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An Oral History of Mabel Tucker, One-Room School Teacher

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AN ORAL HISTORY OF
MABEL TUCKER, ONE-ROOM SCHOOL TEACHER

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science, Secondary Education
Fort Hays State University
Summer 1988

Carol M. Miles

CHAPTER TWO
PERSONAL INTERVIEW

The following interview of Mabel Tucker was conducted by Carol Miles on July 5, 1988, in Mrs. Tucker's home, Tribune, Kansas.

Carol: When and where were you born?

Mabel: I was born in Hebron, Iowa, in the south and western part of the state of Iowa. I left there when I was about six years old and came to Colorado and lived in Colorado most of my life until I moved to Tribune. I was born in 1899 on July 25. So that makes me going on 89 years old pretty soon.

Carol: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Mabel: I had two brothers and one sister. The sister and I are the only ones living in our family now.

Carol: Where in Colorado did you live?

Mabel: South of Towner, Colorado about nine miles. We had a little claim down there. Dad came out and filed on the claim. He said we'd stay

there until we filed up the claim or go back to Iowa. We got too poor to go back, so we just stayed.

Carol: What kind of school did you attend when you were little?

Mabel: I attended, well, in Iowa. I was just barely starting school. We'd only have just about three months and then we'd have a little vacation, and then we'd go again. So I started at six over here in Towner in a one-room schoolhouse just like I taught in later on. In fact, I taught in that same one-room schoolhouse later on, too.

Carol: Did your brothers and sister go to that same school?

Mabel: Yes, they did. I went until eighth grade, and then Dad thought there was no one else in my class, so he sent me to Towner. And then my freshman year I went to Holly, Colorado. From then on the four of us came over here to finish high school in Tribune.

Carol: How far from home was the grade school that you attended?

Mabel: It was about two miles. We'd just cut across.

There was no plowed land in those days, so we would just cut across. It would probably be about a mile and a half, maybe.

Carol: You graduated from Tribune?

Mabel: Yes, I graduated from Tribune.

Carol: In what year?

Mabel: 1918.

Carol: How many were in your graduating class?

Mabel: There were seven of us. Three of us are left,

Carol: Did any of the others become teachers?

Mabel: Not that I know of.

Carol: How did you get your first teaching job?

Mabel: Well, I just applied and got it. I was only 19 years old. I was just out of high school, and I didn't have any training, only just what we had in senior year. He told us what we should do and how we should teach, our teacher did. But I didn't have any other training. I went into there, 19 years old, and I had all eight grades. They must have liked me because I went back the second year.

Carol: What year did you start teaching?

Mabel: Well, I graduated in 1918, so it would be in 1919.

Carol: What subjects did you teach in different grades?

Mabel: Alright, listen to this. I taught reading, classics, arithmetic, writing, spelling, United States history, Kansas history, agriculture, physiology, geography, and civics, that I can remember.

Carol: And you taught those at all the different levels?

Mabel: Yes, of course, the little kids had only about four different things, but they learned from listening to the higher groups.

Carol: You mentioned classics. What material did that include? Was that their reading?

Mabel: Yes, reading. I remember Longfellow, Hawthorne, and some of those. I don't think you teach them that way any more, do you?

Carol: How many children did you teach your first year?

Mabel: You know, I don't know how many were in the families. The school was full, I know that.

Carol: Would you say there were more than thirty?

Mabel: Oh, I doubt it was that many.

Carol: How long was your school day?

Mabel: Our school day was from 9:00 in the morning until 4:00 at night. And, of course, I would have to go early because I was my own janitor, I would go early and get the fire started and have it warm for the children when they'd come. Then I'd stay after 4:00, after they were gone, and sweep the floor, clean the blackboards, wash the desks, and empty the water, and all that. Then I'd walk home by myself.

Carol: Where was the school located in which you first taught?

Mabel: It was in the northwest part of the county (Greeley). It was called Mount Hope. It was then in District 23. In those days, of course, the county was divided into several districts, and each district had its own school. In this Mount Hope, where Mrs. Hampton went to school, she told me it was moved over to Mount Olive, wherever that district was, and they used it for an entertainment place,

Carol: So that building is still standing?

