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### Mabel Floye Johnson-Cope: Country School Teacher

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**MABEL FLOYE JOHNSON-COPE:  
COUNTRY SCHOOL TEACHER**

**MAX CLARK**

**Summer 1992  
Fort Hays State University**

## CHAPTER II

### NARRATIVE OF MABEL FLOYE JOHNSON-COPE: COUNTRY SCHOOL TEACHER

On Saturday, June 27, 1992 and Sunday, June 28, 1992 informal and formal interviews were given respectively at the home of Mabel Floye Johnson-Cope concerning her career as a teacher. Particular attention was paid to those years she taught in a one-room schoolhouse in Western Kansas. The interviews took place in the living room of Mrs. Cope's home in Topeka, Kansas.

The conversation began with a background of when and where Floye taught in a one-room schoolhouse in Western Kansas. She taught in Cheyenne County in a schoolhouse located north and west of McDonald, Kansas. She taught in the 1916-17 school term and the first half of the 1917-18 school term before resigning in December of 1917 because she got married. Prior to teaching in Western Kansas, she taught two years in one-room school houses in Eastern Kansas. Floye taught in a "little red schoolhouse that was painted white." She went on to say, "Everybody always refers to a little red schoolhouse, but I never saw a red one, they were always white."

Many high school people took a Normal Training Course but Floye took

a Preparatory College Course. She had no training whatsoever to be a teacher. Floye said "I had never even been in a country school." She felt that not taking the Normal Training Course put her at a disadvantage, but that she was determined to be a good teacher. The Preparatory College Course emphasized college preparation with a lot of writing, whereas the Normal Training course emphasized "how to teach."

Floye got her teaching position in Western Kansas by writing to the County Superintendent in Cheyenne County and asking him to send her the names of some schools that did not have teachers for the next year. The County Superintendent sent her the names of four schools that did not have teachers for the next year and she sent letters to them. She heard back from two of them by letter. One of the boards said they did not know any of the applicants so they would hire the first person who answers for their position. Floye was in Holton, Kansas at this time and was dismayed because she knew she was probably too far away to be the first to respond. Her father asked her, "Have you ever heard-tell of a telegraph office?" After that question, she promptly sent a telegram. She was awarded the position and the school board told her, "they thought it was a wonderful thing that she had been smart enough to send a telegram."

The reason Floye decided to teach in Western Kansas was because some girl friends of hers were going to Western Kansas and she decided she wanted to go too. She said the romance of going west and striking out on her own made her do it.

Floye had to pass an examination that tested her knowledge in various subject areas to earn a teaching certificate. She passed that exam and she earned a "Third Grade Certificate". To renew her teaching certificate she had to take another exam which earned her a "Second Grade Certificate". After that, she took another exam which earned her a "First Grade Certificate". The "First Grade Certificate" was then good for as long as she wanted to teach, as long as she continued to teach each year.

The children were not allowed to come to school until they were five years old. They were "supposed" to graduate from the eighth grade by the time they were fourteen years old. Floye prided herself on making sure her students graduated on time. When she went into a school, she taught whatever trades there happened to be. Sometimes a teacher would have all eight grades. Many times though, one or more grades were not represented by students. She had to be able to teach all grade levels.

Floye said she, "endeavored to make school a happy place for

children." She wanted children to want to come to school. Floye remembered how one mother was a little reluctant to send her little girl to school. The little girl thought she wanted to go to school, but her mother did not think she would like it. Floye said the child only missed two days the entire year and those were to go to the dentist.

Most of the students lived within two miles of the school; however, one little boy lived nearly three miles from the school. Floye remembered how he rode a bicycle most of the time. The rest of the students usually walked to school unless the weather was particularly bad, in which case they would ride in a horse-drawn wagon, or occasionally, one of the two cars that were in the community.

Floye's first teaching position was in a one-room schoolhouse called Rosebud School in Soldier, Kansas. She was eighteen years old. Her second teaching position was in Oak Grove School outside of Holton, Kansas in Jackson County. Her third position was also in a one-room schoolhouse called Oak Grove, but this one was in eastern Cheyenne County in the northwestern-most county in Kansas. Specifically, it was seven miles north and three miles west of McDonald, Kansas. She said the schoolhouse is no longer standing. Floye said, "After a while, the 'big

-shots' decided they needed bigger schools so they consolidated school districts and they bussed the children eight or ten miles to school. The little fellows in first grade . . . ." Her thoughts trailed off and she shook her head. When asked her feelings on bussing and consolidation of schools, she said she did not like it. She thought the small school preserved the family values and Christian morals much better than the big schools of the 1940's and beyond.

