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An Oral History of Lucille Denny: A One-Room School Teacher

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AN ORAL HISTORY OF LUCILLE DENNY:
A ONE-ROOM SCHOOLTEACHER

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
Education 803 at
Fort Hays State University

Summer 1988

Betty McFee

CHAPTER 2

ORAL HISTORY

BECKY: Did you attend a one-room school?

LUCILLE: I had it lucky when I was a child, I just walked across there to the schoolhouse and got to come home for dinner. We were so glad when it stormed, because our daddy would bring us a nice lunch.

Teachers wouldn't go to school like I had to go to school. That was hard-up times. It's hard-up now but, oh, Becky, it was awful then. In high school, I stayed with an older lady. Must have been the last two years. The bedroom was just big enough for a single bed and there was just a place to walk, that's all. You could just walk in and walk out. You'd hang the things on the door - your clothes. I didn't have many.

Lots of times for lunch I had a candy bar or a hamburger, maybe. No, I knew that it was my daddy's last dollar lots of times that he gave me. I often told him that I was going to quit but he always told me that he wanted me to go on and finish.

The first two years I stayed in Asa David's basement, and Freda (Most) and I lived together. We had a little old

bulb that hung down from the middle of the room to study by. Kids wouldn't go to school like that today.

BECKY: How did you get your paycheck?

LUCILLE: How'd you get your paycheck? Well, that was interesting! They gave you what they call a voucher. Then I'd start out and go to each one of the board members and they had to sign the thing. When you got to the treasurer she wrote out your check. You had to go get it.

BECKY: In Atwood or somewhere else?

LUCILLE: Nope, right out there in the country. I taught that school down on the creek by Albert Downing's... maybe that's where Kogl's live now. But when the end of the month came I had to go to... anyway, down where Malcolm has his hogs. That's where I ended up getting my money. You had to go get it, they didn't bring it to you. Oh, you earned every cent you got, I'll tell you.

Whislars, that's the name I'm trying to think of. They lived up on the hill as you came out of Atwood. That's one place I had to go and get my voucher signed.

BECKY: Did a teacher have a voice in salary decisions?

LUCILLE: No. And you know we burned coal. They'd bring it in and that would be all we'd get. You'd have to make it last all year. When that was gone, that was it. Teachers nowadays don't know what we did.

BECKY: How many years did you teach?

LUCILLE: I taught seven years.

BECKY: All of them in a one-room school?

LUCILLE: Yes. I finished out a term over here at Chardon. The teacher...I don't remember...she got in trouble and had to leave or something and I finished that term.

Then, I came over in...maybe you used to see that cement over in Bishop's field. That pile of cement, well, that was School Number 44. I taught there. I walked from there over to here just lots of times. It was about two miles. Carolyn was on the way the last year, and I... Denny's lived right over here and they had a little boy named Jack. He was as cute as the dickens. I liked little kids so I asked his parents to let him go the last month of school. They were afraid he would tear up things, but I assured them that he wouldn't. So he and I walked. We'd

get over here a ways and he would ask if I was tired. I usually was, so we'd sit awhile. He was just five...oh, he was cute! I saw him here a few years ago. A nice looking man.

BECKY: What grade levels did you teach?

LUCILLE: Well, they had all levels from the first through the eighth. You knew that.

BECKY: Did you ever have a school where you had all of those levels?

LUCILLE: No, I never did have them all.

BECKY: What was the usual age for children to begin school?

LUCILLE: They could come about anytime they wanted to come. Usually about age four or five. A lot of them started when they were five.

BECKY: How did they get to school?

LUCILLE: Most of them walked. Some of them rode a horse.

BECKY: How many students did you usually have?

LUCILLE: I ended up with three over here. That's all there was, three.

BECKY: Was that Ercell Bishop and...?

LUCILLE: Yes, Ercell and your dad and the Kashka kids were over there. They came to me. I fed Ercell many a sandwich. He'd sit and look out the window and I'd tell him to eat his lunch. He always agreed with me, but didn't eat. Finally, I'd break off little pieces of his sandwich and feed it to him.

One time I was sitting out on the porch and here they came. They'd found some little mice and they dumped them in my lap. Maybe you think I didn't get up quick!

BECKY: What was the over-all appearance of the children?

LUCILLE: Oh, my! When I taught down by Binnings there were _____ . That's German. That little fella came to school so nasty that you wanted to hold your nose. Oh, my, his clothes were just terrible. Poor little fella. And I didn't know that he didn't understand my language, my English. But I got him by the collar one day and took him to the board and told him to do the work. His sister told me then that he didn't know what I was saying. Boy, I felt so bad. They never told me. People didn't do things...they never told me that he didn't understand. I felt awful bad about that, 'cause I did lose my temper with him.

