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### Oral History of Dorothy Gilkson

Dennis Poland

*Fort Hays State University*

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ORAL HISTORY OF DOROTHY GILKISON

Presented by  
DENNIS POLAND

Summer, 1992  
Fort Hays State University

## CHAPTER II

### INTERVIEW WITH DOROTHY GILKISON

Mrs. Dorothy (Goff) Gilkison was born April 4, 1911, on the Rathbun farm in Thomas County, Kansas, a township about ten miles south of Ellsworth, Kansas. Her father worked for a farm family, the Gregorys. Her mother and father supported the family by feeding cattle and by doing other chores for the Gregorys. A year after her birth, her sister was born to the Goff family, she died seven months after birth; making Dorothy the only child of the Goffs.

Dorothy went to Ashland Clear Creek for her first year of school. Her second year through the eighth grade was spent in the Ash Creek school house which was located six miles from Ellsworth. In her class, there were mainly boys, with only one other female student besides herself. Throughout her school years at Ash Creek, she and two other boys were in the same school house the entire time.

When Dorothy was in the third, grade she ruptured her appendix. The teacher, not knowing what to do, sent her home. She had a long walk home and along the way she would vomit and then fall down. She would pick herself back up, time and time again. Near her home, her mother saw her

and carried her the rest of the way. Not having a car in their family, a neighbor took Dorothy to the hospital where she stayed from January until April. During her hospital stay, she developed pneumonia and gangrene. After her dismissal from the hospital, she was helped by her teacher so that she would be advanced to the next grade.

In the seventh and eighth grades, students had to take examinations in all subject areas. These exams were taken in early April because there were only eight months of school at this time. From the eighth grade on, Dorothy went to school in Ellsworth, Kansas. High school was an adjustment because none of her friends went to high school in Ellsworth. She soon made friends and enjoyed her high school years. Her father drove her back and forth to high school for the first three years; her senior year she drove her father's brand new Model T Ford.

During her junior and senior years, she prepared to become a teacher and made her intentions known to her instructor. She decided to become a teacher for several reasons: She didn't have to go to college for the first year; she

didn't have the money to go to college; and she really enjoyed being around kids.

Dorothy Gilkison began her teaching career at the age of eighteen in 1929, in a one-room school during the depression. At this time there were one hundred rural schools in Ellsworth County with approximately three hundred teachers looking for employment. Her beginning salary was \$80.00 per month which was considered good wages due to the state of the economy at this time in history. Of this income, she paid \$1.00 room and board per day.

Her first teaching job was at Mount Pleasant/Vinegar Hill School, where she stayed for two years. During her first year of teaching, she had an experience that all inexperienced teachers dread. One day during school, a young first grader named Albert disappeared from her school. Albert could be found nowhere and eventually the entire community was looking for him. Toward the end of the day, ALbert was found with his grandmother, who was Bohemian, and unable to speak English and was unaware of Albert's disappearance.

The next day the county superintendent came to visit, she had heard about Albert's disappearance and wanted to see what had happened. After observing the classes, she decided that Dorothy had

too much to do, with seven grades and seventeen pupils. A decision was made to skip some of the reading classes in some grades.

Her typical day began with the Lord's prayer and the flag salute. Her day was divided into four parts, including recess and lunch. Mrs. Gilkison's teaching strategy was to teach the harder subjects early in the day while the students' attention span was at its longest.

The third year of her teaching career began in a one-room school named Oxide School. The name "Oxide" came into being because of a yoke of oxen which were found tied to a tree, only their hides remained with a wagon nearby. It is believed by some that the Indians may have captured the occupants of the wagon.

Mrs. Gilkison took a pay cut from the salary of \$80.00 per month to \$50.00 per month the first year at Oxide and then she was paid \$60.00 per month the second year she taught at Oxide School.

At the Oxide School, she would have to carry water about four or five blocks to the school house. At noon, the children and Mrs. Gilkison would go and get more fresh water.

Mrs. Gilkison remembers driving a horse and buggy to school with the two children of the family

All of a sudden the mare pulling the buggy stopped dead in her tracks. A short distance ahead, a power line had fallen and turned the ground a fiery red. The horse turned around and the trio was late for school that day.

Another story related by Mrs. Gilkison was that of a prairie fire coming toward the Oxide School. The fire came over a hill and the students watched anxiously from the windows. The men of the community plowed around the school yard and eventually the fire was put out prior to it reaching the school.

Mrs. Gilkison's home town of Ash Creek welcomed her as a teacher where she taught for two years. She has many fond memories of this school such as flying kites and playing baseball with the students.

Buffalo School, named after the last buffalo killed in Ellsworth County, was the fourth one-room school that Mrs. Gilkison taught in. At this time, her wages went back up to \$80.00 a month. This was a "modern" school with indoor restrooms and anterooms. Every day Mrs. Gilkison would pump six buckets of water for use in the restrooms and once a week, she would put a packet of yeast into the

toilets. Anterooms were rooms where students could store their coats, jackets and pails.

A popular game at Buffalo School was "beckon"; a combination of hide-n-go seek and jail. Not having the luxury of a school nurse, Mrs. Gilkison had to fulfill that role also. She related a story of having to pull up the eyelid of a young student in order to pick out a flying ant by its wings. The child did not lose her sight which is significant to note.

Following her five years at Buffalo School, she went to Burmaster School. This was the smallest one-room school she taught in, having seven pupils one year and five pupils the following year. She stayed at Burmaster School for two years, leaving to go to the public school at Kanopolis, Kansas.

Dorothy truly missed the country schools, and after two years at Kanopolis, she returned to Burmaster and remained there until it was closed by the county in 1945.

