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Interview with Bob and Rose Hillman

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CHAPTER II: INTERVIEW WITH BOB AND ROSE HILLMAN

Rose Hillman taught in country schools from 1945 to 1950. Bob Hillman taught from 1946-1949. They taught in several different country schools located in Trego and Russell Counties.

The reasons Bob and Rose Hillman decided to teach were the need for money and the availability of jobs. Living through the dust storms and depression of the 1930's gave them the desire to find jobs that paid well. Rose comes from a long line of teachers. Her mother taught at country schools during the first part of the 20th century as did several aunts and great-aunts. Bob decided to enter the teaching profession after he left the Navy in 1945 in part because Rose was already teaching.

Training for teachers in the 1940's was more rigorous than it had been around the turn of the century. At that time prospective teachers only needed to pass a state test in order to begin teaching. The required training for Bob and Rose, however, was greater but still very limited compared to today's standards. Bob and Rose needed only to take nine semester hours in order to qualify for teaching. The courses included a methods class and two classes in subject content. They both took those courses at Fort Hays State Teachers College. They were also required to observe teachers during one Summer before beginning their own teaching positions.

Rose began her teaching career at a country school located about five miles east of Russell. She began teaching in Trego County after two years when Bob came home from the Navy and secured a teaching position near Cedar Bluff. They both taught in Trego County for three years before leaving the teaching profession to pursue other vocations. Their teaching situations

were similar. They each taught 10 to 15 students at a time. The ages of their students ranged from 7 to 15 years of age.

The teaching strategies employed by Bob and Rose were both quite similar and quite different from those used by teachers today. They had very few resources at their disposal and had to create most lessons by simply thinking about the best ways to educate their students according to their different grade levels. Basically, each grade level and each child was taught according to what we would consider an Individualized Education Plan. Individual help was given to one or two grade levels at a time while the other students worked on assignments prepared by the teacher. Older students were often asked to help the younger children learn skills and complete their assignments. Peer tutoring is certainly not a new concept. The difference is that educators today feel the need to label strategies while they simply used common sense. Textbooks, readers, and workbooks were usually available for some grade levels but the teacher had to make his or her own materials much of the time. Rose said that "paper and pencils was pretty much all we had."

Rose stated that the country school teacher had to serve as an entire faculty and administration for the students. They were the principal, music teacher, playground supervisor, custodian, and even the bus driver in addition to the regular classroom teacher. Recess occurred in the morning, afternoon, and at lunch time. The teacher had to create ways of entertaining the students at recess time. This became quite a problem during inclement weather. Some of Bob's methods of recreation included playing softball, building igloos, and taking nature hikes. Rose used a variety of games to entertain her students few of which required any type of equipment as very

little was available. As stated, during bad weather it was very difficult to think of ways to keep the children entertained. Most of the games they played were very simple.

Classroom discipline was a challenge to Rose on occasion. She began teaching at 18 years of age and many of the 8th grade boys she taught were bigger and stronger than she was. Since the goal of many students was to run off the teacher her methods of maintaining discipline often centered around corporal punishment. Rose once took a particularly unruly second grade boy outside and forced him to help her select an appropriate switch for his spanking. Not surprisingly, the boy didn't seem to like any of the switches that Rose recommended. They eventually agreed upon one and the spanking took place. On the way home the boy's older brother also beat him for his bad conduct as did the boy's father once he got home. Rose said that the student's behavior improved a lot after that day. As this story illustrates, the support of the family helped the teacher maintain discipline. Many educators would be horrified at the prospect of using corporal punishment today but it doubtlessly helped maintain discipline for most country school teachers. On another occasion an eighth grade boy was giving Rose a bad time in the classroom. Rose knew that this student was far too big to spank so she waited by the door one morning and slapped him very hard as he entered the room. That student's behavior also improved greatly according to Rose. The boy was considered a leader by the other students and Rose had no more problems during the course of that school year.

Bob felt that the reason the goal of some students was to run the teacher out was so they wouldn't have to attend school. He did not experience any discipline problems and Rose attributes that to the fact that he

was a man and she was a woman. Bob jokingly stated that he beat his students everyday and when he skipped a day they loved him for it.

"Actually," Bob said, "I never really experienced any problems with the kids as all." Regardless, they both agreed that it was imperative for the teacher to establish themselves right away.

