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1992

### Interview with Alden Olson

David Alden Olson  
*Fort Hays State University*

Alden Olson

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#### Recommended Citation

Olson, David Alden and Olson, Alden, "Interview with Alden Olson" (1992). *College of Education One-Room Schoolhouse Oral Histories*. 138.  
<https://scholars.fhsu.edu/ors/138>

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## CHAPTER II: ORAL HISTORY OF ALDEN OLSON ONE-ROOM SCHOOL TEACHER

On Friday, July 3, 1992, Alden Olson was interviewed about his experiences as a one-room school teacher. The interview took place in his motel room in Denver, Colorado, as his wife was recuperating from abdominal surgery. The interview was recorded on a cassette player before it was narrated into this chapter.

The interview began with a description of the buildings on the school site. There were a total of four buildings at the site of Bower School District #70: the main schoolhouse, the woodshed, and two outhouses. Each building was a wood structure painted white. The woodshed stored the wood and coal for the year's heat. As there was no plumbing on the premises, the outhouses were used for bathrooms. The schoolhouse had a wooden floor, and the west end was raised about six inches to be used as a stage for any programs. The teacher's desk was also located on the platform. The walls were boarded about half-way up, and the remainder of the walls and the ceiling were covered with plaster.

Electricity was the only utility that the school had. The water had to be packed in by the president of the local board of education or his children on a daily basis. There was no handpump nor flushing toilets.

Heat was supplied by a wood or coal-burning stove. The stove would have to be fired up early in the morning to have a warm classroom by the time the students arrived. Telephones were also not available at this school. If a message needed to get to the students or the teacher, one would have to call the nearest neighbor and relay the message through him.

Mr. Olson was twenty-one years old when he started teaching at Haigler, Nebraska, for the 1951-52 school year. He had to have a permit to teach in Nebraska and at least forty-five college hours of credit. To teach in Kansas, he had to have at least sixty college hours. So after his first year at Haigler, he enrolled at McCook Junior College. He graduated from McCook with an associate degree in 1953 and began teaching at Bower School in the fall of 1953. His teaching certificate was good until 1955 when it was automatically renewed with a continuous 60-hour elementary certificate which would remain valid as long as there were not six years of non-use. This means that as long as Mr. Olson never took more than five years off from teaching, his certificates was valid for life. This was the last year that the state issued the life-time certificate, as far as Mr. Olson could recall.

The Board of Education of Bower School consisted of three members living in the township of the school. The offices held were president,

secretary, and treasurer, and they were not directly responsible to any other board in the County, as Mr. Olson remembered. The Board was in charge of hiring the teachers, supplying the water, and keeping up the schoolgrounds. In Mr. Olson's case, the Board came to McCook and interviewed candidates for the job at Bower. Once a month, the president would drop by the school and pay the teacher if the president was fortunate enough to find the other two officers to sign the check. Mr. Olson was paid \$2800 for his first year of teaching. He had no other fringe benefits or compensation for chores outside his teaching duties.

Some of these duties outside of teaching consisted mainly with the upkeep of the daily use of the schoolroom: sweeping and dusting, cleaning erasers, starting the fire, setting up the water, etc. He did have some of the students perform some of these chores. The residents of the township and the Board were responsible for the upkeep of the buildings, the grounds, and the playground equipment. There was no need for the collection of fees or dues, so Mr. Olson did not have to worry about any money matters.

Mr. Olson was formally evaluated once a year by the county superintendent. Each month, Mr. Olson had to record the students' grades and report to the county superintendent of what had gone on during the

month. On the back of this report was a form the superintendent would sign, date, and comment on any of his/her observations made during a school visitation.

Mr. Olson taught a wide range of subjects which is not that much different from the subjects taught today. He taught math, reading, English, science, health, spelling, and social studies. The students did not receive any music or physical education instruction, but Mr. Olson did teach art and woodworking on Fridays after the afternoon recess. These two areas would also be taught during the lunch hour on days when inclement weather prevented outside activities.

Kindergarten was not taught by Mr. Olson, and he believed that no rural school offered kindergarten. He taught grades one to eight, although many times there would be no students enrolled in some grades. The first few years he taught at Bower, he averaged about eight to nine students a year. However, later the state required an enrollment of ten students in a school in order for the school to receive state aid. It was a struggle to get ten students at times, and Mr. Olson would have to recruit students. One of those students was his oldest son. His son had completed kindergarten in Atwood, but he was the tenth student for Bower as a first grader for the 1958-59 school year. The students were grouped according

to grade for the most part, but occasionally, he grouped students by ability for some extra-curricular activities.

The students were promoted by Mr. Olson's recommendation. The students had to earn a grade of 70 per cent or higher on their subjects. This was not a problem, as the students were "eager beavers." The eighth graders were promoted on the same basis and were expected to attend a county-wide graduation to enter high school. Most of the rural eighth graders went on to attend high school at Atwood Community High School, but some students did attend other high schools of their choice in other towns or states. The eighth graders did not have to pass a state test to be promoted to high school. The only state-mandated test was the SRA achievement tests given to all students every year.

When asked about how much homework the students had, Mr. Olson mentioned that they did not have very much, if any. As he stated earlier, the students were "eager beavers" and worked very hard so as to not have to take anything home. Many of the students would have work and chores to do when they got home, so they did not want a lot of homework to go along with their work at home. The parents greatly encouraged the students to complete the work as soon as possible.