Mabel: I think later on it might have been one the Methodists bought. They bought two of those country schools and used them for Sunday School

classes because we didn't have enough room in the old church. Later I think Cy Higgins bought it, and it's over there now with antiques in it.

Carol: So that first school could be standing some place now?

Mabel: Well, I think it was one of them, Analee thought it was one of them.

Carol: That's interesting. How did you handle having all those grades in the same room while you were trying to teach one particular subject to one grade?

Mabel: Oh, we had our blackboard in the back of the teacher, and my desk, and then there was the recitation class bench, then the pupils. Then on back was where they kept their clothes and their lunch buckets. They all had to take their lunch and eat at noon together. And I'd just call one class up at a time. We were just coming and going. There were so many of them, and we had to teach everything everyday. We couldn't skip anything nor combine them. And I think the little kids learned a lot from listening to the older ones.

Carol: And if they had listened to it several years, by the time they got to be a fourth or fifth grader, they probably knew it.

Mabel: They would learn a lot just by listening to the upper grades.

Carol: What kind of teaching aids did you have? You had the blackboard, and you had your texts. Did you have anything else to use?

Mabel: No, just what the state sent us out for the textbooks and what I could think of.

Carol: What you could make up yourself?

Mabel: I sent them to the blackboard lots of times to write their spelling. We'd check it afterward to see if it was right. I'd send them to the blackboard to work arithmetic problems. That way I could see whether they were working them by themselves. But they were good little kids. They didn't cheat. I never caught a one of them cheating.

Carol: Did you have maps? The wall maps?

Mabel: I think in later years they did, but I don't ever remember having one.

Carol: Were there maps in their textbooks?

Mabel: Yes, we had maps in our geography books.

Carol: Were there any types of special services for handicapped children or children who were mentally retarded?

Mabel: No. They were all smart, smart kids. And they were good kids, too.

Carol: Was there any type of testing, such as competency testing, before they could go on to another grade? When they finished eighth grade, did they have to take any kind of test?

Mabel: Well, in the lower grades, I just graded what they did. The eighth graders had to go up here to Tribune, and all eighth graders took an examination, a test, to see whether they would go into high school or not. That's the only test they had.

Carol: Did you have a library at the school?

Mabel: Not much of one.

Carol: Did the families provide books for a library, or did you provide them books? Did the state? Did the county?

Mabel: Well, I think the pupils' parents furnished their books.

Carol: Did you decide what textbooks were to be used,

or did the district do this?

Mabel: I followed the state. Whatever the state required, why that's what we had to use.

Carol: What kind of an atmosphere did you have in that school?

Mabel: Well, like I told you, they were good children, and their parents took my side of it, and they taught them that they were supposed to go there to learn, and when we had recess at noon, I'd go out and play with them and supervise that, too. But I was only 19. I was like a kid. I liked to run and play, too. We would just have a good time out there. And when we'd come back in, we'd settle down and teach. One of my patrons said I was like a Jekyll and Hyde. I had two personalities. I was a kid out on the playground, and then we settled down in school.

Carol: What were some of the rules that you had at school that might be different than what we have today?

Mabel: I didn't make any rules. They just knew what they were supposed to do, and we just did what we were supposed to do, and I never made rules, even when I taught in Tribune. I never made a rule unless I had to, and then I would make one,

but not until one was required. Those little kids, they just came in and found their seat, and they settled down. If they would be awful tired from playing, I would read them a chapter or two from a little book until they'd settle down. Then they would get their classroom books and start to study.

Carol: So discipline problems to you were not like the discipline problems we have today?

Mabel: No, not a bit. My parents stood beside me.

Carol: What kind of special observances or holiday things did you do?

Mabel: We always had a program at Christmas time, I know. And the parents all came, and we had a program. I can't remember whether we had Christmas trees at Mount Hope or not. I know we did when I taught out south of Towner. But we'd have a program. We'd have a little drill, readings, and little plays, and different things like that.

