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### Interview with Dorothy Diehl Chambers

Betty Jean Baus

*Fort Hays State University*

Dorothy Diehl Chambers

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## CHAPTER II

## ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH DOROTHY DIEHL CHAMBERS

BAUS: I am Betty Jean Baus, and I am conducting an oral history interview with Dorothy Diehl Chambers, who taught five years in a rural one-room schoohouse. This interview is taking place on June 16, 1989, in the home of Dorothy Diehl Chambers in McCook, Nebraska. Dorothy, would you give me some background information on yourself?

CHAMBERS: I certainly would. My name is Dorothy Diehl, and I married Chambers. I am seventy-seven. I attended eight years of grade school, four of high school, and I have four years of college. I taught from 1929 to 1940. I was a substitute from 1940 to 1944. After I married and went to the country, I tutored the youngsters that were neighbors. I taught at rural Walnut Grove, District 57, for those first five years. I then went to Oberlin City School at Oberlin, Kansas.

BAUS: What subjects were studied at you school?

CHAMBERS: The subjects covered were arithmetic, English, reading, writing, art, history, grammar, geography, and spelling.

BAUS: What was the length of the school day and year?

CHAMBERS: The school day began about 7:30 A.M. Sometimes I went earlier. I would never leave before 5:30 P.M. It was an eight month rural school--nine months in town.

BAUS: Did this change any, while you were teaching there?

CHAMBERS: No, I don't think so, not particularly.

BAUS: What teaching methods were used?

CHAMBERS: Well, in normal-training class, I took methods and management, and then I had practice teaching at Fort Hays State. We received our methods there. At that time, very little phonics was being stressed. However, I always taught phonics to the children.

BAUS: What teaching aids were made available to you?

CHAMBERS: There were all kinds of teaching aids available. The county superintendent always had an institute before school started in the fall. There, we received many teaching aids. There were all kinds of material in her office that we could check out. We had plenty of teaching materials available.

BAUS: Were there any classes or unique educational services offered? Today we have special education, LD, and Title reading programs. Did you have anything

of this sort?

CHAMBERS: No, at that time, we didn't have. If we had a child in school that was retarded, we just kept him there and did the best we could.

BAUS: Would you describe a typical school day curriculum?

CHAMBERS: Well, I think you want a routine of my classes. That depended on the number of students I had. The general plan was an opening exercise. That might have been a music memory contest, or the teacher reading a book, like A. A. Milne's Christopher Robin, or the Bobbsey Twins series. We had a rhythm band, and if we were doing a program, of course, we did that as our practice time. The regular schedule was arithmetic, then the English classes. Recess was for fifteen minutes, from 10:30 A.M. to 10:45 A.M. After recess, we did reading, writing, and art. During art, we did lots of study of Master Paintings. Then came the noonhour. After lunch, we studied history, English, some spelling, or maybe some writing again. I used lots of spelling and writing together. First grade would have more reading activities. Recess was from 2:30 P.M. to 2:45 P.M. After recess, we studied geography and spelling. School was dismissed at 4:00 P.M.

BAUS: What were the amount of different classes given at one time?

CHAMBERS: I am not sure just what you want on that, Betty. If I had four grades, like my first year, I would have fifteen to twenty minutes per class. Is that what you wanted?

BAUS: I think that is what we need to know.

CHAMBERS: Well, sometimes you spent more time, and sometimes not. You had some working on different things.

BAUS: Were competency tests or grade-level tests taken for promotion purposes?

CHAMBERS: Not in the rural school, we didn't. We had a test or examination, as they were called, that was sent out by the state, quarterly. We had to cover a certain amount, so we could answer questions on those subjects. No, we did not have a competency test.

BAUS: Did Walnut Grove School have a library?

CHAMBERS: We had a bookcase, and we called that our library. We had a table that was right there by it, and when we would speak about going to the library, we would sit at the table.

BAUS: How did you decide on a textbook?

CHAMBERS: The State Textbook Commission decided that.

Our books had State of Kansas written on them, and they were printed at the state level.

BAUS: Where did they come from? Where did you pick them up at?

CHAMBERS: Well, we bought them. We went to the drugstores and bought our textbooks each fall. Each child had to buy his own textbooks.

BAUS: What was the atmosphere of the educational program? Was it strict, loose, warm, or cold?

