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Interview with Ida Skibbs Wohlford

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Ida Skibbe Wohlford

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CHAPTER II
ORAL HISTORY OF IDA WOHLFORD
ONE-ROOM SCHOOL TEACHER

Janet: This afternoon I'm visiting with Ida Skibbe Wohlford of Geneseo, Kansas. My oral history interview is about Ida's experiences when she taught in a one-room schoolhouse in Marion County, Kansas. She taught there in 1925, 26, and 1927. This interview is taking place at her home on October 30, 1990. Ida, before you started to teach, what kind of teacher education did you have?

Ida: After my sophomore year in high school, I decided to take normal training at Marion High School so I could teach; therefore, I had to take all the classes that were required for normal training.

Janet: What classes did you take?

Ida: They were literature, geometry, psychology, physiology, grammar, arithmetic, reading, and American History. I also had to take writing because the principal said that I needed to improve my writing. At the end of both my Junior and Senior year, we took normal examinations and I passed.

Janet: Who taught your normal training classes?

- Ida: I do not remember the names of all the teachers, but Mr. Moneypenny was the principal and he taught some of the classes.
- Janet: How many people took normal training in your high school?
- Ida: There were ten.
- Janet: Were they all girls or were there some boys?
- Ida: There were three or four boys.
- Janet: After you graduated from high school, what was the next step in becoming a teacher?
- Ida: We took the normal training examinations and had to passed. Then we had to become certified and this had to be done by the state. The county superintendent had to sign the certificate.
- Janet: Could you tell me about the normal training exams?
- Ida: We met at the high school in the springtime and I don't remember who was in charge but it was probably the principal or the county superintendent. There were ten tests, one for each of the subject areas covered in normal training. A score of 80% or less on an individual test was failure.
- Janet: Was it a one day or two day test?
- Ida: It was a two day test.
- Janet: What kind of teaching certificate did you have?
- Ida: A Normal Training Teachers' Certificate for two years. It could be renewed.
- Janet: When you were teaching in a one-room school, what

kind of supervision did you have since there wasn't a principal in the building?

Ida: The county superintendent came out. Very rarely a school board member would visit.

Janet: Did you know when the superintendent was coming?

Ida: No, I had no idea.

Janet: Did he watch you for a day?

Ida: No not usually. It was an afternoon or part of a morning.

Janet: What kind of reports did you have to make out?

Ida: We kept attendance and recorded grades of the children. They were sent along with an end of a year report to the county superintendent.

Janet: Now that we talked about how you became a one-room school teacher, let's visit about the school building itself. Do you know when the schoolhouse was built?

Ida: I don't know.

Janet: What was the name of your school?

Ida: Finch School.

Janet: Where was Finch School located?

Ida: Four miles east and two miles south of Hillsboro, Kansas.

Janet: What was the Finch Schoolhouse made out of?

Ida: Wood.

Janet: What type of heating did the schoolhouse have?

Ida: One big stove that was at the back of the room.

Janet: Where you in charge of keeping the coal in it?

Ida: Well, we had coal and kindling wood for our stove. The teacher was in charge of making the fire and keeping it going. We kept it in a little building on the school ground. It locked on the outside and you had to be careful or you would lock yourself in.

Janet: Did you ever lock yourself in?

Ida: I did. I had to stay until someone let me out. Unfortunately that wasn't until the next morning. Luckily that only happened once.

Janet: What kind of lighting did the school have?

Ida: Mainly the sunlight that came through the windows. We did have gas lamps that was used on special occasions. Other than that we didn't use lamps at all.

Janet: How about the toilet facilities?

Ida: They were something else! There were two of them, located on opposite sides of the schoolyard. One was for the boys and one was for the girls. They were the regular "johns" with the little half moons on them.

Janet: How did the school get the water that you drank?

Ida: They had a well on the schoolyard.

Janet: Then you brought the water from the well into the school?

Ida: Yes, we brought the water in a bucket for the day's

use.