As was typical in a one-room schoolhouse, Floye taught all of the subjects to the students. Emphasis was placed on reading, writing and arithmetic. She also included social studies, science and music. She said it always bothered her when youngsters did not know all of the states and their capitals. She always emphasized that. In science, she liked to do experiments such as growing beans in an egg shell or observing a butterfly develop from a caterpillar. She also taught music every day. They had a pump organ in her school which she knew how to play, so songs were sung daily.

Floye said that although completed papers were taken home to show their parents, she did not assign homework. There were no work-sheets in those days either. She said that she usually wrote the problems on the

board and the students copied them on their tablets. The tablets were paper and she always insisted on a large sized one. The tablets were similar to the ones of the 1990's, but the paper was much rougher to touch.

Report cards were sent home every four weeks. At the end of the school term, if the child had completed the requirements for the grade level they were in, they would be promoted to the next grade. On the back of a report card, for example, a third grade report card would state that "this child is promoted to the fourth grade." That child would then have to bring that report card back to school the following year or take it with them to a new school to prove what grade level they were ready for. That is how student records were maintained.

There were no state competency tests at that time. However, upon completion of the eighth grade, students had to go to the County Superintendent's office in St. Francis, Kansas to take an exam. Upon successfully passing that exam, a student could then go on to high school. The students from Oak Grove usually went to high school in McDonald or in Bird City, Kansas.

Floye's philosophy of discipline was one of "kindness and sternness".

She believed the students should know what was expected of them. She felt it was important to follow-up on what she asked the students to do. Everything had to have a purpose. She said discipline was never a problem for her and she never had to involve parents in the discipline process.

The school year began the day after Labor Day, in September, and ran through March. She taught a seven-month term. She said some schools had eight-month terms and that a nine-month term was almost unheard of in a country school at that time. Parents wanted children to help at home with farm work, so the seven-month term worked well for that. Most work that youngsters could do on the farm did not get started until April and was usually completed by the time school started in September.

Floye described a typical school day as arriving at school early enough to get her custodian-type chores completed. She said she had to get there earlier in the cold months to get a fire going to heat the school up. She usually arrived at the school before breakfast to get the fire going then would walk a quarter of a mile back to her boarding house for breakfast. She would then be back at school by 8:30 A.M.. School began at 9:00 A.M. and, at 10:30, there was a fifteen minute recess. Lunch was from 12:00 noon until 1:00 P.M.. They had afternoon recess at 2:30 for

fifteen minutes and school was dismissed at 4:00 P.M.. After school she had more custodial duties such as emptying the water from the crock, bringing in firewood for the next day, and sweeping the schoolhouse.

Floye's recollections of Oak Grove School in Cheyenne County were as follows: The stove was in the middle of the room. Some desks were in back of the stove and the older children usually sat there. There were desks on both sides of the room until you got to the front of the room. Across the front of the room was a long bench called a "recitation bench". The children sat or stood at the "recitation bench" when they recited their lessons. In the southeast corner of the room was a raised platform and the teacher's desk sat on that platform. There was a pump organ in the southwest corner of the room. Near the organ was the water fountain which was a large stone crock with a spigot at the bottom. On the west wall were the hooks for coats to be hung on. The restroom facilities consisted of "out-houses". The school did not have electricity, running water, or a telephone. Every day two boys had to carry water in a milk can from Floye's boarding house, one quarter of a mile away from the school, so they would have fresh water. Light was provided by six windows that allowed sunlight inside the schoolhouse.

For a fund-raiser, the school had a "box-supper". That was an event where the children put on a show and whoever wanted to, could bring a box. The box was to be decorated and contained a cold picnic supper for two people. An auctioneer would then auction off one box at a time. Whatever price the boxes brought, the school got that money. Floye said these were a lot of fun. She said, "If a boy was keeping company with a girl, then he was expected to buy her box-supper. Though the donor was not supposed to be known, if the other boys found out whose box it was, they would bid it up so the boyfriend had to pay a higher price." From the receipts of that box-supper they earned \$85.00. With those receipts they bought play-ground equipment such as a slide and some swings. They also bought the teacher a new desk.

