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Interview with Nettie McPheeters

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Nettie McPheeters

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Being a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse

In September 1932, Nettie Hartman began her career as a teacher. That day she stepped into Lakeside school, District No. 31, and began a wonderful career touching the lives of children.

Nettie had already received her three-year teaching certificate. Two years before, her family decided that she should leave the farm and pursue her education at Emporia State Teachers College. Nettie returned to Emporia State Teachers College during the next three summers to pursue her degree. She received her lifetime teacher's certificate, but stopped eight hours short of finishing her degree. "Then I got married, a normal thing," she said.

Nettie was hired at Lakeside school and soon was earning \$50 a month for a 32 week school term. There were 23 students on the census that year, but her actual number of students was 10. One of Nettie's strong memories of Lakeside school was the coal burning stove which sat at the back of the room. A long stove pipe reached from the back to the front of the room. About once a month a pigeon would get into the pipe. One of the school board members would have to come to remove the pigeon. When they did, black soot would be all over the school room. This was a real mess for Nettie to clean.

Cleaning responsibilities were just part of the job. Each morning it was Nettie's responsibility to sweep the floors, stoke the fire, clean

the boards, or do any other cleaning task that needed to be done.

Another responsibility that Nettie had was to carry water to the school each day and keep the crockery clean for the students. One of Nettie's teaching contracts stated that the board was "responsible for keeping the schoolhouse in good repair and paying for janitor service."

Unfortunately the "janitor service" part was crossed off before Nettie was asked to sign the contract.

In September 1933, Nettie moved on to a different school south of Dodge City. This school was Harshberger - Prairie Home, District No. 26. One of Nettie's memories of Prairie Home School was that there were only four students that year. Then, the last month of school one family moved away and took three of her students with them. Having only one student for that month was interesting for student and teacher. Curtis Spriggs was an eighth grader that year, so student and teacher spent most of their time studying for the final exam. Curtis would have to go into Dodge City to the high school to take his exam. He did well.

Another memory of Prairie Home School was the beginning of a hot lunch program. No, this hot lunch program was nothing like the federally mandated program of today. This hot lunch program consisted of soup made with tomatoes, carrots, celery, and potatoes. Mrs. James Hartman, Nettie's mother, prepared the soup with vegetables that she got from the courthouse. Nettie would carefully take the soup to school in the morning and keep it warm on the stove.

The children appreciated a variation from their typical lunches carried in their syrup pails.

When Nettie began teaching in the early thirties, some special restrictions were placed on her behavior. These rules of conduct were told to her before she signed the contract for the year. Some of the rules of conduct included: The teacher was to be a person that respected her elders. She had to respect others and their thoughts. She had to respect the parents and their thoughts about their child. She was not to wear the same dress every day. She was to keep herself presentable, clean, especially her finger nails. Her shoes must be clean and her hair must be neatly tied. Lipstick and rouge were definitely not permitted for teachers. The length of her dress must be halfway between her knee and her ankle. The teacher must not keep company with men. She must be home between the hours of 8 p.m. and 6 a.m. unless at a school function. Finally, she must not smoke or drink. Breaking any of these rules of conduct would mean her immediate dismissal as the schoolteacher.

One more highlight of the Prairie Home School that Nettie recalls was the box and pie supper in the spring of 1934. The auctioneer, John McPheeters, sold some of the pies for \$.10 but held out for \$.25 on some of the items. The total proceeds of the evening amounted to \$3.00. This was a large amount for the school. What Nettie remembers most about that evening though was when the

auctioneer introduced her to his son, Wayne McPheeters, her future husband.

The last year that Prairie Home School was open was 1934. It had served the community well, but there was not a need for the school. Nettie took a job at South Hopewell, District No. 29 the following year. Nettie taught at South Hopewell for the next five years. Teacher evaluation was part of the education system at that point in time. However, the evaluation was not done by the local school board. It was done by the county superintendent. One superintendent claimed Nettie was a "natural teacher" which made Nettie feel wonderful! Another superintendent asked Nettie to make the workbook or seatwork for the county. "I didn't get paid for that either," she said. There was one other type of informal evaluation. Nettie described it this way. "Of course you heard it from the parents if you did something wrong." Nettie had no problems with evaluations, however, because both parents and students loved her.

THE ONE-ROOM SCHOOL

I remember when I went to school-
Some of us walked; some rode a mule.
To that one-room house upon a hill
Went Mary and I, and Fred, and Bill.
Our one teacher had 40 scholars-
Her monthly wage was 60 dollars;
She taught eight grades from 9 to 4,
Then banked the fire and swept the floor.
Her subjects were not just two or three,
She taught them all from A to Z;
And then she taught us how to spell
In the one-room school we loved so well.
Seated two in a seat, our faces red,
We tries to grasp what our teacher said.
Lunch was a homemade sandwich or two-
No cafeteria to serve hot stew.
We needed no gym to make us strong,
The two-mile walk home was plenty long.
I'm told kids are learning more today
From specialized teachers with higher pay;
But I remember that one-room school
Were we all were taught the Golden Rule.

