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Interview with Agnes Hennes

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Recommended Citation

Ottley, David; Hake, Gary; and Hennes, Agnes, "Interview with Agnes Hennes" (1988). *College of Education One-Room Schoolhouse Oral Histories*. 93.

<https://scholars.fhsu.edu/ors/93>

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CHAPTER 2
ORAL HISTORY

Gery: What is your age?

Mrs. Hennes: Eighty-two.

Gery: Where did you go to grade school?

Mrs. Hennes: At a little corner school that was built on our farm. It was a little parochial school.

Gery: Where did you go to high school?

Mrs. Hennes: At Tipton High School. That was the first year that Tipton opened up their high school. I attended as a freshman.

Gery: Did you go to college?

Mrs. Hennes: No.

Gery: How many years have you taught?

Mrs. Hennes: Five.

Gery: Can you tell me the names of the schools at which you taught?

Mrs. Hennes: The first was Free Will and it was in Osborne county. It was way out in the country, out in the prairie. Fact of the matter is, by running down in the pasture about a mile and a half or two we'd find a stone that said geographic center of the United States. I know they've taken that many times and never come back out there again, because islands have

been added, Alaska has been added, and the center has moved and I don't even know where. I wish I could remember the year that was written on there. I can't recall.

Gery: What subjects were studied in the schools where you taught?

Mrs. Hennes: At that time I was supposed to teach any grades from one to eight. I had a pair of twins in the first grade, a little boy and girl. I also had an eighth grader that had failed the year before. She didn't pass her examination. Her mother wanted me to give her extra time and I did. I really worked with her and she passed the year I taught her. She went on herself to be a teacher and she taught many years after that.

Gery: Did you teach subjects like math and reading?

Mrs. Hennes: We had spelling, reading, writing, geography, arithmetic, United States History, Kansas History, and some elements of agriculture and hygiene.

Gery: How long was the school day?

Mrs. Hennes: Nine to four and I think I taught 120 days in a term.

Gery: Was it always the same in all the years that you taught?

Mrs. Hennes: Yes, that was just regular for teachers.

Gery: Can you tell us what teaching methods you used?

Mrs. Hennes: We didn't know the types that you have today. I didn't get any manual teacher training. I was supposed to attend one week of manual training, which was given at the county seat. I went to the city of Osborne, which was the

county seat, and for that week I took manual teacher training. That is all the training I had. Otherwise, I was on my own.

Gery: Were there any special classes for the learning disabled or special education students?

Mrs. Hennes: No, we never had anything like that. We had equipment for kids to play on and we kind of made up games. We didn't have much use for the hardball or anything like that.

Gery: Can you describe how a typical school day went?

Mrs. Hennes: In the mornings the children were bright. So I tried to teach them their reading and arithmetic, because I thought both were very important. I would save the lesser subjects for later on in the day. The little ones in the first grade, they got tired with the hours. From nine to twelve and from one to four that was six hours. For them that was a lot. Even while I was teaching the big ones they were still in school. I would try to get them to have a picture they could draw or something they could do on their own.

Gery: Were there any kind of competency test to advance students to the following grade?

Mrs. Hennes: No, we went by what I thought they knew. Testing and reciting is all I had to go on.

Gery: Did any of the schools you taught at have a library?

Mrs. Hennes: They had a few books and a big dictionary usually but not a real library.

Gery: How did you decide on your textbooks, and where did they come from?

Mrs. Hennes: I made them up.

Gery: Were there any that the state recommended you use? Such as a math book.

Mrs. Hennes: They did send some out. What they would send we had as textbooks.

Gery: How was the atmosphere of the educational program?

Mrs. Hennes: It was loose.

Gery: Can you think of any rules that were different than they might be today?

Mrs. Hennes: They wouldn't ask the smaller child to stay in school that many hours. One grade was treated like the other grade. They got the same treatment as the other grade.

Gery: What were some of the special observances of the school?

Mrs. Hennes: We had a few days of break for Christmas and we would get a little time at Easter. That's all I can remember.

Gery: Did you have any special programs like a Christmas program, a spelling bee, or a music program?

Mrs. Hennes: We tried to put on a little program for the community at one time, but I can't remember what school it was.

Gery: Did any of the schools you taught at have graduation exercises for the eighth grade when they graduated?

Mrs. Hennes: No.

Gery: Can you describe for me what you did on a typical day before and after school to get ready for the next day?

Mrs. Hennes: I would write things on the blackboard that would help one class or another. Maybe for the little first graders I

would write a few addition problems. They would have time to go up and figure those out. I really tried to teach them things.

