because I had to help my parents too. And I'd always try to make it up the next year and the following year. And I finally made it up by the time I got married in 1935."

The school you taught in, you mentioned was in the Swedish part of McPherson county."

At this school was it open only to taxpayers children or was it open to everybody?

"I think it was (open to everybody) there were schools every two miles and each district would take their own children. I don't know how far the taxpayer would pay for a particular school or if they took care of all of them. I don't know how that was done. But I'm sure all of this came from taxes. I don't know if Prairie Queen (school) taxes just paid theirs or how that was done."

These communities were fairly stable communities or were these people coming and going all the time? How was that?

"Farmers."

Do you have any idea of the rules they handed you as a young teacher?

"They did not."

They trusted you?

"I only saw two school boards. I had applied for thirty schools, before the school board meetings. I didn't get one of them. I was very discouraged. I was here at Hesston Academy and I got a call from the

county superintendent, she said "I have a school that will hire you. But you'll have to go up there today." I was in school down here at Hesston. Your grandmother, drove me up there, and I only could see two of the school board members. And those two hired me just like that. Then after school started the other school board member: said it was just like buying a pig in a sack when I hired you."

(laughing) "Is that what you wanted?"

That's what I asked. Did you teach several years at one place or how did that work?

"OK, I taught two years at the Swedish school. then I moved to the Inman German school and taught there three years, then I got married."

Am I correct that the Swedish people were in the North part of county. And the German people settled in the Southern part?

"Right"

Tell us how often you met with the school board?

"Never"

You never saw them?

"Only at these meetings they'd casually talk to me about how things were going. Maybe one would drop in and see how things were going. It was very easy to teach them on discipline because kids - I don't know if it was because you were younger or I don't know why, but kids they weren't ~~problems~~."

When you were teaching did you have any problems with the buildings? What kind of heating did you have?

"In this first school the Swedish school I had a basement. It had a furnace, and coal room right there. All I had to do was scoop it in. And I would bank it at night. Then in the morning we didn't have anything to turn up. We just stirred it a little and it would start burning. I did all my own janitor work these five years, in these schools. There was no janitor."

You bought the supplies? Worked all the schedules?

"You worked with PTA. Got all the programs with the PTA you got all the Christmas program and last day program, anything else they wanted you to do with the children."

Do you have any recollection when the school houses were built?

"Can't answer that. I don't know where the buildings went. I have a feeling that the box type schools were torn down. But the others were moved off the property for someone to use for a home. I don't know that for sure."

But the buildings are no longer in existence?

"They might be in existence but they're not on the property where they were originally."

Did you ever teach in a one room school that had a principal?

"No."

You were a single teacher. You were the principal and the teacher?

"Right."

So you didn't work in schools where two teachers taught in the same building?

"Not until I came to Hesston in 1950. You're talking about schools back there, one room schools, then when I came to Hesston there were four teachers."

But you didn't have electric lights then in the first two schools where you taught.

"When our programs were at night they would bring in these old mantle, gas type, lamps they had a place where they could hang all these. The building had good light."

Excellent lighting?

"Yes."

You were using coal to heat both of these schools?

"Now this box type had a place in the back where the coal was put in. It had a little door in front that I could open up. But I'd have to scoop the coal over into that place, or somebody had to. The stove was a round jacket type thing in the corner of the school at the German school."

Can you describe your teaching methods in these single room schools??

"Alright we'll start with first grade. I thought about this but it's kinda hazy

because it's been so long ago but I think I used the word method with pictures. And then after four weeks we begin to break words down into alphabet and then phonetics after that. Then as I recall there was a period when they did not teach phonetics as a subject. These 28 years I used phonetics."

You believe in phonetics?

"I didn't believe in phonetics as a single thing but you can't get away from phonetics if children are going to learn to read and spell properly. Now I know there will be teachers who don't agree with me but that's my philosophy."