Dorothy told of many memories of her teaching career and shared with me some of her photographs revolving around her teaching career. Some of these memories are fond ones, while others are not. Memories of the days of the dust bowls when the



at Buffalo School. Following is the contents of a letter she received regarding the float:

November 17, 1938

"I wanted to congratulate you and your pupils for the very fine float you had at the Armistice Day Parade here in Ellsworth. The float represented considerable work and planning for you and your pupils and I felt sure that it was deserving of the first place that I gave it. I want you to tell your pupils for me that it was a very fine piece of work and that I congratulate them as well as you. Best wishes for the school year to you and your pupils."

The theme for the parade was "Kansas or Bust" and the float was symbolizing the life of the pioneers.

Mrs. Gilkison felt that reading played a vital role to the success of her students. She stated, "that if you don't read to children, then they don't want to read, they want to do what you do and they want to be a reader like you are. You have to be a good reader and you must choose interesting books; books that teach as well as entertain."

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The texts used by Mrs. Gilkison in her one-room schools were chosen by the county superintendent. Every year a list of approximately one hundred books was sent to the teacher and she could choose the books she thought were appropriate for her classes. She would let the students help choose the books by reading a short description to the students. She could spend between \$20.00 - \$25.00 and this would buy her six or seven new books a year.

Parents were welcome at the school at all times. However, many only visited the school for special events such as the Christmas play, eighth grade graduation or a "box supper." A "box supper" was usually held between Halloween and Thanksgiving. A program was presented by the students which may have included a song or play. Every person attending the box supper brought a box, and chances were sold on the boxes. Part of the fun at the box supper was that prizes such as pickles would go to the man with the biggest feet

on the ugliest nose. It was not uncommon for the box supper to net \$50.00 or \$60.00.

Events such as the Christmas program and the box supper gave the parents the opportunity to discuss the pupils' progress. Parent teacher conferences were not in existence at that time.

Mrs. Gilkison was responsible for sending grades out once a month along with administering the eighth grade exams. An entire month was allotted to prepare for the eighth grade examinations. As far as grades were concerned, students were given the total number of points they earned. They were not given a letter grade. Mrs. Gilkison did not believe in retaining students, she felt that it did not benefit the student in any fashion.

Mrs. Gilkison felt welcome in each of the communities in which she taught. She stated that the neighbors looked out for each other and one parent may bring the neighboring children to school and yet another one may pick them up from school. It was not unusual for the students to walk three to four miles to and from school. Mrs. Gilkison stated that the children loved to walk and be outdoors.

The parents were interested in their child's progress. She told of one mother who was concerned about her son being so sad in school. It appeared that this family was from the eastern part of the United States and the mother dressed the son in shorts, which was not the dress code at the time. The other children accepted the child as long as Mrs. Gilkison was around, however, when she was not present, the child was taunted and teased by the other students.

The schools were built out of wood and always faced the east with six windows in the one-room school buildings. Mrs. Gilkison stated that the schools were built out of whatever the old pioneers could find. One rural one-room school house was made out of white limestone and is still standing near Ellsworth, she noted. Several of the schools in which she taught had barns for the children's horses. However, the newer schools did not have barns and the students just left their horses out front. Many of the early schools had desks that you could not remove from the floor, they were attached. In some of the schools, you could move the chairs around to rearrange the classroom. Mrs. Gilkison stated that the boys did not like the class to be changed around, but the girls did.

There was no electricity in the school houses. For heat, Mrs. Gilkison had to bring in wood and coal for the fire. She always brought in her wood and coal the night before to avoid the inclement weather in the morning. When she first started teaching, the school houses did not have telephones. Even when the telephones came into the school houses, they were not that effective due to the fact that many of the parents did not have telephones in their homes.

No specialized equipment was available for the needs of special students. A teacher just worked extra hard and spent more time with these students. Mrs. Gilkison had one young female student who had difficulty walking and had to be carried out of the building during the fire drills.

The teacher was to teach every subject in the one room school, from history to arithmetic. Mrs. Gilkison recalled one day when several of her children were late for school. When they did arrive, they had a present for her, a white owl which was about one and one-half feet tall. She said that they spent the entire day watching the owl and they looked up different information and facts regarding owls. She said that if the

students were really interested in something, you studied it.

Every six weeks or so, the county superintendent would call a meeting for the teachers to attend. They would discuss how things were going and different teaching strategies they found to be effective and which the kids enjoyed. She stated that the only teaching tool they had in a one-room school was a blackboard. These meetings were not for the entire county, it was usually for four or five different districts within a certain area.

Every two years, Mrs. Gilkison attended school at Hays. A teacher could teach two years with a regular certificate and then had to go to school to renew her certification. She eventually was granted a lifetime certificate from the State of Kansas.

Mrs. Gilkison retired from teaching in 1975. She truly loved her forty-six years of teaching. She never wished to leave the classroom to become a principal or county superintendent. She stated that she was happy being a teacher. She was responsible for many more things than the teachers are responsible for today. She was responsible for the cleaning of the school house. She also

functioned as the school nurse. It was her duty to make sure that the students made it home safely. She stated that during the days of the dust bowl, students were never allowed to walk very far fearing they may never be seen again.

The biggest challenge that Mrs. Gilkison faced during her teaching career was trying to reach the students that couldn't grasp a particular concept. She stated that there was always a student that could not grasp the idea of phonics or geography.

Mrs. Gilkison stated that the students of today are not more intelligent or less intelligent than the students of her era. She stated that it was dependent upon what they were exposed to academically. Many of her students have become teachers, lawyers and doctors. She spoke of one young man who would never do his homework in class and he would have to stay after school to complete his work. When she told him that she didn't like staying after school, he said, "Well, how are you going to feel when I become President of the United States?" She replied that she would be happy that he learned something in her class.

When asked about the student's attitude toward learning, she stated, "the students wanted to learn, they wanted to please you."