Many of the special occasions during the school year no longer exist in today's schools. For example, the last day of school was a big event at the country schools. All of the students, parents, siblings, and other community members would attend on the last day and bring food for a potluck dinner. The students would play the fathers in a game of softball and many other games would be played. An important annual fund-raiser for the school was the selling of box lunches. The girls in the school would decorate a box and put homemade lunches in them. The boys would then bid on each box lunch and the high bidder ate the lunch with the girl who made it. The money would be used for softball equipment and other school necessities. This also served as an important social event for the teenagers. Bob said that if every student passed their spelling test during the week then he would have a bubble gum day for his students. Students spent a lot of time and effort helping the poorer spellers in order to get bubble gum. Extrinsic motivation has become much more as have the tastes of the students. Bob and Rose occasionally brought their classrooms together for a day of softball and nature hikes even though they taught at schools several miles apart. The Christmas program was another important annual event for the students. They would rehearse songs and plays for the community and perform them just prior to Christmas. Family members helped build stages and make costumes for the

program. Again, the family and community centered themselves around the school much more then.

The country school teacher faced many problems that teachers today never have to deal with. The weather played an important role in their everyday lives. If snow began to fall during school the school children had to be sent home. Bob often took his students home himself. On many occasions the students and teacher had to stay overnight in the school because a sudden snowfall prevented anyone from traveling. Rose shared the story of her great aunt who went out to get more coal for the fire during one such occasion. She became lost in the blizzard and died. Her body was found two days later in a snow bank. Building and maintain the fire at school and burning trash were important tasks for the country school teacher. They were also hazardous tasks on occasion. High winds once blew embers into a nearby wheat field setting the field on fire. Rose saw that the fire was quickly spreading to nearby oil drills. She and her students frantically worked at stopping the fire and narrowly escaped a catastrophe.

One advantage for the country school teacher was the pay. Teaching seemed to be a lucrative profession by the standards of the day. Bob and Rose each earned around \$200 dollars a month and felt that they were rich as a result. This is a change which is almost universally accepted, at least by the teachers. When they began teaching in Trego County in 1947 they purchased their first home for \$75 dollars and moved it onto the school property where Rose worked. Prior to that they lived in the library of Rose's school and Bob drove to school each day or rode a horse. Most of the students either rode horses to school or walked each day.

When asked about modern educational issues like prayer and patriotic songs in school Bob and Rose cited these as shortcomings in today's schools. Both Bob and Rose led their students in prayer everyday and often had their students read out of the bible. They also said the Pledge of Allegiance everyday and sang patriotic songs like America the Beautiful. They felt that World War II and the Cold War had little to do with this. "People were more religious and patriotic then and those activities were encouraged by the parents", said Rose. They felt that children were raised differently then and that families expected the teachers to influence their children toward religion and patriotism. Not doing so is one of the problems with schools today according to Bob and Rose. Another problem that they see in education today is the amount of time spent in training people to be teachers. They feel that college students often spend years preparing to become teachers only to realize that teaching isn't for them. They both feel that one is either cut out for teaching or they are not and no amount of education or training can change that. They also felt that teachers don't have to use their creativity as much anymore. Teachers too often rely on curriculums and materials that they purchase instead of their own creativity. Parents are also a source of modern problems in education according to the Hillmans. Parents don't support teachers or take part in their children's education as much as they did when the Hillmans were teaching. The family as the basic cultural unit has changed and diminished too much.

Although teaching and education has changed a great deal over the past fifty years there are many examples of how schools have basically remained unchanged. The Hillman's had to help the graduating eighth grade students prepare for the county examination much the same way that

teachers today must help graduating seniors prepare for ACT tests and advanced placement examinations. In the area of discipline many of the rules about establishing and maintaining order still exist. Rose discussed the time that she caught a few of her students smoking in the restroom. The main difference in this case being that the restroom was on outhouse. The basic duty of teachers has also remained largely unchanged. Teachers still must find ways of educating their students to the best of their ability and must be creative in doing so. "A person either likes children and teaching them or they don't", said Bob. That is the bottom line for being a teacher according to the Hillmans and that is still true today. The length of the school year and the school day are much the same today as they were during the 1940's. The main difference being that school ended in April rather than late May or early June. Finally, the children themselves remain basically the same. They are often more spoiled today and are too used to getting whatever they want in many ways. They are also exposed to media violence and sex. Most, however, want to learn if the teacher is willing and able to help them and attempts to make learning fun.

When asked what things should be done to improve today's public schools they listed shortening the time a student has to spend in college, lengthening the school year, parents getting more involved with their children and their schools, using stronger forms of punishment, and raising salaries for teachers.

The Cold War had no effect on the country school teacher according to Bob and Rose. World War II's major contribution was that there were a lot more students to teach a few years after it ended. The lack of resources was something that the country school teacher had become used to so the effect

of World War II were negligible. "We didn't have anything," said Rose, "we just didn't know it at the time."