Marguerite Mosby

Children in the one-room schoolhouse

The children in the one-room schoolhouse have many of the same characteristics of the children in schools today. But times were different then and children were handled in a different manner. School

was the second type of structure that the children had in their lives, not the primary structure. The primary structure for children in the thirties was the family. Children were taught at home to respect their elders, to respect themselves and others, and to work. The family's morals were taught at the home. These morals were common to all of the families in the community because of the churches in the community. The family was the first form of government that the children experienced. The children knew that if there was any trouble at school, there would be more trouble at home.

Morals were taught in Nettie's school. She did not teach religion directly, but there was a lot of indirect teaching going on. Every morning Nettie and the children would start their day with the flag salute and the Lord's Prayer. Nettie claims that days that they did not say the Lord's Prayer, something wrong was destined to happen. The Ten Commandments were also part of the informal teachings that took place. Nettie said, "I didn't teach the Ten Commandments, but I taught them how to be neat, how to be respectful, and to love one another and to be happy with each other. We had to learn what made each other happy, what made each other sad, what made each other cry."

The parents that Nettie worked with were very supportive of her and of what she was teaching. Nettie recalls only one instance where she and a parent had conflicting ideas. This child was having trouble with his arithmetic. They had worked for days on the fact $2 + 2 = 4$. The child insisted that $2 + 2 = 8$. Nettie tried to work with the child

and showed him that two apples plus two apples produced four apples. The older children tried to show him that two cats plus two cats equaled four cats. All of this work was to no avail because this student's father had told him that $2 + 2 = 8$. To this child, his father could not be wrong so everyone else must be wrong. Finally, Nettie was forced to confront the father with what was happening. The father claimed to be just joking with his son, but agreed to set the record straight.

Several students stand out in Nettie's mind. Some stand out because of their academic abilities, such as one student who was reading the encyclopedia in the third grade. Some students stand out because of their art ability, music ability, or just because of their personalities. There was one student, Avis, who stands out for a different reason. Avis lost her mother during the school year and she stands out to Nettie because Avis was a mother to everyone.

Being a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse meant Nettie was more than the children's instructor. Sometimes she had to be their counselor as well. When Avis lost her mother, she was absent from school for a few days. One day while outside playing, the class saw Avis walking toward school with her little brother who was too young to be at school. Nettie and the children decided that they must go meet her and walk with her the rest of the way to the schoolhouse. It was decided that Nettie would go first and tell Avis how sorry she was. The girls would go next and talk to Avis. The older boys would take

the brother and talk to him, take him by the hand and keep him with them. Nettie recalls, "We decided that we had to make this time up, that took us to meet her, by taking five minutes off each recess or noon hour. It worked out real well. We didn't have a counselor in those days." The lessons of life were sometimes much more important than the lessons in the textbooks.

The children in the school became almost a family. Even though they ranged in age from five to possibly 18, they looked out for each other and did almost everything together. Nettie recalled how the students would always play together at recess time. They played games like black man, dare-base, steal chickens, anti-over, hide and go seek, and fox and geese. If the weather was cold, everyone had to stay inside. There they played games like hide the thimble, fruit basket upset, marbles, jacks, pin the tail on the donkey, or tic tac toe.

COUNTRY SCHOOLS

Most old country schools are gone.
They're almost a thing of the past;
But don't let anyone fool you,
Their memories will last and last.

Some are demolished and torn down;
Others used for storage and such.
Isn't it a shame and a crime
When they always stood for so much?

Please awaken and preserve them;
Using them for neighborhood good.
They don't deserve such a fate
When only for good they have stood.

It's wonderful to recall those friendships
That have weathered these many years;
Or aren't there others like me
When I lose a schoolmate, I shed tears?

Now have I any volunteers
On a plan to save the old school;
Or must they all fade away
And people just call me a fool?

Mrs. Ralph Bauer

The instruction in a one-room schoolhouse

Dealing with lessons for eight different grades simultaneously offered a challenge to even the most creative teachers. Each period

was ten to fifteen minutes in length. Nettie would begin with the first graders. She would have to start with them to get them settled in for the day. Usually they started with reading. As she worked with the first graders, the older children would begin their lessons in arithmetic. Arithmetic and government were taught first in the day because they were the hardest. The older students knew exactly what was expected of them because they had been brought up in the school. Getting them motivated to work was not a problem for Nettie.

With the absence of pencils, ink pens, and copy machines, written work was a scarcity in the one-room schoolhouse. Recitation was used to test the children on their studies. Every student had a recitation time each day. Sometimes this recitation took place at the teacher's desk, but Nettie found that valuable time could be saved if she went to the students' desks to hear their recitations. Different types of pieces needed to be memorized at each grade level. The younger children learned all the nursery rhymes and other verses or arithmetic facts. The older students' recitation became more difficult. Following is a poem that the 5th graders memorized.