Basically, Mr. Olson worked with the older students first and got them going on their assignments. Then he would work with the younger students. As the older students finished their work, they would then work with some of the younger students. They would listen to the young readers and work with flash cards. This took a burden off the teacher and freed him up to work with some of the other children that needed individual help.

There was not a great deal of instructional material available during this period of education. There was the blackboard, of course, but no workbooks. Mr. Olson had to type up his own worksheets if he needed anything. Since he never had very many students in any one grade at a time, he typed up extra copies of a worksheet using carbon paper. There was a wax copier that Mr. Olson tried to explain. He typed the work on this waxed paper and then tried to print off copies. The copies were never very clear, so he found that the carbon-paper method was handier for his purposes.

The state mandated the types of books to be used in the schools; therefore, all students were using the same books throughout the state. The books weren't always very current, but they would be updated once in a while. The school did not provide the books for student rental. The

parents were responsible for acquiring the books. They could buy new or used books in town, or they could trade with other families or relatives. Churches and other associations would sometimes help in the process of book exchange.

Mr. Olson really enjoyed his years as a rural teacher. The parents were behind him all the way. The parents did not "crowd the teacher"; instead, they believed in the teacher and supported him quite a bit. As a result, the students had respect for the teacher and were well disciplined.

Mr. Olson's philosophy in discipline was wrapped up in what he called the three-F's: firmness, fairness, and fun. He dealt with the students with firmness, but with fairness. At the same time, fun was essential. If the student couldn't experience some fun, then the behavior could become a problem. Personally speaking, I remember a time when Mr. Olson had me stand for a period of time with my nose in a circle drawn on the blackboard. The circle was at a height a little higher than my nose, so I had to tiptoe to reach it. I don't recall the offense for my punishment.

The parents not only supported the teacher, but they were behind the school and students, also. The school did not have many functions, but the Christmas play was the most important. Not only did the parents turn out

for the program, but so did most of the grandparents. That little school was quite packed on the night of the Christmas play.

No doubt the parents would have attended all parent conferences, if there were any. Parent-teachers conferences were not held in the rural schools at that time. Mr. Olson would meet with the parents when a need arrived or, informally, outside the school. On many of these occasions, the talk might deal more with the crops than with the school. Report cards were sent home on a monthly basis, so the parents were kept up to date on their students' progress.

The school year consisted of 157 days. It usually began in the first week of September. Sometimes it might be the last of August and the beginning of September. The last day of classes was in the month of April. The 157-day school year was a carry-over from earlier years when the students were needed at home for farmwork. In Mr. Olson's opinion, the students were not needed as much then as they were several years earlier.

The school observed many of the same holidays that we observe today. If school did start in August, then they would get Labor Day off. Thanksgiving and the Friday after were also vacation time. They also took a week off for Christmas vacation. However, they had no spring break, but they did get Good Friday off whenever it occurred during the school year.

Outside the Christmas play, the school did not have any other special observances or occasions. They usually did something special at the end of the year. They would take field trips to Grinnell or Quinter, Kansas, to the Rock Pyramids or take in the circus at McCook, Nebraska.

In the case of inclement weather, Mr. Olson was responsible for the cancellation of school. He would call the Board president and check the weather conditions in the country. Then with the advice of the president, Mr. Olson would decide about school for that day. He stated that they usually never missed more than two or three days. The schools were not required to make up lost days as strictly as schools do today. In fact, one Easter, Mr. Olson wanted to take his family to Sunrise Services at Red Rock Theatre in Colorado. He asked the county superintendent if he could close school with only 154 days taught; she gave him permission to do so.

A typical day for Mr. Olson began with arrival at school between 7:45-8:00. Since he lived twelve and one half miles from school, he had to leave town about 7:30 in the morning. Luckily, eleven of those miles were on the highway. Classes began at 9:00, so Mr. Olson had time to get the fire going, dust and clean the building, and complete any last-minute preparations for the day. Classes were over at 4:00, and after the flag

was brought in and the water was emptied, Mr. Olson would pack up his work and go home about 4:15.

A typical day for the students usually began with a softball game while everyone was showing up for school. Mr. Olson would either participate or umpire the game if he had his other chores done. At 9:00, classes would begin. As mentioned earlier, the older students had their classes first, so they could be used to tutor the younger students. At noon, the students would wash their hands and eat their sack lunches they brought from home. They would then have recess or art, depending on the weather, until 1:00. The afternoon classes would run until 4:00. There were two fifteen-minute recesses at 10:30 and 2:30.

The school did not provide transportation for the students. The parents were responsible for getting their children to school. The farthest any child had to come to school was four miles, with the exception of the one or two students recruited as the tenth student. Since this was a rural area and the distance was very short, a few of the older students were allowed to drive themselves to school.

I concluded the interview with Mr. Olson by asking him if there was anything that I might not have covered with my questions. He politely mentioned that I did a pretty good job of covering everything. I am sure,

though, that this kind of research needs to be continued in order to acquire a very complete understanding of the one-room school houses. The information will help present teachers and teachers-to-be understand where the education process came from and where it could be heading.