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An Oral History of Louise (Frusher) Stairrett, One-Room School Teacher

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AN ORAL HISTORY OF LOUISE (FRUSHER) STAIRRETT
ONE-ROOM SCHOOLTEACHER

FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

1989

BY
BILL HATFIELD AND BILL KEELEY

Chapter Two

Oral Interview of Louise (Frusher) Stairrett

Bill: Today is February 3, 1989. We are interviewing Mrs. Louise Stairrett who taught in a one-room schoolhouse. This is taking place in Mrs. Stairrett's home in Dodge City, Kansas.

Bill: When did you start teaching?

Louise: In the fall of 1941.

Bill: Where was this?

Louise: The Brinks School in Platt County, Missouri.

Bill: How old were you when you started teaching?

Louise: Thirty-eight.

Bill: How many years did you teach in this one-room schoolhouse?

Louise: One year, but they asked me back.

Bill: What grades did you teach?

Louise: First through eighth grade. It was like the Hatfields and McCoys. The older boys ruled the school and no one else could play ball with them or anything. The teacher out there said "You won't last a week," and I said "That's what you think." The superintendent came out and said half of the kids play on one side of the schoolground and half on the other. I said "This is America and we're not going to live like that."

Bill: Did you ever think about leaving this school?

Louise: I tell you I never heard such language from kids. The school board told me I had to teach that school and if I needed three boards to use on them, do it. But I never spanked but three kids, a first grader and two third graders.

Louise (continued): I let them know I was in charge. This school had not had a Christmas program in several years because they could not get along. So we had a Christmas program and a pie supper.

Bill: Did you only teach in one one-room schoolhouse?

Louise: Oh no, I later taught in Union One School nine miles north of what is now Jetmore, Kansas.

Bill: What subjects were studied in the one-room schoolhouse?

Louise: Well, we had just about everything. Let's see, we had math, reading, history, general science. Spelling and reading were incorporated together.

Bill: What was the length of the school day and the school year?

Louise: Oh, let's see now. We started at eight in the morning and left for home at three-thirty. This school was a nine month school which is unusual because at that time, most schools were eight months. When I went to Union School it was six months.

Bill: Did you ever use the switch on anybody?

Louise: No, but there was a board member who had four girls and one little second grade boy. This boy wouldn't study and the dad came to me and said I don't dare touch him because of his mom but I want you to spank him. Well, he was the sweetest little guy and it broke my heart but I warmed him up but good (laugh) and it hurt so bad he couldn't sit down. After that, he was the star pupil. Two little Indian girls would fight like savages so, I warmed them both but good with a board and that was the last of them fighting.

Bill: Can you tell us some of the teaching methods that you used when you taught?

Louise: Well, we had workbooks to use and I relied on the upper grades to kind of help me with the lower grades. The basics were taught everyday.

Bill: What teaching aids were made available to you?

Louise: We had nothing. It was all straight from what I had to give them. Every now and then I would bring a paper from home to use.

Bill: Can you describe a typical school day curriculum?

Louise: We always started with our flag salute first. The central subjects were taught first like reading and math. Of course, if there was a current event or something going on I thought was important, we would discuss it. I felt it was important to teach these subjects first because I feel kids as a whole learn better first thing in the morning. I know this because in this day and age when I taught up at Dodge City Junior High I never saw the likes of kids by mid-morning wanting aspirin. We didn't give them any but they didn't eat breakfast.

Bill: Did you group any of the grades together?

Louise: I would teach state history to seventh and eighth grade both, you see. I would put as many grades together as I could, you see.

Bill: Can you tell us the approximate length of time you devoted to each subject?

Louise: Well, I tell you, math and the essential ones we spent longer on. I never really thought about it. It came to well over an hour on a subject.

Bill: How did you decide on textbooks?

Louise: They were decided for you. They were there, I guess it was the board. I don't know just what they did.

Bill: What would you say the atmosphere of your school was? Was it strict or fairly easygoing?

Louise: Well, I had to be strict because they (kids) had run teachers out before. They told me I couldn't do it and I did. I just got really stubborn. Kids now have even gotten worse.

Bill: What were some of your school rules?

Louise: I didn't have a whole lot of rules. They must have proper behavior.

Bill: What were some special observances of your school?

Louise: We were just out there in the hills but we did have a Christmas program and observed holidays.

Bill: Did your school have graduation exercises for the eighth grade?

Louise: Yes, the county did. All the country schools in that area.

Bill: What was the usual age a child would begin school?

Louise: Around six.

Bill: Did the parents ever try to send four and five year olds to the school to babysit?

Louise: No, none did.

Bill: Did many of the children move in and out of the school during the year?