Carol: You organized the program and put it on with the children?

Mabel: Yes.

Carol: Did you have graduation exercises at the one-room

schools, or did they come into the county seat school?

Mabel: No, they just passed on to the next grade on into high school. And, like I told you, the eighth grade came in and took the test, and if he passed, he was a graduate, and he was entitled to go on to high school.

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

Mabel: Well, I just acted natural, I guess. I don't know. They didn't tell me to do this or that. We used to sign and tell what religion we belonged to, what church we belonged to. I remember that on our contracts, But that's discriminating now,

Carol: But you could come and go as you please?

Mabel: Yes, but I didn't have any way to come and go. We were way out there in the country. My folks took me out there (to Burnett's in northwest Greeley County), and I didn't have any other way to go. My dad would always take me to the school, and then he would come here and take the other three kids to high school. Then Friday came, and he'd come get them and take us home. And

then the same thing every weekend.

Carol: Did he take you back home to Towner?

Mabel: Yes.

Carol: Where did you live during the week?

Mabel: During the week? With Burnetts, With Analee Hampton's parents.

Carol: So it was with one of your student's families?

Mabel: Yes.

Carol: What about your brothers and sister that were here in town? Who did they live with?

Mabel: We had a little . . . My dad owned that property where these buildings are now right east of me. And there was a little old house over there, and there was a little shed, and they bach'd over there.

Carol: They took care of themselves then during the week?

Mabel: Mother would fix everything for us, for them, of course. Food and clothes and get everything ready. I know she must have worked like a Turk to keep all of us going.

Carol: Were you in charge of any extracurricular things? Did they participate in athletics or have contests with other schools?

Mabel: I don't believe so. I can't remember that they did.

- Carol: In a small school like that, was there a problem with teacher turnover? Did a teacher usually stay there for quite a few years?
- Mabel: Well, I was there two years at Mount Hope. And then, of course, I wanted to go home to board at home and teach in my own school. But I suppose I could have had another year at Mount Hope if I had wanted it.
- Carol: Were you also considered the principal in the one-room schools?
- Mabel: Yes, I was my own principal, janitor, and everything.
- Carol: Did anyone evaluate you to see how good a job you were doing?
- Mabel: Not to my knowledge. They might have said something around among themselves, but they never told me.
- Carol: So there was no superintendent or anyone who visited your school?
- Mabel: Well, we used to have a county superintendent, like Mrs. Moore was and Mrs. Simpson one time. They would come around once in awhile and visit the school.
- Carol: While you were teaching, or just come to visit you?

- Mabel: Yes, come to visit the school and see how it was going on. I guess I was alright, because they never put me out.
- Carol: Did parents ever come in to complain about the school or problems with their children?
- Mabel: No, they would come and visit school sometimes, but they never complained.
- Carol: Did you have parent-teacher conferences?
- Mabel: They just came in when they wanted to. No, we didn't have any conferences.
- Carol: You taught at Mount Hope in northwest Greeley County and then went back south of Towner to teach in the one-room school you had attended for the first seven grades. Do you have any idea when that schoolhouse would have been built?
- Mabel: I don't know about the one near Towner, but Analee told me the one in Greeley County was practically a new building when I got there. Hadn't been built but just a few years, and was made of lumber, and it was just a one-room school. And they got their lumber from the lumber yard at Towner. Towner used to be a pretty good-sized town. They had two grocery stores, and they had this lumber yard, and they had a depot. They

got their lumber there because it was closer than coming to Tribune.

Carol: What kind of heating did you have in the schools?

Mabel: It was about the same. Like I told you, I would go out at night and do my janitoring, and I'd go out and get the coal and the kindling in for the next day. I'd get there early enough to start the fire for the kids.

Carol: Was it like a pot-belly stove?

Mabel: Yes, at the back of the room.

Carol: Did you have any lights?

Mabel: No, we never had anything there at night because we had no lights.

Carol: You used only what came in through the windows then?

Mabel: Yes. Restrooms. We just had outdoor toilets, boys on one side of the school yard and girls on the other side.

