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An Oral History of a One-Room Schoolhouse Teacher, Junita Moore Skubal

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AN ORAL HISTORY OF A ONE-ROOM SCHOOLHOUSE TEACHER
JUANITA MOORE SKUBAL

BY
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FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY
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CHAPTER II

NARRATIVE OF JUANITA SKUBAL: A ONE-ROOM SCHOOLHOUSE TEACHER

Juanita Skubal was born and raised in and around Ellis, Kansas and worked in the area for twenty five years as an educator. Her first teaching position was in a one-room schoolhouse in 1947, where she taught for only one term. Two days after the end of the school term Juanita was married and spent the next few years working in a drug store and for a local photographer in Ellis. In 1958 Juanita and her husband moved to California. During her time in California, Juanita worked as a secretary in a school system and as an aid in a social studies resource center, she had not yet finished her teaching degree so she could not teach in California as she had in Kansas. Leaving California in 1965 after the death of her husband Juanita returned to Ellis where she took up college again at Fort Hays and worked as an aid at the elementary school in town. She finished her degree in 1968 and taught in Ellis at Washington Elementary School for twenty five years, retiring in 1991. Juanita still resides in Ellis, Kansas where she is very active in the community helping her friends and neighbors.

Juanita graduated from Ellis High School in 1946 and attended Fort Hays State the following year, taking thirty hours. After her first year in college she decided not to go back to school because her future husband did not want to go back. Her brother-in-law was a board member of the Star Country School, and had told her that they were needing a teacher for the upcoming school term. Juanita decided to take the job and went back to Fort Hays that summer and completed a six week course on school discipline. Although Juanita had only one year of college, she had more experience than most

one-room schoolhouse teachers of her time. In 1947 Juanita began her career as a teacher at the Star School twelve miles north and east of the city of Ellis, in Ellis County School District.

The Star School where Juanita began her career was a small one-room wood frame building that was painted red. The schools front door was on the east side. The building had many windows for light on the north and south sides. Outside there was one outhouse that also had storage space for the wood and coal. Along with the outhouse there was a merry-go-round which sat behind the building, and a flag pole just outside the front door.

The inside of the building had enough space for a teachers desk, fifteen or sixteen students desks which were a chair and desk top combination that had storage under the chairs, some had lifting desk lids that provided storage in the desk for books and papers. All of the desks could be moved, and this became very important in the winter when it got cold in order to move closer to the wood-burning stove which sat in the middle of the room. The building had no running water inside, but there was a well on the property with a hand pump that they could get water from to bring inside by buckets. Juanita thought that the building had lights inside that were run by batteries like the lights in her sisters house. There were also no bathrooms inside and no kitchen or wash room, just a place to hang coats and keep the water bucket, in the entry way as you came in the front door.

In the school term of 1947 and 1948 the Star School had twelve students at the beginning of the year and sometimes thirteen, when Juanita's niece was allowed to go to school with her. Juanita called her niece her only kindergartner, although the Star School did not formally have a

kindergarten class offered, Juanita would teach the girl some of the lessons and let her sit in with the other students while they would read. Juanita said that she had neither a first grade student or an eighth grade student but she had at least one student in grades three through seven. The students came from four or five families who lived within eight or ten miles of the school. All of the children came from families of German descent and attended either the Catholic Church in town or the Lutheran Church near the school.

The children who were taught at Star School were all from farm families and came to school dressed in the clothes that they could work in. The boys wore overalls and boots and so did the girls most of the time or if they wore skirts they would wear slacks underneath, especially when it was cold.

Juanita lived just a mile and a half from the school with her sister's family. She would either drive the family pick-up to school or sometimes walk with her nephew when the weather was nice and the road wasn't muddy. In the days of one-room schoolhouses it was very common for the teacher to live with a family whose children attended the school, Juanita said. She was very fortunate in the fact that the family she lived with were her relatives and also a board member of the school. Her brother-in-law, being on the board was the one who paid her so she didn't have to wait for her check to come in the mail.

Juanita was paid sixteen hundred dollars for an eight month school term which amounted to two hundred dollars per month. For her wages Juanita was not only the teacher but she was also the sole caretaker of the building and the grounds. The money was pretty good for this time considering she lived in her sister's house and had few bills of her own.

In 1947 school started around the first of September and ended the

twenty third of April. The children needed to be out the end of April in order to help on their family farms with the field work that was done in May. The school day started at 8:30 in the morning and ran until 3:30 or 4:00 in the afternoon. The students were given a break in the morning and afternoon, and took however much time they needed for lunch, usually thirty or forty minutes were adequate.

When asked about closing the school due to poor weather, Juanita said that the school was open as long as she could get there, but if the weather was bad, all the families would get a phone call from her to let them know that school was closed. Juanita thought that the school was only closed for about four or five days during a very bad snow storm. The storm started while school was going on and a couple families could not make it to pick-up their children. Juanita had the students gather their books and she took the five students home with her. She said even though the school was closed, those five students still had class with her at home until their parents were able to come get them three days later. Juanita remembers the winter of 1947-1948 as a very hard one, at one point during the winter she remembers not being able to get to town for six weeks due to snow and muddy roads. For a couple months the snow was so deep the farmers had to hire airplanes to haul feed in for the cattle or they would have starved do death.

The Star School was a public school run by the District of Ellis County, the school building was owned by the county and placed on donated land, which was given back to the owner when the school closed. The Star School contained grades first through eighth. Students could start first grade when they were six. At the end of a students eighth grade year they were required

to take a test in order to get into high school. Juanita did not have any eighth grade students in 1948, so she didn't have to prepare anyone for this test. The students who attended Star school could go to either Ellis, Wakeeney, or Hays for high school.