Gery: What about putting wood in the stove and things such as that?

Mrs. Hennes: The second school that I worked at was a modern brick building and it had a furnace. So I had to stoke the furnace in the morning to get it started. Then I had an older student, which was my nephew, and he would go and do that for me.

Gery: How were teachers expected to conduct themselves in the community? Were there morals that they had to upkeep?

Mrs. Hennes: Yes, we always tried to be as good as the average at least.

Gery: Were you in charge of any extracurricular activities?

Mrs. Hennes: No.

Gery: Was there a problem with teacher turnover? I notice you went to three different schools in five years.

Mrs. Hennes: The new students were always a challenge. Can I tell about an incident?

Gery: Sure.

Mrs. Hennes: I was at the blackboard writing out problems when a spitball hit me in the back. I turned around and said, 'Frank, did you do that?' 'Yes.' 'Well, why did you do that?' 'Because that other student bet me fifteen cents I was afraid to do it.' So little things like that happened and it made your day happy.

Gery: Did more than one teacher ever work in the school?

Mrs. Hennes: No.

Gery: Was there a principal for the school?

Mrs. Hennes: Yes, there was a principal that lived in the county and he would come around and visit your school. He never said what day he was coming.

Gery: How did they evaluate you?

Mrs. Hennes: Well, I think the community did. They always watched what the teacher did. The teacher was a special person in the community. Sometimes we were invited out for supper.

Gery: How were the discipline problems handled? Like the spitball incident, how did you handle it?

Mrs. Hennes: With a little laughing. I didn't take it as an insult, and no one else did either.

Gery: Were there any other discipline problems?

Mrs. Hennes: I didn't have many problems until the last school that I taught at. I didn't have much problem at the other schools, but I did at the last school.

Gery: How did you handle the problems when they came up?

Mrs. Hennes: I don't know. I think that is one thing that kind of burned me out about teaching. You had so many and then get a wild one. It doesn't work very good.

Gery: Were the parents involved when there was a problem?

Mrs. Hennes: Yes, if a student wasn't doing very good I would contact the parents. I did once with a boy who was having arithmetic problems. He really wasn't having that much problem,

but he thought that problem was so hard. He thought, I can't learn all that, I'm just too dumb. He needed something to boost him. I told his dad and that was probably the wrong thing to do. I think his dad was too harsh with him. At least we didn't have any more problems. I thought I would never tell a dad again.

Gery: Where did you live while you were teaching at these schools?

Mrs. Hennes: The second school I lived at home. I had about two miles to walk.

Gery: What about the first school?

Mrs. Hennes: The first one I lived with people that would let me.

Gery: And the same with the third school, you lived with people in the area?

Mrs. Hennes: I really lived with my brother. I lived with him for two years.

Gery: How much schooling did you have in order to teach?

Mrs. Hennes: A graduation from high school. Then I took some exams. Normal training examinations and I had to pass those. I have three teacher certificates that I earned. First, I took the examinations and some of the grades that weren't high enough then I took those over another year. So I worked until I got a good standard grade out of each one. Then I got a first grade certificate and that meant I could teach. First I got a third grade certificate, but that was only good for six months. So I

was working all the time while I was going to school studying to improve my grades. They gave these normal training examinations in all the county seats at certain times. I went to Osborne county one time or if it was more convenient to Mitchell. I think I even went to Russell one time. Until I got my grades to average and I got a first grade certificate.

Gery: Tell me a little about the schoolhouse. When was it built and by whom?

Mrs. Hennes: I didn't find much about that. But they were just wood framed buildings, not too elaborate. Except for this one that I told you was brick. That was a nicer school. It was warmer, and it had an entrance area you could close first. So they could leave their boots and things there and then go into the schoolroom. It stayed warmer that way without having an outside door open. Their water supply was from a cistern along side the building. The kids all drank out of a bucket of water that was brought into the school. They each had their dip cup and they would dip it in and drink from it. I don't think it made much difference if they used their own cup.

Gery: Were the schools that you taught at public schools?

Mrs. Hennes: Yes.

Gery: What type of heating, lighting, and toilets were available?

Mrs. Hennes: Of course they were outside toilets. The brick building had electric lights. The other ones didn't.

Gery: What did the other ones have?

Mrs. Hennes: We never used any lights except for the windows. We had little old-fashioned lamps in holders by each window so when you had a program or something when a bunch of people came to the school in the evenings they could use them. I never did use them.

Gery: What were the school names, and did they have any significance?