BECKY: Did you have any teacher training before you taught or did you just get out of high school and teach?

LUCILLE: I taught right out of high school. Wasn't I brave?! Oh, we just thought we had the world by the horns. I look back now...one summer Irene, Maxine, and I went down to Lenora for four weeks and took training. I don't know what it amounted to, but we were down there and we had a lot of fun. All I got was a second grade certificate, I never got a first grade certificate. Just second grade, and it lasted for two years. Then you had to go do something to renew it.

I was so elated the first summer after I got out of school when Albert Downing came one evening and asked me if I'd teach their school. Why, I hadn't been home very long. Oh, boy, I was on cloud nine. It was down there by where Kogl's live. I can't decide where that little old schoolhouse was. It was in some trees...

BECKY: Did they tell you what books you had to use or did the kids bring what books they had at home?

LUCILLE: The children had to buy the books. They had to go buy them.

BECKY: Did they tell you what books to use or did they just use what they had?

LUCILLE: Oh, they had to buy certain books. We had the Stone Arithmetic. The books were there and the parents would go in and tell them what grades their children were in. They'd pile the books up. I know we had one bedroom at home and it just had piles and piles of schoolbooks in it.

They also started Social Studies when I was teaching. That's when they had...well, you know what it is. We didn't have any book. We had nothing to go by. So we wrote to all these different companies. We wrote to where they made chocolate, and we'd write to where they made this and that. We wrote to the rubber companies and all that. We got little booklets and that's what we used. We had to buy that ourselves. They didn't buy it.

As far as music, not very many places had even a piano, you know. Do you remember Tiny McDKougal? She taught, and she couldn't sing or play or anything, so she'd come and have me go to her school and have music once a month or so. She wanted me to help her, so I did that. It was all a free will offering. Nowadays they won't do anything unless they get paid for it. Oh, I always had music. They sang something or I read them a story. Most usually they liked to sing.

BECKY: You did that first thing in the morning?

LUCILLE: Yes, and then when we came in after noon, too. I had what we called opening exercises.

We'd all go up there and the kids would sit on the recitation bench. The little kids listened to the big kids and learned from them.

Oh, and we had spelling bees. That's one thing we did have. It must have been Tiny McDougal's class...some other school came in and, oh, boy, we'd line them up against the wall and have spelling bees.

BECKY: It says in these reports that you had a library in school number 44. Do you remember one?

LUCILLE: Well, I suppose there could have been. I don't remember.

BECKY: What were some of the chores that you did around the school?

LUCILLE: Of course we had to do all the cleaning. Unless you could get the kids to help you. Sometimes I let the kids go and beat the erasers together and this, that, and the other.

Also, I started hot lunches. I just got so sick of that old, cold sandwich. I always liked to eat. Well, anyway, the different ones would bring different things. Like, we'd have potato soup and I'd have somebody bring the

milk and somebody the potatoes and cook them on the old stove. Bean soup, potato soup...the kids really liked it. Then after that they got to wash the dishes. It would give them something to do when it was cold.

BECKY: Did you have a car to drive or...?

LUCILLE: It was my daddy's car. My mother was staying in Atwood with the kids. I stayed there and drove out from Atwood my first year. Then I was married and I drove Ralph's car down there on the creek by Binnings.

I had quite a bunch down there, quite a bunch. That bunch down by Binnings...they were just nothing but little heathens. They had really tied that teacher up, Emma Martin. They tied her in the seat the year before and tied her up.

So you see, that was a long time ago and they were little villains. They had never seen T.V., either. That's what has caused our trouble right there, Becky, that T.V. Oh, my. There's so many things that come on that thing that these children shouldn't watch. These children whose parents are gone, they just sit in front of that. It's just an awful thing. Not good...not good.

BECKY: Was the school used for anything in the community?

LUCILLE: Oh, I always had a Christmas program and this, that, and the other. Boy, the old schoolhouse would just be full for the Christmas program. Everybody liked to see the kids. That's what I liked to do, too. I thought we had a lot of fun practicing for the program. But, I don't remember much. Now, Mrs. Bertram, she taught down where we were. She had a lot of things doing. She lived in the basement. She was quite a woman and a wonderful teacher.

BECKY: How about the kids that you taught. Do you remember waht any of them did?