The school was run by the County Superintendent whose office was in Hays. Juanita said she could not remember him ever coming to the school but the school board members did as most of them had children in the school. Juanita was required to send her lesson plans and students progress reports to the superintendents office every month. The school district did not have many resources that could be used at the Star School, they did provide a few shelves of reading books and old texts. The only person who ever came out from the county to the school was the county health nurse. She made a visit one time during the year to see if all the children were healthy and to see if there was anything she needed to help with.

All of the students from second grade through seventh grade were taught in the same manner, as they were all in the same room learning at their appropriate grade levels and helping each other. Juanita would give instructions or read to one age group or a combination of close ranging age groups while the other students would work on assignments that she had given them. Many of the same subject areas that are taught today, Juanita said she taught to her students at Star School, including math, science, history, reading, spelling, english, music, and art. Juanita was especially fond of teaching reading and math because she new those were two very important areas that everyone needed to know. Art was usually worked on by the students when Juanita was working with other groups, and music was taught

first in the day, soon after the children arrived at school. There was not a formal physical education class taught in the school, recess was as close as they came to having one.

The students were provided text books to use that would work with the district curriculum, but they were required to by the workbooks to go along with the text. The students were also responsible for bringing their own school supplies that were needed.

When asked about school discipline policy, Juanita said that to her knowledge there was not any because it was not needed. When the parents came to pick up their children each day she could speak to them if she felt there was a problem, but she doesn't remember ever needing to discuss a discipline problem with anyone. Juanita says those were the the good old days when children listened to their parents and did as they were told.

Making lesson plans was a very important part of the education process as each month she had to send in the plans to the County Superintendent to show that she was teaching according to the district curriculum . The lesson plans were not always followed as written because when you have classes of different sizes and ages all together not everything works as expected.

The students would help each other which was a big help to Juanita. Juanita taught each grade level one at a time, which meant that she would have to teach each subject six times in the day. Each class had there own lesson plans to follow. Juanita would read aloud to the students quite often, as this was an activity that could be done with the whole school. When Juanita first got the teaching job she was afraid of having all the different grade levels in the same room and having to teach to them all. She said this soon became

her favorite part about the job, it was always busy but quite challenging.

A typical day at Star School would begin with Juanita coming in early to get things ready for the coming students. During the winters months Juanita would have to go in a little earlier in order to start the fire. She said that she had never learned how to bank a fire and by morning all the coals would be cold so she would have to start the fire again each morning. The before school chores included bringing in wood or coal for the stove if it was in the colder months and carrying in a freshly pumped bucket of water for the students to drink and to fill the wash basin. Juanita said that the students all supplied their own cups to drink from because she would not let them drink from the dipper. The students would start arriving soon after 8:00 in the morning, school would start at 8:30. Juanita said that one day school was almost delayed by a bull snake that was laying by the door. She was just a little afraid of the snake but she was finally able to get up enough nerve to go past him and open the school.

Juanita started each day with the opening exercises, and then got right into teaching the days lessons. The days lessons usually included teaching in all the subject areas. Juanita would get the students working on their lessons and then she could work with each grade level , she said that the one on one contact was a good way to teach and she could tell how each student was doing. They would take a break in the morning to go outside and use the outhouse if needed and play around to use up extra energy. The school was not very well equipped with playground equipment, but there was a merry-go-round to play on and many balls and jump ropes to play with. Juanita enjoyed watching the kids play ball and she would sometimes play jump rope with the

children. After the short break the students would return to their lessons until it was time for lunch. The students all had to bring their own lunch as the school was not equipped with any place to make hot lunches, although sometimes Juanita would use the heat stove to warm up soup. After the students would eat their lunch they could play on the playground if the weather was nice or play quieter games inside when it was cold out. Lunch usually lasted 40 or 45 minutes then it was back to work until it was time to have another break for the restroom and recess in the afternoon. School would end at 3:30 and the student's parents would be there to pick them up. After the students went home Juanita would stay after to clean up and prepare for the next day of school.

During Christmas Juanita organized a school program for the students to sing for their parents and others who wished to attend the evening program. Santa Claus was their and all of the children had a wonderful time showing off their musical talents. Juanita's sister played the music for the program and the students sang the songs that they had learned in school.

At the end of the school year Juanita took the students on a field trip to Hays. While in Hays the students went to a movie. Juanita could not remember what they saw but thought that it was probably something historical. After the movie she took the students shopping at Duck Walls Department Store. The field trip also included a trip to the park for lunch and to play on the park playground equipment. The trip to Hays was quite a treat for the students because they did not get the opportunity to get to the city very often.

Juanita got married two days after that term was finished and did not return to that job. She really enjoyed teaching at the Star School and learned

much about teaching from the experience, that carried over and was used in her teaching career at Washington Elementary School in Ellis.

The Star School was first opened in 1894 and ran a six month school term. The first teacher was Ada L. Randall whom taught there for two years. In 1933 Doris Dietrich taught at the school for fifty dollars a month and she had 37 students which was near the all time high of 43 students in 1934. The student enrollment started to dwindle just before Juanita got there in 1947 and hit an all time low of 4 students in 1950. Star School was closed in 1964 probably due to the decrease in students and the increase in access to better transportation. Around this time most of the one-room schoolhouses in the area were closing, it was a sign of the changing times. Transportation made it much easier to bring all the children into town for school where they could all receive the same type of schooling.