Mrs. Hennes: The first one I taught at was the Free Will School. The second one was Hillside, and the third one was Fair View. That's the one we're going out to see. It's not very far from here. The last one was Sunflower. Where they got these names I don't know. I suppose the people living there when the districts were started thought up the names.

Gery: Can you describe the interior of these schools?

Mrs. Hennes: Plain wooden interiors. Most of them had two blackboards attached to the wall in the front of the building. There wasn't much, the stove was always closest to the door. Sometimes I would try to start the fire as early as I could to get it warm in there. If the kids were still too cold by nine o'clock they stood by the stove and maybe held their books.

Gery: Who was in charge of the upkeep of the building?

Mrs. Hennes: There were three men from the community, of the school district that were called upon. If I needed some coal or supplies I'd go ask them if they would get it for me. They were usually always real cooperative. Or if something failed to work I could ask them. The stove pipe came down in one school, it

was a mess. They came and fixed it up.

Gery: What were some of the physical problems of the school building?

Mrs. Hennes: According to modern standards our buildings would have been outlawed. The children came in to wash their hands in a little pan. They all washed in the same pan. Then we would take the pan of water and throw it out the door and get another. It wasn't too good.

Gery: What happened to the schoolhouses? Were they torn down?

Mrs. Hennes: They were torn down, fell down, or sold off. That was up to the district.

Gery: Do you know what happened to the equipment in the schools when they were torn down?

Mrs. Hennes: I think they had an auction. Some of them did. The one that we are going out to see was sold to the 4-H. They used it for many years. Then it was just going bad. No one seemed to keep it up. I guess the 4-H didn't have much money to do that with. They just left it go.

Gery: What was the usual age a child began school?

Mrs. Hennes: Six years.

Gery: Did it vary at all?

Mrs. Hennes: No.

Gery: Did many children move in and out of the school during the year?

Mrs. Hennes: A few but not many. Not many that I had at least.

Gery: What was the greatest distance traveled by any student?

Mrs. Hennes: Oh, I imagine about two miles or two and a half.

Gery: How did they get to and from school?

Mrs. Hennes: Their own power of walking. They brought their lunches.

Gery: Approximately how many students did you have in your schools?

Mrs. Hennes: Well, I'd say I started with twelve and ended with twenty. But can I tell you about the twenty students?

Gery: Yes, that would be fine.

Mrs. Hennes: I had all eight grades. That made a lot of classes. You had to write it all out. You didn't have but two or three minutes for each class. That was no good. I had to try and combine some of that together. Seventh and eighth were a little bit together. Otherwise I couldn't do any good to either class.

Gery: Did you teach all eight grades?

Mrs. Hennes: Yes.

Gery: What type of occupations did the students usually take up once they graduated?

Mrs. Hennes: Probably just went on to be some old plain farmers. Like I said this one girl went on to be a teacher, and she did teach for a good number of years. I don't really know too much about what the other ones did.

Gery: Did many students go on to college?

Mrs. Hennes: Among the grades that I taught, I don't think too many of them went on to college. College is a lot more popular

now.

Gery: Did the students of the schools that you taught at come from a particular cultural or heritage background?

Mrs. Hennes: I had all nationalities. Most of the people were Germans or English. There wasn't too much of anything else.

Gery: What was the average number of years a student spent in school?

Mrs. Hennes: Eight years.

Gery: Were they required to go to school eight years?

Mrs. Hennes: It was thought most of the parents wanted their children to have an eighth grade education. They wanted them to go that far. Of what I taught most of them graduated.

Gery: Was there a state requirement for the length of time they had to go to school?

Mrs. Hennes: No. I think there was an age, but I don't remember whether that was sixteen or what it was. I can't remember for sure.

Gery: What was the dress and the overall appearance of the students? How did they dress when they came to school?

Mrs. Hennes: They were usually always dressed pretty good for those days. All the kids wore hand made clothes. The girls' dresses and the boys' shirts were a lot of times hand made. No one thought of buying a ready made dress; that was out. I remember I always enjoyed the first day of school because everyone was wearing a brand new dress or new overalls. I could smell that fabric like you were going right into a dress shop.

I could smell that fabric all day long. It smelled like that until their clothes got washed. The girls, you never saw any bare skin. Their legs were covered. They were dressed different than they are now. Their dresses were longer. But they had a good time.

Gery: What was the cost of education to the students or his family?

Mrs. Hennes: They didn't buy too many books, and they weren't as expensive as today. Back in those days that expense put them back a little bit too.