LUCILLE: Meryl and Marilyn Martin, their daddy and mother were ministers. He was a minister over here and they lived in the parsonage. Meryl turned out to be quite a guy. I think he's been the manager of some store or something up in Iowa. I don't think there's any others I remember.

What I liked were the little ones. I remember June Argabright, June Beamgard now, Ruth Downing and Billy Faylon. I'd just work my head off to try to get them to do things. It's fun to work with the little ones. That's what I like. When they get a little smarter they think they can do anything you can and I don't like it. Yes, they were a cute bunch. Mrs. Downing dressed Ruthis so cute and Mrs. Argabright dressed June so cute. June was such a cute little girl.

Ruthie had to go out and be paddled several times. Her daddy came and she didn't want to stay. They babied her so she didn't want to stay and go to school. She wanted to go home. So her dad would come and take her out to the woodshed.

BECKY: Did kids back then want to go on to college, or did they want to stay and farm or get married, or whatever they were going to do?

LUCILLE: Maybe we teachers didn't encourage them very much. No, maybe we didn't because it was such hard times. Such hard times. I don't remember anything about that. If they got to high school, that was pretty good, you know.

People are having to struggle now, but it's a different...it's different than it was then. I'll tell you that. Somehow people can get money nowadays it seems like. When I was young...when Ralph and I were married, we just had nothing. Absolutely nothing. We lived here with his folks. There were four families that lived here at that time.

That's when I taught down at Binnings, when we were living here. I drove down to Binnings. The old school would be so cold when you went in. Oh, my! You had to start your fire.

This schoolhouse up here had one of those great big old...maybe you remember them, with a jacket around them. Old, cold-blooded stoves. Ralph just put me right up on top of it. My feet hurt so bad and me so cold. He'd put me right up on top of it so I could feel a little bit of the heat.

BECKY: You taught up here at number 44 for three years didn't you?

LUCILLE: I maybe did.

BECKY: I don't know that for sure, but these papers that I found in the courthouse...one was for 1937, 1938 was missing, and the other one was for 1939. You were the teacher for 1937 and 1939, so I just figured you had stayed for the one in between, too.

LUCILLE: I expect that's right. I should have kept those old teacher things, but I didn't. I don't have any of them at all.

BECKY: Well, this is just the superintendent's report or something that they send in.

LUCILLE: The superintendent came out sometimes...well, not more than twice a year. I think Mellick was the superintendent when I was teaching.

I just started teaching right out of high school. I often think how brave I must have been. Just think how brave I was! I used to give the children little prizes for things they did. Well...

BECKY: And you had to buy that with your own money?

LUCILLE: Why, sure! We were good old souls. We never thought anything about it. Thirty dollars. When I taught down there at Binnings, I stayed at Walters'. I suppose I paid ten dollars for my board. So that only left me twenty dollars.

BECKY: And you bought all the prizes and everything out of your twenty dollars?

LUCILLE: Yes, I did.

BECKY: I don't know many teachers that would do that today.

LUCILLE: Well, you know they wouldn't, Becky.

BECKY: Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?

LUCILLE: I feel sorry for the children of today. I feel very sorry for them. The home life isn't like it was when I

was a child, you know, there's so many times when the mother goes off to work and the dad goes off to work and the kids...

My daddy was all out for his kids. He wanted us to have good teachers. We really did have some good teachers. I don't know about nowadays. The morals of some of the teachers are so terrible that they shouldn't even be in the school. I don't go, but I know that, Becky, I know that. I went to something down there at Atwood, oh, I like to go to school things. I don't know what it was, but from where I walked in the door to go in to turn, I heard the most vile language from those children. My, my! Swearing, cuss words, dirty words, everything. So, I don't know if they let them talk that way or not, but I thought that that was a sample of it and I thought, "My word!"

I guess you could say that we don't talk that way here, we don't use that kind of language in this room. I know it must be hard.

A good teacher is priceless. You can't put a price on a good teacher that really is sincere. I'm sure there's a lot of children that need someone to love them. They don't think anyone cares about them. Put your arm around them and give 'em a hug. I don't know where I heard that, but she said she gave the kids a hug every day when they came in the room. If you only have six, if you could just straighten

out six, why that would be wonderful. Maybe that six would help somebody else...

Then I taught piano and accordion lessons. I did that for a long time. I just love to work with children. I still do, but... Some of them...there's a few of them that did something with their music, but a lot of them didn't...

But I enjoyed it. Oh, I tried to do a lot of things, Becky, with my life. I like to help people. I always taught Sunday school classes over here. I taught the little folks, that's what I like.