Janet: Did everyone have their own cup?

Ida: Yes.

Janet: Did they bring their cups from home?

Ida: Yes, they brought the cups at the first of the year and kept them all year at school. A dipper was kept in the bucket so the children didn't dip their cups in the bucket. This was to avoid spreading germs.

Janet: What is the significance of the school name?

Ida: I do not know. I guess a former school board member was named Finch.

Janet: What did the inside of the schoolhouse look like?

Ida: It was a small white frame building. On the inside was one big room. There were blackboards in the front and the back of the room. It had a stove in the back and there were windows on the two sides which let enough light in for the children to do most of their studying. However, as I mentioned before, there were coal oil lamps which could be used on dreary days or special occasions. There was also a little entrance way where the students kept their coats, lunches, and balls for recess. In the front was the recitation bench and the teacher's desk. Some recitation benches had backs, ours did not. There were also twelve students' desks in the room.

Janet: Did you have any maps?

Ida: Yes, we had a map of the United States, a Kansas map, and a map of the seven continents. I also had a large globe sitting on my desk. I don't think a lot of teachers use globes these days.

Janet: Who was in charge of the upkeep of the school?

Ida: The school board members took care of repairs and I was in charge of keeping the building clean with the help of the students. I remember one of the housecleaning chores was dusting erasers. On Friday afternoons, I would assign students to go outside and hit the erasers together. Some other chores would be cleaning the blackboard and straightening the books in the library. The teachers were also the janitors in the one-room schoolhouse.

Janet: How many school board member were there and do you remember their names?

Ida: There were three members and their names were Ed Winkley, Sam Eitsen, and J.E. Kafton.

Janet: During the year did you have any special events that went on at Finch School?

Ida: We had picnics, a Christmas program, and cake walks.

Janet: Were you in charge of the Christmas program?

Ida: Yes and that was a big event. The children worked for weeks on it. We had a play. Before the play there was a pot luck dinner. It was a lot of work.

Janet: Were the cake walks a fund raising event?

Ida: They were for fund raisers. Each student was responsible for making a cake. Some were very fancy and others plain. The community would come to the school to try to win a cake. It was a big event.

Janet: Did you have any box suppers?

Ida: Box suppers were where the women and girls in the community fixed up fancy boxes all beautifully decorated with a whole picnic supper in them and were auctioned off to the highest bidder. I was a little apprehensive about the men bidding against the boxes just in case there was somebody that didn't get the box they wanted and would get upset. So I tried to avoid having them.

Janet: Tell me more about the end of the year picnic.

Ida: The end of the year picnic was on the last day of school. It was an exciting event. Many parents came with picnic lunches for their families. The adults sat around and ate and visited while the kids played games. In the afternoon, the students put on a program. After the program, I gave awards for perfect attendance and promoted the different children to the next grade.

Janet: Did the community come in to the events?

Ida: Yes, we had a good attendance. Parents and people from miles around attended.

Janet: Was the schoolhouse used for any other events besides school events?

Ida: I think it was also used as a voting poll during the elections. That was all though.

Janet: Do you know what happened to the Finch Schoolhouse?

Ida: I just recently asked whether it was still there and it is not still standing.

Janet: Let's look now at the students that attended Finch School. What was the usual age a child began school?

Ida: Mostly they were six years old, but once in a while, a younger child would have an older brother or sister and were ready to go to school, so I would let them come.

Janet: Did children move in and out of the school district during the year?

Ida: We had very few changes in the school year. The students came from farm families.

Janet: The students that you taught were they from three or four families?

Ida: I had eleven students in 1925. They came from six different families.

Janet: I see you have the students names for the first year that you taught. Who are they?

Ida: Eldena Schlotthauer was in the first grade. Lucille Winkley was in the second grade. Joe Winkley and Warren Olsen were in the third grade. Sylvester

Kafton and Mabel Winkley were in the fifth grade. Evelyn Olsen and Florence Nelson were seventh graders. Olive Kafton, Doris Olsen, and Susan Klassen were the eighth graders. Susan Klassen came back after she passed her eighth grade exams because for some reason she could not go to high school and she wanted to go to school.

