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Interview with Kathleen Slimmer

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Kathleen Slimmer

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CHAPTER II:
AN INTERVIEW WITH KATHLEEN SLIMMER

Kathleen Slimmer taught school for a total of fifty-two years in Rooks County, Kansas and Ellis County, Kansas. Twenty-one of those years were spent as a one-room schoolteacher at seven different schools: Windy Ridge, The Hrabe School, Codell, The Benedick School (all in Rooks County), Saline Valley, Lost Canyon and Turkville (all in Ellis County).

Kathleen attended The Benedick School, District 105, for eight years. She then continued her education at Plainville Rural High School where she graduated in 1939. Kathleen knew back in grade school that she wanted to be a schoolteacher. Like so many educators, she was influenced by a special teacher, Velma Collins, who taught Kathleen in the seventh and eighth grade. Velma Collins was a great teacher who really enjoyed helping the children. Kathleen said teaching was about the only profession a girl could go into at that time, and it was a respectable profession. She recalled only one male teacher ever teaching in the one-room schools of Rooks County while she attended and taught. After graduating from Plainville, she attended Fort Hays State University (Kathleen referred to it as Fort Hays Kansas State College) in Hays,

Kansas in the fall of 1939. Kathleen had to only attend one year of college to earn her teaching certificate. It was a thirty-hour program that consisted of core curriculum classes such as: English, history, biology, geography and math. Kathleen stated that there were not any classes that specialized in the art of teaching. The course work strictly targeted the subject matter. After graduating from Fort Hays State University, Kathleen received a three-year teaching certificate for elementary education.

In the fall of 1940, Kathleen began her teaching career at Windy Ridge, District 91, which was located five-and-a-half miles south of Plainville, Kansas. She called it the "The Old Rock School" because it was made out of limestone. During that first year, she had 13 students in six grades. There were supposed to be eight grades but a couple of grades lacked students. Kathleen was only at Windy Ridge for two years because of the closing of the school.

Kathleen continued to teach in a one-room schoolhouse at The Hrabe School, District 103, which was located northeast of Plainville. She made the comment that it was the largest country school in which she taught. There were 22 students in the eight grades.

The Hrabe School was formed in 1888 and was called The Hrabe School because over half the pupils was Hraves. In 1932, there was an

all Hrabe school board, a Hrabe teacher (Miss Eva Hrabe) and all the pupils were Hrabe. From 1933 to the fall of 1939, it remained an all Hrabe school. Kathleen taught at The Hrabe School from 1942 to 1944. She remembered at least half of the students had the name Hrabe.

The schoolhouse was built at the cost of \$288.15. It was a white wood frame building. At the entrance there was a hallway where students would hang their coats and keep their lunch pails. The classroom was one large room. At the front of the room was the teacher's desk that sat on a raised platform that allowed the teacher to look over the students. The students' desks were arranged in rows and each child had their own desk. The desks were fastened to long boards in order to keep the rows straight. This also allowed the teacher to move an entire row when it came time to clean. During the cold months heat was provided by a large pot-bellied stove that was located at the back of the room. There were three long windows on the north wall and three long windows on the south wall of the classroom that provided lighting and ventilation. The school did not have electricity. Kathleen said if the days were cloudy then the classroom was dark, but everyone got along and made the most of it. The school did not have running water but had a well outside. Also, there was no indoor plumbing in the school; out-houses were located behind the school.

The responsibilities of a one-room schoolteacher went beyond the duty of just teaching. Kathleen would arrive at school an hour early in order to get the schoolhouse set-up for a typical day. She would begin the morning bringing in coal from the coal house out behind the school. Once the fire was built, she would bring water in from the well and fill the portable water fountain in the front hall. Then, she would sweep the floor which was necessary because each day after school she would put a sweeping compound on the floor which would settle the dust overnight. Usually the blackboards were clean in the morning because the children would volunteer to clean them at the end of each day. Before the children were to arrive, it was important to have the flag flying outside the school.

The school day would begin with the ringing of the school bell at 9:00 A.M. The children would gather out front of the school where they would join in the flag salute. Kathleen mentioned that the kids would race to the schoolhouse so that they could lead in the flag salute. The kids were proud of their flag. The boys would all be wearing their overalls and long sleeve shirts as the girls wore long dresses or a skirt and a blouse. Once the children were in their desks, Kathleen liked to start the day with the Lord's Prayer. She said she always gave students the option to pray or not pray. Kathleen stated that the students always

seemed eager to learn. School was a way to get out, away from the farm. Learning at school served the children in a way that television entertains them today.

Students were responsible for having a writing tablet and a lead pencil every day. Only a few students would have a ruler and scissors, so they would have to share. Parents would buy the textbooks at Stockton, Kansas at the County Superintendent's office. The textbooks within the county were very similar at each school. In Kathleen's words, the teaching supplies were not very "whoopie," only the bare necessities. The school board did not want to spend money on any art supplies or special books. As for technology, the only machine in the one-room school was a record player. Kathleen believed the one-room schools she taught in kept up with the teaching aids (instructional tools) that were out there at the time. The teaching aids were minimal. Teachers had textbooks, maps, a chalkboard and their own creativity.