Carol: Was there running water in the school?

Mabel: No. The parents would bring the water. There would be a jug, and it had a spigot. But I think we all drank out of the same tin cup. I don't know how in the world, but no one ever got sick from it that I know of. That's the way we

would get the water. Some of the parents would bring it in.

Carol: Would someone bring water in everyday?

Mabel: Yes. They would bring the water in when they would bring the children.

Carol: The one-room school in northwest Greeley County was called Mount Hope. What was the name of the school near Towner?

Mabel: We just called it South Towner School. It's still there. They've made it into a home. It's remodeled, and people still live in it as far as I know. They did the last time I was over there.

Carol: Exactly where was the South Towner School located?

Mabel: It was about nine miles south of Towner. It was pretty close to our place.

Carol: When you taught at the Towner school, did you live at home?

Mabel: Yes, I lived at home. Rode a horse to school. One time I was riding along down the way, and I just was relaxing, and the reins were down. Pretty soon here comes a motorcycle behind us, and the horse took off. I couldn't find the reins, but I hung on. Just about the time I

got the reins, why here comes a second one. The horse got clear down to the corner where we turned to go east to my place, but I stuck on there all the time. We got home alright, but it sure did scare us.

Carol: Did you have to take care of the school building at South Towner also?

Mabel: Yes, the same as I did at Mount Hope and the same way.

Carol: Were they coal or wood heated?

Mabel: Yes, just coal, no wood. We didn't have much wood, except for just a little kindling.

Carol: During the time you taught at either of these schools, was there any special event or happening that you can remember of special significance?

Mabel: Well, not while I was teaching. But, of course, in that district was when that bus tragedy happened. (referring to the Towner district)

Carol: Tell me about that.

Mabel: I had some of the children in my school at one time, but later on they were going to this other school out west of us when the busdriver took the kids. It was real nice that morning, but by the time they got to the schoolhouse, it was

starting to storm. He started back home with them, and that's when they had this tragedy. Several of the children froze to death. The busdriver and his son also froze to death because he got out to try to find where they were. Instead of following a fence, I guess there wasn't much of a fence, I guess he lost track of himself, and he froze. The children in the bus would just fight and slap each other to try to keep each other awake. The older kids would try to keep the younger ones awake. When they were rescued, why the ones that survived, they were put in a house down south. A mother went down there to take care of them. They were all little bashful kids like we were when we went to school, and they didn't tell much. When the fellow representing the Denver Post came out, they asked these kids questions. Of course, that Runtine boy was the one that talked up, and he got all the honor, and he wasn't the one that did the things. This older girl did that lives up at Eads. She won't talk about it. Anyway, he turned out to be a drunkard. When they had their dedication of that little monument they

have out there south between Holly and Towner, he was there that time. That was the first time I'd seen him since. But I didn't have him in school. Of course, this was after they moved over to that other school.

Carol: Do you know what happened to the supplies and books that were left in the one-room schools when they closed down?

Mabel: I don't know what happened. I imagine the things in the Mount Hope School were just moved up to the Mount Olive School because they probably used them. But I don't know what happened to those desks.

Carol: I'm curious if anyone knows where those texts have gone.

Mabel: Same with South Towner. I don't know what happened to all those.

Carol: What was the usual age for a child to start school?

Mabel: Six years old.

Carol: Was there a kindergarten?

Mabel: No. You started first grade.

Carol: Did the starting age ever vary?

Mabel: No. I think Martha Matthews id when she taught,

She tells about one or two that were younger.

Carol: Did you ever have any that were much older than that before they were allowed to come to school?

Mabel: No. Most of them started about six.

Carol: Was there much movement of families in and out of the community?

Mabel: They stayed right there.

Carol: About how far would be the farthest a student would have to travel to get to a school?

Mabel: I just don't have any idea. Not too far. I think quite a lot of them walked to school, or they would ride a horse.

Carol: Within a couple of miles, would you say?

Mabel: I imagine so. Something like that. See, we had several districts in this county, and they weren't too big.