Louise: No, they were farmers.

Bill: What was the greatest distance traveled by your students and how did they get to school?

Louise: Well, I think about three miles. Nobody could walk to school in a blizzard. Why, you can't see. Most of the students walked but some boys would ride their horses to school. If the weather was really bad, they just wouldn't come.

Bill: Did the students in your school come from a particular cultural background and what nationality might they have been?

Louise: One guy had a Spanish wife. Don't forget the little Indian girls. Most students were just like you would find around here.

Bill: How many students went to school in a typical year?

Louise: Around twenty some.

Bill: What was the average number of years a student spent in school?

Louise: They would quit at sixteen, you know.

Bill: How many years was a student required to go to school?

Louise: Until they finished eighth grade or turned sixteen.

Bill: What was the dress and overall appearance of your students?

Louise: Well, pretty well dressed. About like the kids dress now. No blue jeans though, they wore overalls.

Bill: What was a typical recess like?

Louise: The older kids would play baseball. The older ones would be monitors. Sometimes, I couldn't even go to the restroom. A favorite was also fox and geese.

Bill: Did you have outhouses?

Louise: Oh yes. Separate ones for the boys and girls. The only thing modern we had was an oil furnace.

Bill: Did you play in the snow?

Louise: Yes, the kids loved doing that.

Bill: Did the children or the school provide the sports equipment?

Louise: The board provided very little. The children would generally bring it from home.

Bill: Do you remember the name of any of the textbooks that you used?

Louise: No, I really do not.

Bill: Did the students have homework?

Louise: No, you see these youngsters were farm kids and they had to milk cows and work after school.

Bill: Were students ever absent from school to help their parents?

Louise: Yes, there was some of that in the fall for the crops. They would have to get caught up but that's just the way it was done.

Bill: Did you ever tutor outside of class?

Louise: No, I did not.

Bill: What was the cost of education to the student and family?

Louise: Oh no, there wasn't.

Bill: Were there any outstanding students from your school that later went on to do something significant?

Louise: Quite a number of them. Dr. Holman's wife was my prize debater. I taught quite a few doctors and lawyers. One boy from Jetmore later on went to the Olympics.

Bill: You probably had many amusing moments in your teaching career. Do you recall any that stand out?

Louise: Yes, there were a lot of funny things, sure there were. One time a kid brought in a bullsnake and laid it on my desk. I said "Get that thing off there, you might get my papers dirty!" I was really terrified of snakes but didn't let on. Another time a kid let off one of those stink bombs and the kids started to open the windows to let in fresh air. I said "Oh no, close those windows down. If I have to smell it so will you." I never had any trouble after that.

Bill: Were teachers expected to conduct themselves properly in the community?

Louise: Oh my, you have no idea. You were really expected to conduct yourself well. At this time no married teachers could teach. This took jobs away from girls, you see. Lady teachers couldn't really even date you know.

Bill: Were you in charge of any extracurricular activities?

Louise: Christmas plays and the like. But, there was no extra pay. That just went along with the job.

Bill: Was there a problem with teacher turnover in one-room schools?

Louise: Just when they got married. There was not much for a lady to do back then except teach or be a nurse. But nurses were looked down on because they took care of men. If the girls had to do that nowadays, they would really feel put down. But, I think sometimes we ought to have some of that back. If I would have said "bull" back then, my folks would have dropped dead. The word "female" was not said either. You said "girls" not "females"; it was just terrible. I did not know what the word "pregnancy" meant til I looked it up in a dictionary. You just can't imagine. Courting was altogether different. Oh my, the boy might give the girls candy or something but there was no hand-holding or nothing. It just wasn't done. It was an altogether different world.

Bill: What about heating and lights?

Louise: At Union School we had a big pot-bellied stove. When we faced it our front would be hot and our backs would freeze. We had electric lights at Brink School but at Union we would use kerosene lamps.

Bill: How did the school get water?

Louise: What memories. At Union School in Jetmore we had to have a boy haul a bucket of water from a quarter mile away. Then, we had one dipper and we all used the same dipper. Can you imagine? I just find that unbelievable. Later on, we had water at the schoolhouse and each child had a cup but we dipped out of the same bucket. (laugh)

Bill: Can you describe the interior of the one-room schoolhouse?

Louise: They were all more or less the same. We had slates for blackboards and some were wood painted black. We had a big recitation bench that folded up. At Union they were single desks. We had a hall with shelves for the lunchbuckets and hangers for the coats.

Bill: What types of lunches did the students bring?