The curriculum was put together by the County Superintendent. The County Superintendent would inform the teacher of their duties at Orientation Day which occurred a few days before school started. Kathleen always enjoyed Orientation Day because teachers could pick up tips that would help them in the classroom. This was the only time during the year teachers from the other county schools would formally

meet. There were not any educational workshops for teachers to attend throughout the year. Kathleen remembered going to school board meetings to discuss ideas that could be used to improve instruction in the classroom.

Instruction in the one-room classroom took a lot of time and patience because of the different grade levels. Kathleen would pair an older child with a younger one before starting in on a subject. The older child would be responsible for helping that younger student with any questions they might have over the subject matter being taught. By pairing the students together, Kathleen could devote more attention to those students struggling in certain areas. Also, the classroom would run more efficiently allowing for more instructional time for other subject material in the day and for the year. She said the majority of her teaching time was spent with the older children on more advanced material.. If the students were not helping one another, they were working in their textbooks until it was time for the next subject. The students learned independent study skills because they were not always the ones being focused upon in the classroom. The children had to learn to be patient because the class could not move on to the next subject until everyone had a good understanding of the new material. Also, the

older students had to be patient when working with the younger children.

Kathleen really enjoyed teaching elementary students because of the variety of subject matter. She did not have one favorite subject. She loved being with the kids and finding ways for them to learn the different subjects. In the one-room school the core curriculum was: arithmetic, science, reading, writing, geography and government. Teachers stuck to the curriculum given to them; very seldom did a teacher stray from the curriculum at hand because time did not allow for it. Kathleen enjoyed teaching students of all ages but preferred fourth grade and older. The older students were more challenging because they depended more on the teacher's instruction, and a stronger teacher-student relationship was developed. The younger students (first through third) learned mostly from the help they received from the older students.

Midway through the morning and afternoon, the students were dismissed for a fifteen minute recess. The teacher was supposed to be on the playground with students. The children loved to play games; everyone would play together. A favorite game often seen played by the children in a nearby pasture was softball. At noon the children had an hour to eat and play. Students would eat their lunches inside at their desks and then had recess outside. When the weather did not allow the

children outside, they played board games, drew on the chalkboards and read books or worked on their homework.

Students were always responsible for bringing their own lunch. In the winter at the country schools, mothers would take turns bringing soup and hot chocolate. They would put it on top of the stove in the morning and by noon it would be heated and ready to serve. Kathleen said she did not eat a hot lunch until she started teaching at Plainville Elementary School in 1966.

Kathleen did not recall discipline ever being much of an issue. The children knew what was expected of them, and for the most part school was a place they wanted to be. It was understood by the children that if they got in trouble at school by the teacher, then they would be in trouble at home. If there was a discipline problem, the teacher would go to the parents, and the parents would take care of the problem right away. A discipline problem seldom reoccurred. If a student acted up in school, Kathleen would restrict them from recess or some other classroom activity. Usually the discipline problem would occur with the older children because there would be times they would rather be home helping their mother or father. Kathleen said the teacher always had the support and respect of the parents. It was important to the parents that their children get an education, and the parents believed in the teacher.

School rules were not as important as they are nowadays. Classroom walls were not posted with rules for proper behavior. There was not the friction between teachers and students as there is now. Kathleen said that friction made it so much tougher to teach and enjoy teaching in her later years. Kathleen felt that both the students and parents lost respect for the teacher and the importance of a good education.

The school day would dismiss at 4:00 P.M. Students would rarely stay afterschool for extra help because they had to get home to do chores. The majority of the children walked to school. Very few children lived more than two miles from the schoolhouse. Kathleen recalled each one-room school being located in a district that covered six square miles. Often times the mothers would pick up the younger children at the school in the car. At this time most families had an automobile.

Students often had homework, and it was an important part of the success of the one-room school. Parents would set aside time in the evenings, usually after supper, to work with their children on their homework. Students would spend a lot of time working on reading and arithmetic at home. Kathleen said the children seemed more responsible concerning their school work. Most children were required to do chores at home, so they developed responsibility and a good work ethic.

While the children were busy at home doing chores and working on school work, the teacher would spend many hours carrying on her teaching duties at home. After cleaning and closing up the school, the teacher would take home papers to grade. There was no time at school to grade the students' work. Once the teacher was caught up with the daily grading, it was time to plan the next day's lessons. Planning lessons for a one-room schoolhouse was time-consuming because of the different learning levels for each subject.

There were no extracurricular activities for the children at that time. School was the children's social time. A big eventful day for the children would arise when the traveling library would make its stop at the school. The children could check out their favorite books and return them on the library's next stop. The one-room school did not have its own permanent library. Only a few books, that were often donated to the school, other than the textbooks lined the shelves of the classroom. Students were always eager to read. Reading allowed the children to break away from their local surroundings and explore parts of the world they most likely would never see. Usually when students finished their education, they often remained in the area working on the family farm.