CHAMBERS: I would say; it was strict. I believe it was, because in those times, we had a certain amount we must cover, and there was no time to waste.

BAUS: What were some rules of the school that may have been different from today?

CHAMBERS: Well, I really have not visited school for a long time. The teacher was not allowed to smoke, and now we think nothing of it if the teacher smokes. She does not smoke at school, particularly. Generally, the teacher was single. She was not married. Of course, she could not be pregnant. That was just a no-no!

BAUS: What were some special observances of your school, like Christmas programs, spelling bees, music contests?

CHAMBERS: Oh, we have had lots of things like that,

Betty. Three-fourths of the time, we had Christmas programs. We had lots of spelling bees, ciphering matches, and geography contests. In the geography contests, they would find places we had studied on the maps. We had lots of music contests. I had a record player, and we would use it to listen to the old Masters, like Mozart. They had to be able to identify twenty of the pieces. I had several kids that won in the county contest. They enjoyed doing that so much. At Halloween, we always had a Halloween program. My mother would bake doughnuts, and we would have doughnuts and apples for the crowd. After refreshments, we would have the program. We had lots of activities like that.

BAUS: Did Walnut Grove School have a graduation exercise?

CHAMBERS: No, that was the county affair. When the kids graduated from eighth grade, they went to Oberlin and had the affair there.

BAUS: Would you describe a typical day before and after school?

CHAMBERS: I would go early, because I liked to go over my lessons, if I had not finished them up the night before. I had a flagpole, and I always put the flag up. One old German lady always said, "I always know

when Dorothy is at school, because she has the flag up at 7:30 A.M." I was kind of proud of the fact that I got there early. After the children left school, I had the schoolroom to clean and fix my lesson plans for the next day.

BAUS: How are teaching ways or habits different now than when you taught?

CHAMBERS: Well, just from what I have observed, I think they are very much different. The teacher, lots of times, is gone from school almost as soon as the kids.

BAUS: They are not supposed to be, though.

CHAMBERS: Maybe not, I don't know.

BAUS: How were teachers expected to conduct themselves in the community?

CHAMBERS: Be ready to help, cooperative, and be dependable at all times.

BAUS: Were you in charge of any extracurricular activities?

CHAMBERS: Oh, not particularly, except for track meets. Would that be extracurricular? I don't know.

BAUS: Yes, I think so.

CHAMBERS: We often had track meets, and there might be five schools involved. We would switch off going to different schools. We had all kinds of races. In



the morning, we had scholarship contests, arithmetic, spelling, and music. In the afternoon, we had our races, games, and so forth. We gave ribbons for the prizes.

BAUS: Was there a problem of teacher turnover?

CHAMBERS: Well, I don't believe so.

BAUS: Did more than one teacher work in the school?

CHAMBERS: No, not in most of the rural schools.

There was just one teacher.

BAUS: Was there a principal for the school?

CHAMBERS: The county superintendent was the principal for all the schools.

BAUS: What evaluation system was used for the teachers?

CHAMBERS: Well, the county superintendent worked out an evaluation list, a set of standards. We would get to see that set of standards, if we wanted to.

BAUS: How were discipline problems with the children handled?

CHAMBERS: The teacher was the one that handled those. I always had real good cooperation with my parents. They backed me up, generally on anything.

BAUS: Did the female teachers handle discipline differently than the male teachers?

CHAMBERS: Well, I presume they did. We did go to a school where there was a man teacher, and it always seemed to me, he let kids do things more than the women did.

BAUS: So you think the women were stronger disciplinarians?

CHAMBERS: I think the women were a little stronger, probably.

BAUS: Where did you live while you were teaching at Walnut Grove School?

CHAMBERS: I lived at home with my parents. My mother was ill. She had cancer, and I lived at home and drove a Model T Ford Coupe five miles. I lived out on the Sappa Creek.

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

CHAMBERS: I started from high school on a Normal-training Certificate. That was renewed with eight hours of college work. I decided long before, that I was going to be a school teacher. I began taking correspondence and extension classes from Hays, and we had summer school each summer. That's how I got my Life Certificate.

BAUS: When was your schoolhouse built?

CHAMBERS: I have no idea, Betty, and there was no way

to find out.

BAUS: So you don't know by whom, then either?

CHAMBERS: No, I don't.

BAUS: What material was used to build the schoolhouse?

