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Interview with Gertrude Klein

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Gertrude Klein

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CHAPTER II

Allow me to introduce the characters and the scene of this historical research project. Gertrude Louise Saxton Klein, my mother-in-law, taught in a one-room country school located south/southwest of Burdett, Kansas, in Pawnee County, in the early 1930's.

The school was known as Uniondale, District 64. There was no significance between the name of the school and its location. The school had a nickname, The Klein School. This particular area of the county was populated by several families of Klein's, and most of the students were Klein children.

The school was built on a corner of ground which one of the local landowners had donated specifically for the purpose of building a school for the community. This was a common practice in this area at that time. When the school would cease to operate, the building would be sold and torn down and the land would go back to the landowner. Gertrude did not remember who had donated the land for Uniondale.

Uniondale was an all wood structure that faced south. The first room upon entering the building was a small entryway. From there you went into the cloakrooms. There were two of these--one for the boys and one for the girls. These rooms, each equipped with

a window, were approximately 9 feet by 9 feet. Proceeding on, you entered the main room of the building. Gertrude could not remember the dimensions of this room; however, it was a large room. At one end of the room was a stage that was raised one step. The desks were located on the east side of this room, and the west was just left open. When the weather was bad and the students could not go outside at noon and for recess time, they could play in this portion of the room. There were no windows on the west wall which was covered with slate blackboards. The north wall had several windows which made the classroom difficult to heat when winter arrived. The east wall of the classroom also had a large area of blackboards as well as a door that entered into the library. The library was a small room added to the side of the building.

The interior of the building was covered with lathe and plaster. The lower portion of the walls were then covered with wainscotting; the upper portion was painted. In addition, the ceiling was constructed of lathe and plaster and painted. The floors were wood; however, Gertrude could not remember if they were varnished or oil finished.

The building was not equipped with indoor plumbing or electricity. Lighting was provided by gas lamps hung

around the room. Heat was provided by a coal floor furnace located in the basement. The basement was just big enough for the furnace and a place to store some coal. The basement could be entered through a door in the floor that could be raised or through an outside entrance. The older boys had the duty of carrying coal from the coal shed, located thirty to forty yards from the school house, to the basement.

It was the teacher's duty to operate the furnace. She would have to come early in the mornings to get the building warm before the students arrived. On Monday the furnace would have to be cleaned and restarted. Although Gertrude could not remember what was used to get the coal started, she thought that it was probably wood. On the other days of the week, it was not such a big job since the furnace was stoked in the evening before she would leave the building; as a result, all she needed to do in the morning was use the poker to break up the coals and add fresh coal.

Water was available from a well on the school ground. It was equipped with a windmill; consequently, students had to pump water by hand only on days when there was no wind. Carrying water was also the job of the older children. Water was carried into the school in a bucket and set on a shelf. Everyone drank from the

same dipper. Gertrude said that they did not have individual cups to drink from; "Guess we just did not have germs in those days."

The school property consisted of four structures other than the schoolhouse. These were an outhouse for the girls, one for the boys, a coal shed, and a lean-to for any horses that students would ride to school.

Gertrude said that although a few of the students would ride a horse to school, most of the students walked to school no matter whether the weather was nice or stormy. The parents in one family who lived three miles from the school always brought their children to school in the family car. When parents did bring their children to school, the parents would just drop them off and leave; they never came into the school to talk with the teacher or to find out how their child was doing with his/her school work.

The Uniondale school closed its doors for the final time in 1936. It was no longer needed as parents preferred that their children attend school in Burdett at the town school where there were more students in each grade. School buses were also introduced into the community; with the bus coming by the students' homes, the life of the one-room school was no longer needed.

Gertrude Saxton's education started in a one-room schoolhouse nine miles north of Burdett, Kansas. It was located on property that her father had donated for the school. After completing eight years of schooling in the country school, she attended Burdett High School from 1924 through 1928. After graduating in the spring of 1928, Gertrude enrolled in Sterling College, Sterling, Kansas, in the fall of 1928. Her college career lasted for two years; this was all that was required at that time to be certified to teach. No degree or certificate was given for this two year course of study.

Courses of study were general education subjects consisting mainly of history, English, math, art, home economics, and quite a few Bible courses. Gertrude did not recall any education classes designed to equip her with the knowledge of teaching or dealing with students.

When asked how she traveled back and forth to college, her response was by way of the train. She acknowledged that it took quite awhile to travel the distance from Burdett to Sterling because the train stopped several times along the way. Between this reason and the fact that her family did not have much money, she did not make the journey home very frequently.

Gertrude's training continued in the summer of 1930 when all of the teachers of Pawnee County gathered at Larned for a pre-school conference. This was operated on the principle of a normal school. It lasted for one week with emphasis placed on such items as handwork, the planning of a lesson, and passing out of names and addresses of catalogs to order school supplies. One of these sessions was held each year before school started in the fall. Each teacher was responsible for providing his/her own room and board.