Louise: Oh I tell you, I have seen some poor, poor families. One family had seven children and they lived in an old sod house. One winter the south wall fell in and they just put up a tarp and lived like that. The kids would usually bring molasses and biscuits. The rich kids had the very best meats, cakes, and fruits. The kids would fight over lunches. The toughies would beat others up just like they do now.

Bill: Who was in charge of upkeep and repairs of the building?

Louise: The board, but I did all the janitor work and started the fires in the morning and carried in the coal from the coal box. Those types of things were up to me.

Bill: Did the kids have most of their supplies furnished by the school or did they have to bring them from home?

Louise: There was no such thing as school supplies.

Bill: Can you tell us the approximate size of the school rooms?

Louise: Not real big. But, these country schools were all over.

Bill: How were the teaching salaries back then?

Louise: The men got more than the ladies, you see. They were around fifty or sixty dollars a month when I was in school. When I first started teaching I got ninety-five dollars a month. Salaries were very low.

Bill: How was your salary determined?

Louise: By the school board. Years of experience did not matter then.

Bill: Did you have any type of benefits like health insurance?

Louise: Boys! There weren't any hospitals. There wasn't even a doctor.

Bill: What would you do if a kid got sick?

Louise: Take care of them myself or send them home. Lots of people died. Sure they did. There wasn't hardly a family around that didn't have some children dead from diptheria. You just don't have any idea what those people went through. You had to be tough. Dodge City is the only place that had a hospital, but you just didn't go unless you were about to die.

Bill: What was the importance of teachers then?

Louise: Teachers were hired like farmers would buy cheap seed wheat. Teachers were not really considered important, as to what their preparation was.

Bill: Was there any evaluation process then?

Louise: Oh no. The superintendent might come in every now and then.

Bill: Were there any differences in discipline between men and women teachers?

Louise: Not that I recall. I remember one lady who had no discipline problems and taught the kids well. Then there was another who the kids ran out real quick. So it all depended.

Bill: Was the schoolhouse used for community and social activities as well as for education?

Louise: Yes, we had literaries and meetings of different sorts there.

Bill: Did any activities take place with a school that was near yours?

Louise: Oh yes, I had a teacher who lived south of Jetmore. We would have spelling bees together and some other activities.

Bill: What would the students do if you were sick and couldn't make it to school?

Louise: If they could get a substitute, they would. If not, we just wouldn't have school.
No radios in those days to tell people.

Bill: What changes came about after you came back to Union School to teach?

Louise: When I came back to Union School in 1953, they still didn't have a radio, record player or telephone. They had nothing but the bare necessities. The school didn't even have as many books in the library as when I went there years before. It was just like I walked into the schoolroom years before.

Bill: How was the school board at Union School?

Louise: I went to school with most of them when I was younger. They were buddies. But most school boards are dumb clucks. When they put in Kansas retirement one of the members was over at my house all morning trying to talk me into paying seven dollars a month, which was what the district should have been paying.

Bill: How was your salary compared to others in the county?

Louise: At Union, I had the lowest salary in the county, and I had a master's. Teachers were not rich.

Bill: If given the choice, what grade level do you prefer to teach?

Louise: Junior high. Children at that age are a challenge to teach. Youngsters have got to feel like they're adequate, like they're wanted, like they are somebody. It's hard to keep up with that age group.

Bill: Were there any Blacks in this area?

Louise: There were some in Leoti when I first taught. I went to school with Negroes when I was in high school in Hodgeman County, but not in Ness County. There was a big Negro settlement in Hodgeman County in 1878. They were out here to round up cattle.

Bill: Were they treated any differently?

Louise: No, not at all. People in Ness City would always look down on Jetmore because of our Blacks. But you see George Washington Carver homesteaded in Ness County and my grandfather knew him. But they weren't allowed in town after dark. We always had colored boys working for us. We always had them eat with us and everything, so I didn't have any problems.

Bill: If there was any educational change you could make today, what would it be?

Louise: Well, one personal gripe I have is that men teachers, especially, felt all students had to make an A or B or they weren't worth much. And one time I told a group of them what is wrong with a good C? I had a college teacher one time who said "You just wait til ten years after you folks get out of school here. I'll go around and see the ones who really rated and gotten some place and they're nearly always B students." If you can get it without being a bookworm, fine. But the average student doesn't come alive until they're ready to graduate from college. Looking back, I think that's right. These men teachers should not rate a C student low. My word, at junior high age they don't know what they want to do. They don't even know how to study. I think that's one thing I would tell present day teachers to help them, let them know they are some worth. I feel that through the years that is the main thing. If a youngster feels he is worth something and he is somebody, he is going to succeed. And attitude is everything. One last thing is if you taught senior high you were somebody and the grade school teachers weren't much. That is wrong!