Janet: What kind of clothes did the children wear to school?

Ida: The kids were all pretty well dressed. They didn't wear jeans or slacks of course but they did look nice. The girls wore dresses and many of them wore pinafore aprons to protect their dresses. The boys wore bib overalls. They might not have been the latest styles, but they looked nice. They dressed comparable to all the children in that area.

Janet: How did the students get to school where you taught?

Ida: Usually they walked. Most of the children did not live more than a mile or so from the school. Sometimes a child would ride horseback or were brought in a truck, but mostly we all walked.

Janet: Did the students come from a particular cultural or heritage background?

Ida: The Olsens and Nelson were from Sweden, I think. Also, some of the students had a German background.

Janet: Did you teach all grade levels at Finch School?

Ida: I taught all grades except fourth and sixth grade.

Janet: What was the reason for this?

Ida: The reason for this was there were no students in that grade.

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

Ida: Most of them went to high school so the average year was twelve years.

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

Ida: I think it was eight.

Janet: Now let's discuss the area of curriculum and what was taught in the school. First of all, how long was the school day?

Ida: The day began for the students at 9:00 a.m. and ended at 4:00 p.m. I would ring the bell at 8:30 to let the students know they had thirty minutes to get to school. We would start with opening exercises. After the opening exercises, we would start our recitations. We had a fifteen minute recess in the morning and a fifteen minute recess in the afternoon. Lunch hour was about an hour long. The children would eat their lunches quickly so they would have a long time to play.

Janet: How long was the school year?

Ida: I think we started in September and ended in April. I'm not quite sure of this but it was a farming community and the boys were needed in the fields to work.

Janet: What subjects did the children study?

Ida: In the first grade, we had reading, arithmetic, writing, and spelling. The second graders studied the same subjects and language, which is called english today, was added. The upper grades were also taught geography and history. Agriculture and civics, which is probably similar to American Government, were taught in the seventh grade. In the eighth grade, the classics and Kansas History were also studied.

Janet: With so many subjects, how was it possible to cover so many age level subjects in one day?

Ida: Some classes were only five minutes long, others were ten, and the longest would only be fifteen minutes long. The children more or less depended on themselves for their learning. Students worked on assignments at their seats while another class would be reciting in the front of the room. The children were used to this and learned a lot from listening to recitations.

Janet: Did you have any special education classes?

Ida: We didn't have any. There really wasn't any time to have any more classes.

Janet: Would you describe a typical day.

Ida: We started every morning with opening exercises. Opening exercises included saying the flag salute and the Lord's Prayer. Then we would sing. That was all the music we had was the singing in the morning.

Janet: Did you play the piano?

Ida: No, I had a pitch pipe. They really enjoyed the singing because we used the Little Golden Rod Songbook. It had a variety of songs in it. For example, we sang "America the Beautiful", "Battle Hymn of the Republic", and "Row, Row, Row your Boat". It had church songs and action songs. We had a lot of fun singing.

Janet: What happened after morning exercises?

Ida: Then we would start our recitations.

Janet: Please explain the procedure for recitations.

Ida: Recitation for each class was not very long. Everybody had to recite in reading and math everyday. There wasn't much time for discussion. The students just answered questions or read aloud, or they worked problems on the blackboard, and then class for that grade was over. If other students finished assignments and was interested in the subject being taught, he or she could listen to the other classes recite. Often times the kids would learn simply by listening to recitations.

Janet: What were the other children doing when you were working with one group?

Ida: Usually they had their own assignments and were working on them, while they were waiting their turn on the recitation bench.

Janet: What kind of methods did you use while you were teaching?

Ida: As I mentioned previously, we recited everyday. I also used a great deal of rote memorization. I had the children do a lot of drills. We also had a contest to learn how to add, subtract, multiply, and divide. I made flash cards and the students enjoyed using them. The children liked to compete in spelling contest to get ready for the county and state spelling bees. Flash cards were also used in reading to help students learn their phonics.