Did you ever hear of the object method of teaching from Oswego, New York?

"Can you explain it to me? Do you mean using objects to learn to read?"

No this was one thing that came out of Oswego, New York and I wondered whether or not it became popular in the plains states.

"Of all the schooling I took after 1950 I never heard anything about it."

Can you tell us how you worked with each grade. Did you work with each grade separately? Did you call them up for recitation, or how did that work?

"Those first five years I called them up for recitation I can't recall the minutes spent. (with each group). You just worked it in whatever time you had. You can imagine it was an advantage with eight grades. The sharp students learn from others. They're learning more than what's taught in their grade."

Because of repetition? Their listening, their hearing? The younger classes are hearing the older ones then and when they get to the lessons a couple of years later they can sort of recall those lessons?

"Right, I think it helped the older students to help the younger students."

Do you remember any teaching aids. Besides cards?

"Pictures and math cards, addition, subtraction, anything but most of the things we had to make. To my recollection we couldn't buy these things-you made your own

charts, picture math cards, phonetics and spelling aids".

When you taught in these schools what was the one room system of evaluation? Did you use letter grades or did you use number grades or how did you grade these children?

"I know how I was graded. Percentage, 96-97-98. Which I probably did too. I can't recall exactly what I did. But I know I was graded by percentage."

Did you have a report card?

"There was all the time that I taught, but I can't recall about myself. I'm sure there must have been some reporting, but when I think back to those days of teaching I think how sad that we didn't have some supplementary books and things. But the children just learned what was in that text book. And took a test over that. If they passed it, they passed it! And isn't that sad?"

Did you have a library?

"An encyclopedias and dictionary. No story books. You know, I just can't believe this. When I developed my teaching on thru the years. I can't believe what we did without back then."

But you got the job done?

"I hope."

I'm going to ask you a question about your curriculum. Can you say anymore about that curriculum in those one room schools, and how did it change over the years?

Do you have any recollection of that?

"In the one room school each subject was just a separate subject. You didn't correlate it with another subject you just taught spelling, arithmetic, reading and in later years as I developed my teaching methods I correlated subjects."

Do you remember anything about how you took care of the discipline problems in your schools? Would you care to say anything about that?

"For the very minor discipline problems, the children were requested to stay in

during recess or maybe copy something. As I think of it now that was not good punishment. Well children just weren't as bad. I really never had any bad discipline problems, except in the German school there were several big boys who were just going to run me out of the building and I really had to whip two boys and I'm not proud of it. I really wish I could have handled it differently but after this happened we had order. And this might interest you the last boy that got the whipping the one who biffed me in the shoulder's was the school boards son. And I went to his home and told him about this and the school board didn't like this very well. Of course nothing could be done about it. But I felt it was either me or him."

Understandable.

"And so I had a better school after those whippings right in the class room, right in front of the children, which I would not say is the proper way to do it now. But I had a better class room after this."

You mentioned there were times when you had activities at school and that you taught both in a German and Swedish communities . Can you point out how you handled the traditions at christmas or other times or any other thing that would be interesting to us?

"I can't remember that my christmas programs were any different from one school to another. Usually we just have the same dialogues, songs or whatever. I think the Swedish people were a little more sociable among themselves than maybe the Germans were; however; when I came to this german school I also organized a PTA at this German school. We also had PTA once a month just like at the Swedish schools and they had no basement and they brought there pies and coffee and we just sat around on the floor or where ever and ate just like at the other school. So I felt I did the second school some good or helped them to be sociable to each other.*

Beside the educational process with the children. What were the real problems that you had to face as a teacher?

"Well like in the German school I had very much problem. They wanted to speak their language which I didn't understand, and I guess it was close enough to one of the wars (I can't remember which one) that we were not to speak the German language. So I tried to keep them from doing this and this became quite a problem. The children wanted to speak their own language and I didn't know what they were saying then. This was more on the school ground, it wasn't in the building during school hours, during recess and noon. I felt sometimes they were not saying good things."