Carol: What occupation did most of your students take up when they graduated?

Mabel: Well, I know two of them became ministers of the gospel. I know some of them became teachers, Analee for one. Some are just housewives and farmers and businessmen. Some of them I just lost track of after they got out of high school.

Carol: All of your students came from farm backgrounds.

Were most of them of the cultural heritage? By that I mean, were they mostly German families?

Mabel: There were two families that were German. But most of them were just, I suppose, like we are, a mix. No Mexicans or colored people or anyone like that.

Carol: Did you ever have any children come to school who could not speak English?

Mabel: No, they all talked English. But when I came to Tribune to teach the first three grades, there was one little girl, Paul Shaffer's wife. They talked German out there, the Kleymann's did. I couldn't teach her phonics at all. She just didn't get them. She turned out to be a pretty good little girl.

Carol: Did most of your students finish through the eighth grade?

Mabel: I think most of them just went right through. People didn't move around like they do now. They stayed put.

Carol: How did most of them dress?

Mabel: The boys in overalls and the girls in nice little dresses. They didn't have these short dresses or

anything like that you know. They had to dress warm because of winter time, and they had to walk to school.

Carol: What kind of expenses did the parents have to send their children to school?

Mabel: I think that the school books were all paid for by the district. So I imagine that expense would be part of their taxes.

Carol: They didn't have extra charges for anything at school?

Mabel: Not that I know of.

Carol: How long did you teach?

Mabel: I don't know how long I taught because some of the records were destroyed up here at the court house. I would teach a while and then decide I wanted to stop for a while, and then I'd go back and teach again.

Carol: So you taught at Mount Hope in northwest Greeley County, and then you taught at South Towner School in Colorado. Both of those were one-room schools.

Mabel: Yes.

Carol: When you started teaching in Tribune, there were other teachers in the building, right?

Mabel: Oh, yes. When I first came over here to teach in that building, I taught first, second, and third grades. My daughter was going to school at that time. Then when she got into fourth grade, they decided I could take the fourth grade, too. When she finally got a little older, she said, "Well, I suppose when I get into high school, my Uncle Rex will come and teach." She told my mother that she didn't want me to know everything she was doing. And I knew everything that was going on. She didn't like that very well, having her mother for her teacher. I wouldn't let her do things because I was afraid that people would think I was babying her. I wouldn't let her dust the erasures or anything to get out of the room. When Alice Tucker substituted for me one time, she let my daughter do all those things, and boy, she thought Alice was sure a good teacher. She got to do all those things, and I never let her do them because I was afraid of showing partiality.

Carol: I know how that is. I do the same thing with my daughter. Was there a school board for the district or for your particular school?

Mabel: Yes.

Carol: How many members?

Mabel: I think there were three.

Carol: Do you remember their names?

Mabel: Well, I'm not sure who was on the school board at Mount Hope, but it seems like Mr. Burnett was one, and Al Jordan was one. I just don't remember who would have been on there.

Carol: Was there any type of parent-teacher organization?

Mabel: Part of the time while I taught here at Tribune we had a parent-teacher organization. Then it would phase out, and we wouldn't have it, much like it is now, too, I think.

Carol: Who interviewed and hired teachers?

Mabel: The school board.

Carol: Did the superintendent have any input?

Mabel: Not that I know of. Just the school board.

Carol: Are they the same ones who fired a teacher then?

Mabel: Yes. They didn't fire me, but I suppose they could have. If you had a contract, I suppose they'd wait till that was over with.

Carol: Did you have contracts to sign?

Mabel: Oh, yes. We just had eight months of school then.

Carol: When would school start?

Mabel: We started in September and end in about April.

Carol: Did you have holiday vacations like the children do now?

Mabel: Not long ones like now, maybe a little bit. I only had fifty dollars a month for teaching. I thought that was good money. In those days a dollar went a whole lot further than it does now.

Carol: Fifty dollars a month. Did you also have to pay for your room and board when you stayed with the Burnett family?

