

A JOURNAL OF WESTERN OKLAHOMA

W E S T V I E W



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Volume 9  
Issue 3 *Spring*

Article 13

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3-15-1990

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### Recommended Citation

Lewis, Kate Jackson (1990) "Three Rewarding Years," *Westview*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 3 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol9/iss3/13>

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## THREE REWARDING YEARS

*By Kate Jackson Lewis*

In early July 1964, my husband, F. C., got a call from Chauncey Barrett, School Board president at Martha, asking us to move to the small Southwestern Oklahoma town to teach. From a financial standpoint, we would profit; and, with three sons in college, we needed an increase in salary. My pay would be the same; but as superintendent, Dad would make considerably more money.

Vividly, I remember driving across the railroad track shortly after noon one hot summer day into Martha. The sun was bearing down so bright that not one person was on the street. Even the lizards had sought a shade to escape the heat. I thought of the movie scenes so often used for establishing the typical Western setting and mood for the story about to be depicted. I even wondered if any were awake that time of day or if they were all enjoying a siesta.

F. C. parked our car under a shade tree in front of the school. Entering the front door, we walked down the hall and into the gymnasium where a man in overalls was painting the walls.

Dad introduced us to the fellow, who told us he was the custodian, then began apologizing for the appearance of the building. With the opening of school just two weeks away, it would take a miracle to get the building painted and restored to orderliness.

I felt only despair at the magnitude of the task we would face if we took the job. But my optimistic husband seemed to enjoy the situation. "It will look so good after it's cleaned up," he said.

Old-fashioned, deeply carved desks, torn maps hanging from their cases, and a scantily equipped science room didn't appeal to me. Of course, I wouldn't be using it much, so I crossed the hall to the combination study hall-library. It contained outdated encyclopedias and fewer than a hundred fiction books, and some of the books had missing pages. A hodgepodge of biography, social science, and language arts books needed repairs, classification, and letters and numerals redone.

The teacherage across the street from the school presented a picture of years of negligence just as did the school building. Stained, torn papered walls, faded carpeting with a dirty, footwide streak extending across dining room and living room, made by the bursting of a water pipe, made me unhappier by the moment. A new sink would be the only plausible solution for the chipped, corroded, rusted, once-white one.

A dusty unceiled attic would be worthless except for storage, though I visualized a future for it if we lived there long enough.

Had I followed my heart instead of my husband, I would have left Martha and headed back to Purcell without even reporting to the school board. The thermometer must have

registered 102 degrees in the shade that afternoon, so after we had inspected the premises, we drove back to Altus to try to find a cool place to talk things over. Dad convinced me that we should wait until after the board meeting that night to make a decision.

Since the window fans weren't in order, Dad and the Board had their discussion outside. I chose to wait in the nearly vacant science room where a piano had been temporarily placed. My piano playing is a step below mediocre, but I needed something to make the time seem short. As I "plunked" aimlessly over the keyboard, recalling memorized bits of mostly gospel music, a dreadful thought presented itself to me-- what if I had to play for the church or school assembly as I had done in times past if no one could do better. I couldn't imagine anything artistic or cultural at Martha. I had things to learn, as will be explained later.

In the backyard session that night, Dad told the Board the salary figure we must have before accepting the school. With the school opening very near, they weren't really in a position to remonstrate. They didn't. It was unanimously and instantaneously settled without discussion.

We took only a few pieces of furniture from our new home, bought a few second-hand pieces, and set up housekeeping at Martha. We had too much space to fill for our skimpy furnishings; but we did have two window coolers, comfortable beds, and a place to cook and serve.

Our 22-year-old son, Joe, stayed with us a month before

because they gave so generously of their time, talent, and love.

My first year at Martha had its "highs" and "lows." I had taught in elementary grades for the past eight years. Now I was to take four high-school and one seventh-grade English classes. The texts had changed, including literature classics I hadn't read for many years--some I had never read. I perhaps studied much harder than did my students.

The Junior Class and its money-making activities became my lot along with a three-act play, their banquet, a "Hootenanny," Sunday community dinner, and the popcorn concession at ballgames as well as the selling of candy door-to-door. Of course the class members worked, but I had to keep it going even if school closed.

In addition to the already scheduled projects, I chose to teach speech fundamentals and give students opportunity to practice good speaking. Finding some talented students, I wanted to see how well they would perform publicly and even took some to a speech contest. A few students did extremely well, considering all the other activities they entered into.

The month of March was so heavily scheduled that I hardly had time to do anything but extra-curricular activities. The stress broke me to the point that I was over-emotional and nauseated most of the time. My migraine headaches became intense even though I took a prescribed barbiturate. It was difficult to desert the youth who had followed in the footsteps of classes that preceded them, but my doctor

returning to college. Dad gave him a job helping make the teacherages livable. Since he would need spending money for school at Southeastern in Durant, he welcomed the chance to earn. A flurry of paint brushes manned by men teachers and custodians went into use. Dad traveled in a hurry to buy new equipment, books, repair materials, and gallons of paint. The Board had given him the authority to buy whatever was needed to make the school plant meet the standards set up by the state's education officials.

Many surprises were in store for me. My "nothing good can come from Martha" attitude became humble; and I must say, I was elated at finding so many bright and talented pupils in a place that had been allowed nearly to disintegrate. Although the school had sunk to a low level, in contrast the homes of these cotton-farming people were well kept, furnished beautifully, and gave evidence that the people maintained high standards. Pianos displayed lesson materials on their racks. Baby Grand pianos graced several homes in the community.

In school, church, and many homes, it was no problem to find a pianist. David Barrett, a high-school senior, played piano or accordian for all of our Christmas programs. His sister Dana could both play and direct when we needed her. Other community people came to help us. Nelson Doughty always managed the lighting for programs and plays.

Instead of a dearth of talent, as I had forethought, Martha community offered a wealth of accomplished people whom I labeled "salt-of-the-earth"

almost demanded that I resign for the remainder of the year.

After a few days of bed rest, I began to feel well enough to help with some banquet speeches. Too, there were two interested speech students whom I just couldn't give up. David Barrett came to my house before school or when he could possibly find some time. He had prepared a cutting from THE ROBE and was advanced to the state tournament. The morning Dad drove him to the meet in Norman, David came by before I got out of bed to show me the improvements he'd made since I had last heard him. I listened as the talented young man re-enacted Marcellus' speech before the emperor declaring that he chose to die rather than to deny that he had become a Christian. David's accomplishment represented much time and effort. He had come so far because of his determination to excel. Whatever he won doesn't matter; or if he didn't win against the state top contestants, he was a winner. It was a thrill to me to see such a wholesome youth perform. He had been taught good basic values by Christian parents and had learned that hard work is rewarded.

I spent the next two years teaching first grade. I immediately loved the Latinos. Such beautiful and fun-loving children! So anxious to learn. Their parents had engrained a desire for learning into them. 🐾

*(KATE JACKSON LEWIS--after a long, interesting, and varied public-schools teaching career--now lives in retirement in Purcell. This article is one of her many contributions to WESTVIEW.)*