I understand, do you remember the names of schools?

"Yes"

The first one where you taught, what was it?

"Prairie Queen" that was New Gottland area eight miles North East of McPherson."

How about the other schools, was it near Inman?

"I'd say six miles from Inman, "Clark school" North West of Inman".

Did you have a district number?

"Prairie Queen was #110 but I can't recall Clarks."

That's fine, Was the name! Prairie Queen given to the first school other than just a man's name, apparently they thought about it quite a bit and they came up with a name for their school.

"I just don't know I can't talk about that, I just have no idea."

Do you know of any remodeling that went on during your time of teaching?

"In this first school it didn't need any remodeling. It was practically a new building."

And you started in "1930", so you didn't really see alot of physical changes than in

those buildings while you were teaching.

"Nothing" I'm not sure there was a piano in the German school. I'm not sure whether it was in when I came or not."

As a teacher did you have any rules about how to use the well, how to get a drink or how not to get a drink. You had a bucket in the building.

"And it had a dipper in it! They could pour into their cups!"

But they were not supposed to drink out of the dipper.

"But even so when you think of that you couldn't do that now. That was the only thing there was to do."

Certainly.

"There was one thing when I was at the German school, there was a little boy that lived two miles from school. I had no telephone. I had my car there and he had an accident with his clothes that day. And there was no way he could stay there. What was I to do, he was in such bad shape, so I just put papers on the seat, things on the seat, and left the school in charge of a big boy I could trust. And took this boy home two miles. I - and after that I reported this to the school board, and I said I must have a telephone, and so they put a telephone in."

Well that was an improvement.

"It surely doesn't sound like much of an improvement today, but what was I to do?"

What kind of records did you have to keep, did you have a county superintendent?

"We had a county superintendent and we had to, I don't think until the end of the year, give the students grades, records and their passing, etc. Now the graduation from both of these schools was held at this McPherson May Day. Even when I graduated the graduates walked in the parade - and so the eighth grade including these two schools graduated. That's the way they graduated at McPherson."

Was enrollment stable or did you have high and low times for enrollment?

"The least I had was 18, the first year. and 14 the next year and 27 the next and

24 the next. 27 at this German school, not below 20 at this German school."

And all right grades.

"The county superintendent would come out once or twice a year and slip in and visit your class room."

So you could never tell when the county superintendent was coming?

"No, I had a very embarrassing moment one time she came, Miss Lovet was her name. She was sitting in the back of my class room and we had been warned about agents coming. We should not let an agent come in. So while she was there there was a knock at my room door and he wanted to come in. And I said no I wasn't interested and he just insisted he come in and he came in. And she slipped up to my desk and said, that's the fire inspector." (laughing)

So you did have a fire inspector. Was this county or State?

"I think it was county. You see we weren't to let anyone in and he didn't tell me who he was. He just came in."

What kind of graduation exercises did you have at your one room school?

"We didn't."

You didn't have any?

"We just went to McPherson and that was something else now. There were all the tests, for all subjects, and we could review all these back tests with the kids. And we could have them and review with the eighth grade kids. And if they learned all that they would pass."

But you think it was still just a rote memory kind of thing?

"Right, Right, and at the last school I had, I had a bunch of boys and they were kinda bad. And I said if you boys all pass I'll take you for an airplane ride, on May day. And they all passed! (laughing) and we went up in an open plane and it began to miss up there. And I didn't think about being responsible for kids getting killed."

(laughing) And this plane began to miss and didn't sound too good to me, but we made it back down."

Were there any controversies surrounding the schools that you taught at? ~~Anything~~ in particular outside of the German language problem? The German people wanted to speak their own language and you wouldn't let them in the school but on the play ground they did apparently.