During the school year, the students would put on three or four programs each year for their families. The programs would usually celebrate a holiday such as: Halloween, Thanksgiving and Christmas. The program at the end of the school year was the largest. The students would work really hard in preparation of the program because they wanted to make their parents proud. The programs would involve a skit, singing and recitations. The last program of the year would also celebrate eighth-grade promotion. The entire community looked forward to seeing the children perform.

The last month of school was a stressful time of year for the eighth-graders who were busy preparing for their county tests. The county tests were designed by the state. These tests were very detailed and difficult. In order for students to move on to high school they had to pass the county test. School was mandatory for children to attend first through eighth-grade. However, it was important to most parents that their children go on to high school and earn their diploma even though their children would most likely return to work on the farm. If a student did not pass their county test, they might be passed on conditions based on the teacher's and County Superintendent's recommendation. It was not uncommon for a student to return to the eighth-grade.

Report cards were sent home with the student at the end of each month. The parents would sign the card and make comments to the teacher if necessary. Students received a letter grade or percentage for the following subjects: social studies, reading, writing, spelling, English, art, music, arithmetic and citizenship or conduct. The following grading scale was used at the Rooks County Schools: an A was 95 to 100, a B was 88 to 94, a C was 82 to 87, a D was 75 to 81 and failing was below a 75. The promotion to the next grade was designated on the back of the report card.

The school year began the day after Labor Day and went through April. Most rural schools used an eight-month school term that allowed the children more time to help with the farm work and harvest. Kathleen would spend her summers at summer school at Fort Hays State University working on her recertification. Teachers would need to earn eight hours to recertify for three additional years. Most of the course work involved core subject material that she could use in the classroom. Teachers had to pay for their own hours for recertification.

Kathleen's salary for her first year of teaching at Windy Ridge in Rooks County, Kansas in 1940 was fifty-five dollars per month. Teachers were only paid during the eight school months. During the summer months while attending Fort Hays State University, Kathleen would work

at the library where she earned twelve dollars a month. Kathleen said it was always enough money to do the things that needed to be done. It was not until she started teaching at Plainville Elementary School in 1966 that she received a twelve-month salary.

Each one-room school belonged to a school district that had its own board of education. Usually the school board was made-up of three members of the community who had children in the school. The board was in charge of the school building and the finances. Only the school board members and the teacher had a key to the schoolhouse. The school board also had the final say on the hiring and firing of the teacher after hearing from the County Superintendent. There were no salary disputes during Kathleen's years as a one-room teacher. A teacher's salary depended on the number of students. Teachers never thought about negotiating their contract. The duties of a one-room school teacher were just understood; they were not always written in the contract. Cleaning the school and preparing the stove were duties that had to be done if the school was to function. Kathleen emphasized teaching was not about money; it was about the children.

Kathleen was evaluated by the County Superintendent once per year. She said the superintendent would spend the entire day in the school observing and participating in the class activities. At the end of

the day the superintendent would offer suggestions that might improve instruction. The evaluation was always verbal not written. She said if a teacher was having a lot of problems with their teaching or with discipline they would be let go quietly and a new teacher would be hired.

After teaching at The Hrabe School, Kathleen had the opportunity to teach at The Benedict School where she attended school as youngster. She only taught there for one year as it was closed down, and the students moved to the Plainville Elementary School. Kathleen taught the fourth grade at Plainville in 1946 for four years before marrying Wayne Slimmer and moving to Ellis County to farm. She stayed away from teaching for one semester. She started back up in a one-room school in Ellis County, called Lost Canyon. Lost Canyon was located along the Codell-Katherine Road. She taught at Lost Canyon for ten years. Kathleen finished up her one-room school teaching experiences at Turkville which was in Ellis County along the Saline River Road. Most of the one-room schools along the Saline River were made of stone or brick. These schools were in a rich district because of the oil. The river schools also had electricity and indoor bathroom facilities. She referred to those schools around Plainville as "the schools on the flat" because of the land and its few hills.

In May of 1966 she would say good-bye to the one-room school and finish out her teaching career at Plainville Elementary. Her only reason for leaving any of the one-room schools was because the schools had become old and deteriorating which led to their closings. Only a few one-room schools along the Saline River kept their doors open after she left Turkville.

Kathleen retired from teaching in May of 1993. She said it was time to retire as it became harder to teach in the later years. She commented that teaching is tougher today than it was in the one-room country schools because there is less support from parents. In the earlier years parents believed in a teacher's ability to educate their child, and a teacher was not blamed for a child's shortcomings. Now teachers have to watch what they say or do, or they might be sued.

Kathleen found it hard to compare the one-room school to today's public schools. The structures of the two types of schools are so different that they have their own plus and minuses. Personally, she thought kids learned better social skills in the public schools because they were interacting with kids their own age. As for the one-room school, she felt instruction was as good as the public schools; however, the one-room school did not have the special educational resources to help those children with special needs. The one-room school did its best to try to

educate everyone. It would be hard to compare beyond that because the times have changed, society changed (more materialistic) and the upbringing of children (family structure) has changed. If Kathleen had to choose between the two schools, she would send her kids to the public school because she said, "a lot of life is going on in a bigger place." The kids are better prepared for the real world in the public schools.

Kathleen defined education as getting ready for the future and preparing the children for what lies ahead.