Janet: Did your school have a library?

Ida: A very small one.

Janet: How many books?

Ida: Around thirty. They were arranged on shelves in the back of the room.

Janet: Did you have an art class?

Ida: We didn't really have art. Art supplies were very limited and were not provided by the school. We would draw, paint, and color pictures. Usually

around Christmastime we would make some small craft for the parents.

Janet: In any teaching situation, discipline is always an area of prime concern. What were some of the usual actions that you had to halt misbehaviors?

Ida: Forms of discipline I used was a stern reprimand. I also would have students sit in the corner. The last alternative I would use was ask him (or her) to leave the room. I know some teachers would, but I didn't do it personally, was hit student's hands with a ruler if they were misbehaving.

Janet: If you did have any real discipline problem with the children, how were they handled, did the parents get involved?

Ida: No, I don't think parents ever got involved. I do know that if a child got in trouble at school, a brother or sister would tell his parents and he (or she) would get the same punishment or worse at home. However, I really didn't have any discipline problems.

Janet: Other than discipline problems, were the parents cooperative?

Ida: The parents were very cooperative. I remember when it was very cold, the parent that I stayed with took me to school and started the stove. The parents would offer help, but I didn't ask for help.

Janet: Speaking of cold weather, did you ever dismiss for bad weather?

Ida: I don't ever remember not having school because of bad weather. I remember sometimes some kids did not make it to school on bad days. But we always had school.

Janet: While you were teaching at the one-room school, where did you live?

Ida: I lived with the school board treasurer's family, Ed Winkley.

Janet: Was there a problem with teacher turnover back in the 1920's?

Ida: I guess there was.

Janet: What were the causes of it?

Ida: I guess marriage was one of the causes. If a teacher got married, in most cases her contract immediately ceased, and the school board would not hire a married teacher. Another reason for turnover was some teachers thought they would make a good teacher; but after one year they left the teaching profession. I guess another reason teachers left would be lack of discipline; because if you couldn't keep discipline and couldn't keep the school quiet and the children attending to their own business, there was no learning. Another reason for leaving the one-room school was to further education. This is what I did.

After two years of teaching at Finch School, I decided to go to Emporia Teachers College to get a lifetime teaching certificate. After receiving that certificate, I moved to Dodge City and taught second grade.

Janet: Another matter of concern in the one-room school was the salary of the teacher. What kind of salary did you receive?

Ida: The first year at Finch, I received \$75 a month. The second year I got a raise and received \$90 a month.

Janet: How did you receive your paycheck?

Ida: It was a check and I received it monthly.

Janet: Who gave it to you?

Ida: Ed Winkley. It was very convenient since I lived with his family to get my check every month.

Janet: How did you get money for the special items that the school needed?

Ida: I would ask the school board. If they did not have any extra money, I would have a fund raising event.

Janet: Did the school have a graduation exercise?

Ida: Most grades were just promoted at the end of the year picnic. I gave each student a little book for a memento of their school year.

When the eighth grade was completed, all the eighth graders in Marion County were included that passed their eighth grade exams. If the

student received grades 90% or higher on the exams, he or she were given special recognition.

Janet: Did you go on any field trips when you were teaching in a one-room school?

Ida: The day before the last day of school, the students and I would take our lunches and have a special picnic. Once we walked to some nearby rocks and caves. The children had fun exploring. We were tired by the time we got back to school. I guess you could call that a field trip.

Janet: Were you highly watched in the community?

Ida: A teacher was expected to conduct herself morally well.

Janet: Were you required to attend church in that community?

Ida: No, but I usually went home on the weekends and went to church with my family. If I would spend a weekend with the Winkley's, they always invited me to go to church and I would go.

Janet: Ida, I have enjoyed reminiscing with you this afternoon about the one-room schoolhouse. Thank you very much.