"Yes"

So they could communicate with each other and you didn't know what was going on. Was that the problem. "

"Well I felt that way. Another discipline problem I had these Holdeman (Mennonite) boys, they were big boys and one morning before school I heard a commotion out on the play ground and there were seventeen boys in the outhouse. Anyway, there were seventeen boys in the outhouse and I went out and they were really raising cane and kicking the sides out. And I said to myself what do I do? So I said you boys come out of there. And they didn't. So I said if you don't come out of there, I'm coming in. And the biggest one came first. And they walked just like Indians into the classroom and sat down in their seats. Those were the kinds of problems you had in those days."

That certainly sounds normal. You feel then that the schools made good contributions to the community during that time? Do you have any ideas about your students where they are now? Did any of them become famous people?

"I've been trying to think of that today and I'm sure many of them were teachers I don't know, I think there is a doctor, and some nurses. I'm not sure if there are any ministers. A number of them have passed away. In fact just this week a girl 36 years old had died. It's hard to keep track of them."

But the school houses are both gone today?

"Yes"

And eventually you moved on to a small city school.

"Right"

When you moved to that school what were the changes you had to deal with there?

"The first few years my methods were similar but with having only one grade you would have to group according to ability. You didn't have separate sides but you grouped them. You taught them more individually."

Do you have any idea how many of your grade school students went on to high school? were they all required to go to high school?

"Well I don't know how many - the Holdemans I'm sure didn't. I don't know how many, I can't recall. The first two schools I'm not sure about. I'm sure most of my Hesston students did. See, when I left my first few years of teaching I moved away to Missouri for thirteen years. I was gone thirteen years right after I was married. So - some in awhile in McPherson I run on to some of those old students and they know me but I don't really know them until they tell me and that's really a thrill."

Describe the people on the school board - were they always farmers?

"You mean the first few years?"

Yes

"They were all farmers."

If you were to say something about the rules you set up, the rules or standards you set up for your students.

"I can talk about the rules of my Hesston years. I usually started out with the golden rule on the black board and the students and I made the rules and I wrote them down on the black board so they could see them."

Highly democratic.

"And so your rules. That was my philosophy after years of teaching that I felt my discipline was better. I mean it was more like the books teach us to do it."

Would you mind telling us something about other activities in school including the penmanship you taught.

"When I went to school we were taught the method of making circles and inner-circles, up and down, and I feel I am a good writer having been taught by that method and I taught that method myself the first five years of teaching. But I felt for myself that it was a good method.

(Note) End of tape - Side #1

How did you handle spelling?

"When I was teaching spelling we just had a list of words that we had to learn weekly. But there were many spelling bees held between schools at different places and they were held at night. So we had to drive to the different schools at night. And we were lined up on both sides of the class room at the place where we met. Then the words were pronounced and the last one up was the winner. Occasionally I was the second one left. But I never got first place." (laughing)

Do you recall about music contests, did you have anything like that?

"These music contests were also county wide and they were usually held on a Saturday at different schools. Sometimes they were carried on at a small town school so there was more room. The contest would be girl solos, boy solos, duets, piano solos etc. And prizes were given for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd places. I believe they were just ribbons, not prizes."

Was your school involved in sports in anyway?

"I can recall that we played games with other schools, but we had many sports of our own. I believe we even had basketball goals and the children played basketball. But they had to play on just dirt."

There was no cement court?

"No court just dirt. But much baseball was played. That was the main sport and much baseball was played in the schools where I taught."

If you had it to do over again, would you chose teaching as a career?

"Yes I would. I would erase some of the mistakes I made. And I, after being more educated after 1950, I most certainly would have helped those children in former years more and I regret some of the things in the discipline areas?"

But the things you remember mostly are pleasant?

"The things I remember mostly are pleasant and I want to state that I enjoyed both schools of those early years very much, and I loved the people at each place, for what they were and what they tried to become, while I was there."

I am sure your efforts were very much appreciated in those communities. And I want to thank you for this interview.

Interview by Herbert D. Zook - 1985