CHAMBERS: It was a frame schoolhouse, and that's about all I know. It was on a cement foundation, as most of the old one-room schoolhouses were. They were all built similar.

BAUS: Do you know where the material came from?

CHAMBERS: I presume that it came from Oberlin, because it was close to Oberlin.

BAUS: Was Walnut Grove School a public school?

CHAMBERS: Yes, it was. It was District 57, when it was organized.

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

CHAMBERS: The heating, of course, was an old stove, and when I say old, it was kind of old. The lighting was lamps. Some of the folks brought in lanterns, if we were having programs. Of course, there was no electricity. The toilets were out back. They were just a little wooden building. We used to have a cleanup day and scrubbed them, to keep them clean.

BAUS: How did the school get its water?

CHAMBERS: There was no well for many years, not while

I taught. I took the water in a cream can, which was never used for cream. I carried that with me in my car.

BAUS: What is the significance of the school name?

CHAMBERS: I did ask about this, and they presume there was a walnut grove or some walnut trees close by. That's how they got the name Walnut Grove.

BAUS: Would you describe the interior of the school?

CHAMBERS: It was a one-room school, of course. You came in the door on the northeast side, and you came into a cloakroom. There was a small room where we had our water, our basin for washing, and our towels. Then you would go on into the schoolroom. The stove was to the back part of the room. The desks were the double type, and they were on either side of the stove. The teacher's desk was in the front, and it was up on a platform. I always had the recitation bench, as we called it, in front of my desk. I would stand, I don't know why I thought I had to stand when I was reciting or having a class recite, but I did. I stood with my heels back against this platform, and I froze my heels in the wintertime. That was quite a thing. I had to wear great big shoes, because I froze my heels. There was a blackboard on both sides of the room and one side of the north wall.

We used those blackboards a lot. There was also a map case. The maps were old, but the times were hard. They couldn't afford any new ones, but we did use those old maps quite a bit. At the windows were just common curtains. At the beginning of the school term, often times some of the mothers would wash and iron the curtains, and sometimes, I did it. I think that gives you an idea of what was in the inside of the building.

BAUS: Yes, that was very good. Who was in charge of the upkeep of the building?

CHAMBERS: The district board would be in charge of that. If I thought something needed taken care of, then I let them know.

BAUS: What special events happened at the school?

CHAMBERS: That would be our programs, track meets, and things of that nature.

BAUS: What physical changes occurred to the schoolhouse during the years you taught there?

CHAMBERS: Not very much, because times were hard. I had started out with eighty dollars a month, and they got so hard up, that I taught several months without any pay. Later, I did get my money.

BAUS: What were some physical problems of the school?

CHAMBERS: The heating was always a problem. The

coal house, where my fuel was, was behind the schoolhouse. I had to go out there to get my fuel. It was a problem to heat that big old building. It stood up where the wind could get to it.

BAUS: Do you know what happened to the schoolhouse?

CHAMBERS: Yes, the last year that the pupils went, there were only three pupils. They couldn't maintain school like that, and so they had a sale and sold it. It is now a house in Oberlin.

BAUS: What happened to the equipment and supplies after the school closed?

CHAMBERS: They were sold at auction.

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

CHAMBERS: It was six years old.

BAUS: Did this age vary any?

CHAMBERS: Yes, depending on the child's birthday.

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

CHAMBERS: I think the first year I taught, there were probably six or so youngsters that moved in. I kept a book of pictures all the years I taught and the names of the children. My first year, I started out with ten and before the year was over, I had eighteen in school. You can see some did move in.

BAUS: That was quite a few. What was the greatest

distance traveled by the students, and what mode of travel was used?

CHAMBERS: One family lived about three and a half miles away. Generally, the children walked or rode horses. Very seldom were they brought to school.

BAUS: What grade levels did you teach?

CHAMBERS: The first year I had first, second, third, fifth, and seventh grade.

BAUS: What types of occupations did the students usually take up?

CHAMBERS: There were various ones. I was looking to see the other day, and one, that I correspond with, was a doctor. Another one was a teacher, two were in charge of large furniture stores, one was a funeral director, and one went into art work.

BAUS: Did many of these students go on to college? It is obvious that the ones you mentioned probably did.

CHAMBERS: Yes, the ones I keep in contact with, and I would say the majority, went to college.

BAUS: Did the students of Walnut Grove School come from a particular cultural or heritage background?