"TIS THE LAST ROSE OF SUMMER

"Tis the last rose of Summer,
Left blooming all alone;
All her lovely companions
Are faded and gone;
No flower of her kindred,
No rosebud, is nigh,
To reflect back her blushes,
Or give sigh for sigh!

I'll not leave thee, thou lone one,
To pine on the stem;
Since the lovely are sleeping,
Go, sleep thou with them;
Thus kindly I scatter
Thy leaves o'er the bed
Where thy mates of the garden
Lie scentless and dead.

Thomas Moore

The textbooks used in the one-room schoolhouse were mandated by the state. Kansas indicated which books would be used in every school. They also supplied Nettie with a State Course of Study. In this book, Nettie was told how many pages needed to be covered by each grade level each day. This course of study remained the same until a new textbook was established. The textbook alone was not enough, so teachers were responsible to make up their own seatwork to supplement the text.

Discipline and control in the classroom were essential for students to learn, especially because there were so many different things happening at once. Nettie shared that she did not have any serious discipline problems. If any problems did occur, the major offenses were throwing paper wads, dipping a pigtail in the ink well, flying paper airplanes, or whispering. The most serious offense Nettie encountered was children chewing gum. She shared, "that was seen as serious, very ill mannered!"

To enhance her curriculum, once a year Nettie and her class would take a tour into Dodge City. There they would visit Beeson Museum. It cost them \$.10 to visit the museum. Then they would go to Fairmont's where the highlight was a free ice cream cone when they finished. Next, it was on to the Dr. Pepper plant where they received more samples. Other places to visit included Ham Bell's place, the jail, and the historical markers around town. The class always enjoyed going to the park to eat their sack lunches. However, after all the snacks from Dr. Pepper's and Fairmont's, no one was very hungry!

Other special days were planned throughout the school year. One such day was Achievement Day. On Achievement Day three of the area schools, Concord, West Hopewell, and South Hopewell, would get together for a program and games, complete with costumes and plays. Parents and students enjoyed sharing what they had with the other schools. Another day when several schools would get together was Track Day. During this day, different races and track

events would pit one school against another. Nettie recalls that the best part about the day was that winners and losers were all still friends when the day was over.

One very special day for Nettie and her class was the day they performed live on the radio. The KGNO radio station had them play a few songs. A parent came in and played the piano for them. A student directed the band. Their band maybe did not have a lot of expensive instruments, but they had homemade instruments and a lot of enthusiasm.

Nettie's special memories

The Depression days of the early 1930's meant hard times for the families in this area. Nettie recalled the dust storms. "I had to drive twelve miles to school and the only farther I could see was the radiator cap." One year they missed three days of school because of the "dark blizzard." After the wind had died down and the dust had settled, the schoolhouse would be terribly dirty. Nettie recalled that she just brushed the dirt aside and went on with what she needed to do.

The lack of money during the Depression hurt many families. Several families were losing their farms and would be forced to move away. Nettie recalls the children wore feed sack clothes. "There was nothing wrong with them. They were clean." People were poor and there was not money to go and do things or buy anything special.

School meant stability for the children growing up in these times.

"School was where they had their fun and especially their memories."

Nettie McPheeters has a lot of love in her heart today. This is somewhat surprising because she has given so much love away already that you wouldn't think she could have any left. Nettie believes that all children need to be loved. This is sometimes hard to do, but teachers must force themselves to love all of the children. Nettie's classroom stressed loving each other. She recalls two girls who had a hard time with that belief. One day these two girls got into a fight. "They bloodied each other's noses and scratched each other." Nettie brought the girls into the school-room and cleaned them up. When they were clean, Nettie told them, "I don't know which one of you started it. I don't want to know. I don't want to know what happened, but you sit here and you're not going to play with anyone, you're not going outside, you're not going to do anything until you learn to love one another." Nettie then walked out. It didn't take long until they had told each other that they were sorry. Soon they came out to tell Nettie that they were sorry. Nettie recalled that the best part of this story is that those two girls are still friends today.

The days of the country schools are gone, but Nettie emphasized that the precious memories live on. "Within those walls came dentists, came teachers, came farmers, came lawyers, came artists. And they all formed their lives within that school, within that community. They are now helping to form our government. Life is an adventure and teachers

must teach the kids and help them to know that life is an adventure. The country school buildings are nearly all gone. There is still one remaining, West Hopewell. Nettie shared, "it is just a skeleton now, but it shelters the birds, it shelters the owls, it shelters the animals and God made them too." The yesterdays are gone, but the memories are here.

Implications drawn from a one-room schoolhouse to education today

Many things can be learned from the experiences of Nettie McPheeters. We in education today have a tendency to brush aside the past as history instead of using it as a lesson. Some valuable practices that we seem to have "re-invented" are using older students to help or tutor younger students, having individualized instruction, and building a family atmosphere within the school. Most importantly, this researcher has learned that if you love and respect your students, no matter how difficult that may be, you will build future adults that will contribute to society and you will build adults who can love and respect others in return. Isn't that what teaching is all about?