Gertrude's teaching career started in the fall of 1930 and continued into the fall of 1934. Uniondale had lost their teacher in the spring of 1930. The name of the gentleman was not available, but he had been a rather athletic fellow who had arranged competitive sporting events between Uniondale and the Brick School a few miles to the east. However, the athletic events ended when he left.

Gertrude learned of the job opening, met with the Board of Education, and interviewed for the opening. At the conclusion of the interview, she was offered the position. The only board member whose name she could remember was Harry Klein, who would later become her father-in-law.

The starting salary at Uniondale for a beginning woman teacher was sixty dollars per month, but that was received only during the eight months that school was in session. By the fall of 1934, the monthly salary had been raised to a whopping one hundred dollars per month.

An appendicitis attack and the following surgery ended her teaching career early in the fall of 1934. Gertrude knew that she would not have the strength to walk to school through the snow and other bad winter weather since she had been weakened by the operation.

It was a common practice in the Burdett community for the school teacher to live in a local family's home. The going rate for one's board and room was twenty dollars per month. Three different families--the Ruff family, the Harry Zahn family, and the Earl Zahn family provided their homes for the young teacher's housing needs. Each of these families lived at least one mile from the school, and none of them ever provided transportation to or from the school house. No matter what Mother Nature decided to throw at her, Gertrude had to walk to and from school. She tells of having to walk over snow drifts when her foot would break through and go deep into the snow. She would be almost totally exhausted by the time she got to her journey's end. With the coming of the week-end her parents would make

the twenty mile journey from their farm north of town to pick her up and take her home for the week-end. Even with the trusty family car, it was over an hour's journey to travel the round trip.

School started promptly at eight o'clock each morning. The day began with a few verses out of the Bible and a prayer. The next item on the daily schedule was to say the flag salute followed by the teacher reading a chapter out of a good adult book to the children. Having completed the opening exercises, the teacher then settled down to business.

Class recitation started with the little folks; they were then given work to keep them busy and contented while the older children took their turn going over their daily work. Each class recitation had to be limited to fifteen minutes, or all of the students would not be able to cover their lessons each day.

Gertrude taught these subjects: reading, language, arithmetic, geography, history, writing and Kansas history. The order in which she taught the classes could not be recalled. However, she recalled that the day always ended with spelling and writing and started with reading. The days were planned and prepared for by the teacher in such a manner that each grade level covered all subjects on a daily schedule.

At no time during her four year tenure at Uniondale were there students in all eight grades. During her first two years, no students were in the upper grades. Although there was at least one student starting first grade each year of her teaching, the enrollment remained consistent and did not change much from year to year. It averaged around ten students with more young men attending than young ladies. Discipline was never much of an issue because the students were well behaved for the most part. No young romances blossomed in this group of students. There was only one time that a student had to receive a spanking.

The most commonly used form of punishment was to revoke the student's recess privileges. Recess happened twice each day, once in the mid-morning and once in the mid-afternoon, each lasting for fifteen minutes. The only other break during the school day was at noon. Students got one hour off for their dinner. Each student brought their own lunch which consisted of a sandwich and fruit most days. There was never a time when a hot meal was served for lunch. When the students finished with their meal, they were allowed to play games of their choice. When the weather was nice, they went out to the playground. The playground was equipped with swings, a teeter-totter, and a merry-go-round.

When the weather was bad, the students remained in the building either playing boardgames or drawing on the blackboards.

The students were called to school in the morning, at noon, and after each recess by the ringing of the bell. The school was equipped with a large bell in the bell tower. Sometimes students were allowed to ring the bell as a treat or a motivation. At times they would pull the rope too hard and flip the bell over upside down. Then someone would have to climb into the attic and return it to its proper position.

School ended for the day at four o'clock. Students were not allowed to remain around the building following the conclusion of classes. However, this was not the case for the teacher. She would remain at the school to grade papers, prepare lesson plans for the next day, do the janitorial duties, and, in the winter months, take care of the furnace for the night. Then she still had the long walk home.

Textbooks were furnished by the district. The teacher had no input in the selection of the textbooks. New textbooks were selected by the county superintendent for all of the county schools. Members of the school board would travel to Larned, the county seat, and pick

up the number of books needed and deliver them to the school.

The county superintendent would come periodically for a brief visit. She traveled around the county in an automobile and would simply show up at school without any warning. She would come in, sit down for awhile and listen to see if the teacher was getting along okay, and then get up and go on her way. She made visits about every other month.