CHAMBERS: Their parents were all farmers.

BAUS: Do you know what nationality they were?

CHAMBERS: I really do not know. One family might

have been Irish.

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

CHAMBERS: They went through grade school and high school. Those who went on to college would make it more.

BAUS: Were the students only required to go a certain number of years, at that time?

CHAMBERS: They were only required to go until age sixteen, but by that time, folks were beginning to see how important it was to have an education.

BAUS: Are there any "outstanding students" from Walnut Grove School that you can think of?

CHAMBERS: The one that is a doctor has been very well known in California. One boy was a teacher, and some are quite noted musicians.

BAUS: What was the dress and overall appearance of the students?

CHAMBERS: They were clean and neat, but not fancy.

BAUS: What was the cost of education to the student and his family?

CHAMBERS: I can't tell you, Betty. I have no idea about that. There was no way for me to find out.

BAUS: Do you know why the school was built?

CHAMBERS: The school was built because the children



needed a place to go for an education.

BAUS: What were the boundaries of the school's jurisdiction?

CHAMBERS: I'm not sure about that. I would say four miles by four miles. Maybe, it was five miles by five miles. The district was set up by the state no doubt, and the children that lived in the district were supposed to go to that school.

BAUS: Was the schoolhouse used for community social activities as well as for education?

CHAMBERS: When I was teaching, there was a lady that was preaching, and she would come out on Sunday and have services there. I did not take part in it, because I went to church in Oberlin.

BAUS: Were there any traditions that were peculiar to Walnut Grove School?

CHAMBERS: They were very kind to their teacher and always insisted on your coming to have supper with them. They would plan parties and entertain the teacher, which was lots of fun.

BAUS: Was there a school board for your school?

CHAMBERS: There was a three member board; a clerk, a director, and a treasurer.

BAUS: Do you remember any of the school board members names?

CHAMBERS: Carl Schultz, Mr. Simpson, and Mr. Boettzer were the three that hired me.

BAUS: Are any of these men deceased?

CHAMBERS: Mr. Schultz and Mr. Boettzer are deceased. Mr. Simpson is living, and he is nearly one hundred years old.

BAUS: That's interesting. Did Walnut Grove have an organization similar to PTA?

CHAMBERS: No, we did not have any organization like PTA.

BAUS: Who hired and fired the teachers?

CHAMBERS: The school board hired and fired the teachers, and thank goodness, they did not fire me.

BAUS: Did anyone else have any input?

CHAMBERS: Yes, the county superintendent did.

BAUS: Are there any controversies surrounding Walnut Grove School?

CHAMBERS: There were no controversies that I knew of. The only one might have been lack of money.

BAUS: Did the school make any lasting contributions to the community?

CHAMBERS: I would say so, because these children came to school, and we made a lasting contribution to their lives, anyway.

BAUS: Why did the school close?

CHAMBERS: There were no children and not enough tax money to maintain a school. Of course, reorganization days were upon them, and they knew they had to do something.

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

CHAMBERS: I do not know.

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

CHAMBERS: The funds came from land taxes.

BAUS: Did the community help finance the construction?

CHAMBERS: I couldn't tell you about that, Betty.

BAUS: How much did it cost a student to enroll in school?

CHAMBERS: It didn't cost them anything to enroll. That was their school, and that's where they were to go to school.

BAUS: What was your salary when you first started teaching?

CHAMBERS: My first year, I received eighty dollars per month for the eight month term. Later, when I went to Oberlin, I received ninety dollars for a twelve month period.

BAUS: How was your salary determined?

CHAMBERS: I do not really know about that. We were so glad to get a job, the salary really didn't matter.

BAUS: Do you know who determined your salary?

CHAMBERS: I presume the school board determined the salary. They knew how much money there would be. A little later, we were judged on the kind of certificate we had, and our experience counted.

BAUS: Did a teacher have a voice in any salary decisions?

CHAMBERS: If she wanted a job, she took what she could get.

BAUS: How did you get your pay check?

CHAMBERS: You went to the clerk, and he gave you a signed voucher. You took it over to the director, and he signed it. Then you took it to the treasurer, and he signed your check for you. That was the way you got your money. In the city school, our checks were brought to us.

BAUS: Dorothy, I want to thank you very much for this interesting and informative oral history of Walnut Grove, District 57, and your years of teaching there.