Mabel: Yes, I paid for my room and board, and I always had plenty of money to spend on myself and get mother some things once in awhile, because I always thought she had been pretty good to me while I was growing up. I thought I was rich getting fifty dollars a month. I had never made any money before, and I was only 19.

Carol: Were there any other benefits provided, such as insurance?

Mabel: No.

Carol: Were there any activities or competitions between schools while you were teaching in the one-room

schools?

Mabel: No, we didn't do any. The only thing, all districts came into Tribune to take tests.

Carol: Were there any big controversies that you can remember while teaching at either of the one-room schools or while teaching in Tribune?

Mabel: I never heard of any. Everything went OK.

Carol: Do you know why the one-room schools closed down?

Mabel: Yes, because they made this county into one district, and they all had to come to town like they do now. They come in busses now, where they used to ride horses or walked to their school.

Carol: Do you know how the land for the one-room schools was obtained?

Mabel: No, I've never delved into that.

Carol: How were the little one-room schools built?

Mabel: I understand the community helped put them up. The district itself put it up.

Carol: You said that when you first started teaching, you were making fifty dollars a month. Would you mind telling me what you were making when you quit teaching?

Mabel: Oh, I don't remember what I was getting, but it wasn't so much as you fellows are making now, I know that. But I don't remember how much it was now.

Carol: Do you know how they determined your salary?

Mabel: I guess we just talked among ourselves. I don't know. I didn't have much college work. What I got after high school was by correspondence, and I did go summer school. I took some work in Lexington, Kentucky, and we got credit for that just for taking a tour up into Canada. While the others were sight-seeing, we would sit and have lessons. And then I went to Hays and to Greeley, Colorado. So when I wanted to transfer my credits, they would take off some from one school or the other. So, I don't know how many credits I have.

Carol: Did going to school in the summers help increase your salary?

Mabel: Well, I just got fifty dollars most years. I can't remember what I got when I was at South Towner.

Carol: When you taught at Tribune, did they increase your salary every year?

- Mabel: It was just whatever they wanted to pay us.
No, they didn't do like they do now.
- Carol: Were there no teachers' associations to help with that?
- Mabel: No.
- Carol: How did you get your paychecks?
- Mabel: Maybe handed them out to us at school.
- Carol: Are there any humorous or special experiences that happened to you during that time when you were teaching in the one-room schools?
- Mabel: Not one thing in particular to me. But we did a lot of things, like our Christmas programs and our last day of school. The parents would all come in and take a picnic and go some place. We used to go to Wildhorse Corral in northwest Greeley County. It's all torn down now with a lot of dust in there and weeds, but it wasn't so bad back then. They told the story of why it was called Wildhorse Corral. They would round up the wild horses. They told about one stallion that just jumped clear over this cliff to get out of the cave area. We were there one time for a picnic.
- Carol: Was that anywhere near Barrel Springs?

Mabel: It might have been pretty close. That's where all the people came to get their water when they settled here.

Carol: Did all the families come to those picnics?

Mabel: Yes, we would just play all over those cliffs and have a good time.

Carol: What do you think was the most rewarding part of teaching?

Mabel: I think it's to see what my youngsters turned out to be. I see a lot of them here now are grandparents. Some of them are always telling what I did to them while I was teaching here in Tribune. I guess I was a little onrier here in Tribune than I was out in the country. They tell me things I did. Martha Matthews tells about how I scratched her back, but she was one of the best little old seventh graders. But you know she was out here when that airplane propeller flew off and hit her and crippled her. But she says, "Mabel did that when I was in school." And she says, "I can show you that scar." Just what my school kids tell me now and razz me about things I did. Sometimes they make it up. Special ones are Clarence Sawyer, Luwana

Morris, and the Nemechek boys, Ernie and Bernie. One time I was down getting gas from Nemechek, and I said that I can remember when I used to sit at your desk and help you with arithmetic problems, and now here you're helping me by giving me gas and cleaning my windshield. So, that's the thing, just see what happened to your youngsters.

Carol: Did you feel you were doing a good job? Did you feel good about what you were doing in those one-room schools?

Mabel: I guess I must have because I was sure enjoying it.