Gertrude said that when the superintendent came for a visit, the students appeared to sit up straighter, and the teacher would get nervous. She did not know whether she was being evaluated during this observation time or not. If an evaluation was done, it was never shown to the teacher or discussed with her. Gertrude assumed she was doing a good job because she was never told that she was not. No one from the Board of Education ever came to observe any of her work or teaching methods. It just appeared that she was hired to run the school, and no one seemed to care what went on from there.

The library of the school, as mentioned earlier, was a separate room. The students were allowed to go and pick out books to read after they had completed all of their assignments. All assignments had to be

completed because there was no homework; all work was finished at school.

The state required so many new books to be added to the library each year. The teacher was allowed to select the new books. Although the only information provided on the list of new books was the title, author, and grade level. There was no summary of the book for the teacher to use in determining whether the book should be selected.

The school was equipped with a telephone, which was located in the library. It was there strictly for emergency use. The only time that Gertrude could remember using the phone was one day after she had had to discipline a little boy who lived close to the school. He ran home, so she called his mother.

She received her pay check once each month during the school year. The treasurer of the Board of Education would bring it by at the end of the month. She received no pay during the summer months.

School supplies were supplied by the Board of Education. The teacher was never consulted as to what materials were needed or what she desired to have ordered. The supplies were just delivered to the school. Gertrude admitted that she bought many of the materials that she wanted with her own money. Items

included were decorations and any special types of paper. The students were expected to furnish Big Chief tablets, pencils, scissors, rulers, etc. Textbooks were furnished at no charge to the students, and no activity fees were collected.

The students were expected to finish their books in each subject during the school term. If, for some reason, the task did not get completed, it was not finished the following year; they were started in the next grade level text. The students were tested once each six weeks just before grade cards went out. The county superintendent sent out tests to be given in each grade and each subject to check if the subject material was being taught and learned. Gertrude could not remember what happened to test copies; however, they were probably kept at the school. The test scores were recorded in a ledger along with the grades of the students' daily lessons and tests made out by the teacher. The grades were figured each six weeks, recorded on a grade card, and sent home for the children's parents to look at, sign and return. The grade cards were used for the whole year; at the end of the school year, the students got to keep them. As for the ledger, it remained in the school. Several years' grades were kept in it until it became filled. After

that happened, Gertrude did not know where it was taken to be stored.

At the conclusion of the eighth grade the students had to take comprehensive exams. They were required to go to Larned for these tests. The teachers of the students could not be present. The tests were administered by people not associated with the one-room country schools. The teachers were not allowed to see the tests and did not find out how well their students had done. Gertrude never had a student fail to pass or graduate.

Most of the students after graduation went to high school in Burdett. None of Gertrude's students chose to continue their education beyond their high school graduation. At least three of the boys served in the military during World War II. Elmer Klein returned from the war and became a union carpenter in the Denver, Colorado, area. Rex Klein returned from the war and bought an oil and gas business in Kinsley, Kansas. Morris Klein returned from the war, married a lady from England, and bought and operated a grocery store in Burdett, Kansas. Several of the other students returned to the farm.

There was no PTA or other parent involvement organization at this time. The parents had little or

nothing to do with the school or their children's learning process. Parents usually only came to the school for the Christmas program. The teacher and students would decorate the building and prepare the program.

They did not have a evergreen Christmas tree. Some of the men who had children in the school would cut a nice branch from a tree; then the teacher and students would cut green crepe paper and wrap all of the branches. Popcorn would be strung and placed around the tree along with tinsel. The room would be decorated by hanging red and green streamers from the center of the room, twisting them, and fastening the other end to the walls. The windows were also lined with bright colors to make them look very pretty. The walls were covered with pictures and samples of the children's work. Lighting was provided by gas lamps placed around the room.

The programs were attended by everyone in the district even if they did not have children in school. The students would sing songs, put on skits and present a play. The singing was acappella. The school had an organ, but since neither Gertrude nor any of the students could play, it was not used.

The Christmas Party would be concluded by the appearance of Santa Claus. Santa would come and pass out treats--nuts, candy, apples, and oranges--to the boys and girls.

Santa was played by a man who did not live in the immediate community, he would put on a fur coat and fix himself up to look like Santa. He always seemed to have a sore thumb.

Other extracurricular activities included an exchange of valentine greetings on Valentine Day and a dinner the last day of school.

The people of this community were very poor during this period of history so there were not many extra items or frills. The children all came to school clean, but it was a common sight to see patches on their clothes. The boys wore overalls, and the girls wore dresses. Sometimes when the weather was bad, the girls would wear overalls to school over their dresses but would remove them upon arriving at school. Personal hygiene was never a problem, and the teacher did not have to teach courses that pertained to these areas.

Gertrude's teaching experience was a positive and rewarding one. She had a number of enjoyable experiences, students, and memories to look back on for the rest of her life.