They also had a school Christmas program. Floye had a beautiful Christmas tree with no lights, but she did have candles on it. She did not light the candles; however, because she was afraid of starting a fire. Floye recalled two young girls who sang "Away In A Manger". They were both in the lower grades. One sang alto and the other sang soprano. They harmonized beautifully. She said, "Their singing was so beautiful it was just a delight to hear." They were also able to give a treat to everybody at

the Christmas program because of money earned at the box-supper mentioned earlier.

On the last day of school they had a dinner and everybody brought something. She said it was like a family reunion. They had a program at that "get-together" also. Floye said, "I think it is a good thing to have programs because it teaches children to gain personality and learn how to stand up before an audience and talk."

As far as Floye could recall, the costs associated with sending a child to school was the cost of a tablet and pencil and any text books that were required. She said the children were required to supply their own reading books. On many occasions those books were used for years and passed down from siblings.

Floye's salary for her first year in Cheyenne County was \$45.00 per month. Her second year, she was paid \$60.00 a month, which was a healthy raise. When asked about any fringe benefits she might have received, such as health insurance, she replied, "No, mercy no, you were lucky to get \$45.00!" She did not get housing provided either. She said she boarded with a young widow with two small girls for \$2.50 per week. She got free food for helping with children and cooking. Floye confided, "The

widow was not a very good cook." A point Floye noted was that she went home and lived with her parents the other five months of the year and worked in a candy store in Holton, Kansas so she could afford to teach the rest of the year.

The district's school board consisted of three members. It had a clerk, a treasurer and a director. They were in charge of finance and of hiring a teacher. In order to get paid, all three members had to sign her check. Floye said the treasurer would write the check and sign it and then give it to her. She would then have to find the other two board members and get their signatures on the check before she got officially paid.

Floye was evaluated once a year by the County Superintendent. She said she had a good report because she was re-hired for a second term. She was not sure what the criterion was for the evaluation other than how she maintained discipline in the classroom.

There were no extracurricular activities in those days. The children all had chores to do at home in the evening. "They had to get the cobs and the wood in to start the fire," Floye said. Firewood was collected from an area northwest of the school known as "the Canyons" which were actually just big ravines that had some trees around them.

Floye shared various memories of her experiences while she taught in Western Kansas. She remembered one winter day when it started snowing and blowing. She did not think much about it, but the parents did. Slowly the parents started coming in to take their children home. Though she thought they might be over-reacting a bit, she felt it was a parents right to get their children when they felt the need. She said, "The first thing you know, I was all alone. I fiddled around doing chores, emptying the water can and so on, and by that time it was really snowing. It was snowing so hard that you could get lost if you were out." She wondered how she was going to get the quarter of a mile back to her house. She had a heavy coat and a big hand-warmer called a muff. She held the muff up to her face to keep the snow out of her face. She went across the road to a fence and started following it west. When she thought she had walked far enough to be at her house, she crossed her fingers and crossed the road again just hoping to be near her house. She said she was lucky because she came out between the house and the barn. That experience gave her a new respect for what a Western Kansas blizzard was.

That story led to talking about dust storms and how it was not at all that unusual to see drifts of dust along the side of the roads that looked

just like brown snow. She said one winter day they put a freshly iced cake in the smokehouse to get good and cold. The dust came along and the cake got so dirty they could not eat it.

Floye said that because they lived so far from town they could not go to church. The families of the community around the school would have Sunday school every Sunday afternoon in the schoolhouse. Floye went to McDonald and persuaded the minister to come to Oak Grove School every other Sunday afternoon to hold a church service for the community. She said, "Now we had Sunday school and church to bring to the children as well as reading, writing and arithmetic."

Floye spent one night in the home of each of her students. She said, "That was a revelation, you can learn a lot about a child if you can see him in his own home." Some of the people still lived in sod houses. Spending an afternoon and evening in the home of students really helped explain why the children did a lot of the things they did and why they talked like they did.

In the five months that Floye was out of school, she always went to what was called the "Institute". This was a two-week long "crash-course" designed to improve your knowledge and your teaching skills.

Floye started every school day with the flag salute and the Lord's Prayer. Although most school teachers still say the flag salute today, she said she felt the Lord's Prayer was still needed too. "We need to remember who we owe our existence to and we should thank Him every day," she said.

Floye said that, to her knowledge, none of the children she taught at Oak Grove School were still living. She still has relatives in that area and has inquired about her former students and their children. She said, "All the children came from good families. They were nice people. The people were all so friendly. It is sad that they are no longer with us."

As the conversation ended Floye thought it was an honor to have "her story" written and preserved as a little piece of Kansas educational history. She said in closing, "It is nice to reminisce and think about those good times."