Gery: Can you tell me approximately how much it would cost a family to send a child through school?

Mrs. Hennes: I wouldn't know how to figure that.

Gery: Why were the schools built?

Mrs. Hennes: People want their children to learn. People living on these farms couldn't take their children to town schools. They thought that their children should have an education. They should learn to read and write. Reading, writing, and arithmetic were very important to them. So they got together and decided they would build the schools themselves, hire a teacher, and their children could go there.

Some of the districts were very much interested in their schools. Fair View was interested in their schools. I have a picture here of the Fair View School. That's the last day of school. Even the people that didn't have any children in school would come on the last day to help the teacher celebrate.

Gery: What were the boundaries of the schools?

Mrs. Hennes: I imagine about three miles either way.

Gery: Is that how it was decided who would go to school there?

Mrs. Hennes: By the people living in that district. Sometimes I had a family move in that helped a farmer and maybe they had children that went to school there.

Gery: Was the schoolhouse used for community social activities?

Mrs. Hennes: They had farmer union meetings and they would have a little social, maybe a box supper. When I was a little girl I loved to go to ciphering matches. But that didn't carry on that long.

Gery: What were some of the traditions peculiar to your school? Was there any tradition that you can think of?

Mrs. Hennes: We were pretty proud of our schools.

Gery: Was there a school board for your school?

Mrs. Hennes: Oh yes, the school board paid me my check. If I needed something extra, like a box of chalk, I asked the school board.

Gery: Can you remember any of the school board members' names?

Mrs. Hennes: At Fair View there was the Hartmans. The Hartmans were very popular in the work of the school. They were willing to give me what I asked for if I thought it was for the betterment of the school.

Gery: Did any of the schools have organizations like PTA?

Mrs. Hennes: No.

Gery: Who hired and fired the teachers?

Mrs. Hennes: The school board.

Gery: Did anyone else have any input?

Mrs. Hennes: Oh, I suppose if someone didn't like us they would probably go talk to the school board. But to me that didn't show up.

Gery: Did any activities take place between schools?

Mrs. Hennes: Usually at the end of the year we had a little bit of athletics. Some of the students would get together and make a twenty yard dash. There would be certain grades in that. There was a little competition like that but not much.

Gery: Are there any controversies surrounding any of the schools that you taught at?

Mrs. Hennes: I don't think so.

Gery: Why did the schools close?

Mrs. Hennes: I think for the lack of students. They were all big families. So many of the farmers went together. One farmer would have 160 acres and another farmer would have 160 acres, but one farmer would farm it all and the other would have to move on. So it was just lack of students I would say.

Gery: Is there anything else you would like to add about the school district or the community?

Mrs. Hennes: In the last school I taught in, where I had all those students, I couldn't do justice to the students. Time was too short. I tried to do my best, but I know I failed them a little bit. Not that I wanted to, there just wasn't time.

Gery: Was the land purchased or given to the school?

Mrs. Hennes: I think it was given to the schools for as long as the school was on that spot. If the school got moved or burned down maybe they rebuilt it, maybe they didn't. It just depended what they wanted to do.

Gery: Where did the funds for the construction of the school come from?

Mrs. Hennes: I just imagine from the people around in the district. From their taxes. It didn't come out of their pockets, but it came from farm taxation and so much property.

Gery: How much did it cost for a student to enroll in the schools?

Mrs. Hennes: There was no charge.

Gery: What was your salary when you started teaching?

Mrs. Hennes: I started at \$72.50, and I ended at \$90 a month.

Gery: How was your salary determined?

Mrs. Hennes: I would ask for a certain salary. Maybe they didn't want to give me that much. So they cut me down. We would have to agree.

Gery: Was it between you and the school board?

Mrs. Hennes: Yes, it was between me and the school board. I suppose other people in the district had talked to the school board and knew how much they wanted to pay. Because the land would be taxed accordingly so they could get that salary.

Gery: You did have a voice in your salary. You could make them an offer.

Mrs. Hennes: If I didn't want to teach for that I could turn

them down. Once I signed a contract that was my salary.

Gery: How did you get your pay checks?

Mrs. Hennes: Through the board. One of the board members usually gave it to me.

Gery: Would you like to describe a little about each school or tell me something about each of them? Is there something else you would like to add?

Mrs. Hennes: I think I already told you that as we went along. The last school was the hardest school, because I did have a couple of boys that were very disruptive. They talked a lot and were trouble makers. When you were teaching the rest of your classes they were problems.

Gery: That's nice. Thank you for your interview. Maybe we can go out and look at the school.