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Interview with Mabel Pruter

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Mabel Pruter

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CHAPTER II:

AN INTERVIEW WITH MABEL PRUTER

Mabel Pruter taught school for a total of forty years in Rooks County, Kansas. Fifteen of those years were spent as a one-room school teacher at four different schools: Pleasant Ridge, Sarver, Hoskins and R-7.

Mabel attended Pleasant Ridge School for eight years as a youth. She then attended Natoma High School where she graduated in three years. Mabel had always dreamed of being a school teacher. After graduating from high school, she attended the Normal Training School in Hays, Kansas. The Normal Training School consisted of sessions devoted to instructing the prospective teachers on how to teach the various subjects encountered in the school setting. Mabel stated that she felt the Normal Training School prepared the teachers better than the college courses at that time since the Training School dealt with the actual teaching of each school subject. Upon completion of the Normal Training School, Mabel received an Elementary Provisional teaching certificate which allowed her to teach elementary school.

In the fall of 1929, Mabel began teaching at Pleasant Ridge

School, District 107, which was located south and west of Natoma, Kansas. She lived at home during this time since the school was just one quarter of a mile from her house.

The school was a white wood frame building. At the entrance to the building was a vestibule which contained the boys' and girls' cloakrooms. Each student was assigned a peg upon which to hang his or her coat. The students also placed their lunch buckets on the floor of this room. The inside of the school building was one large room. At the front of the room was a raised platform where the teacher's desk and a recitation bench were located. A hanging globe and maps were located at the front of the room. Chalkboards, which were made of slate, were located all along the front wall of the room. When the chalkboards were being used, the globe and maps were raised up out of the way. The space was utilized to the fullest.

The students' desks were arranged in rows according to size. Each desk was bolted to long boards in order to maintain straight rows and ensure that the desks could not be moved. This made it difficult for groups to work together, however,

there was a large table in the rear of the room which was used for that purpose. There were windows along each side of the building which allowed for adequate lighting and ventilation. Heat was provided by a large pot-bellied stove which was located at the back of the room. The school did not have electricity, running water or a telephone. The restroom facilities consisted of out-houses.

The preparation for the school day began early since the duties of the one-room school teacher went beyond just teaching. The building was heated by a wood burning stove. During the winter, Mabel gathered the kindling and fire wood and took it inside before she left in the evening. She would also bank the fire with a log or a piece of coal so it would still be going when she returned the next morning. Mabel would arrive at school an hour early in order to get prepared for the day. She would pump the water for the day as well as get the fire going to heat the room during cold weather. The teacher was also the custodian and attended to the duties of keeping the school building clean. Each day after school, a cleaning compound of sawdust and oil was spread on the floor and then

swept up. This compound gathered all the dust and dirt as it was swept from the floor. The teacher was also responsible for cleaning the windows, chalkboards, stove and furniture. Supplies were furnished, but the cleaning was the duty of the teacher.

Organization was an important part of Mabel's day. She would organize the materials needed for the next day before leaving the school each day. Mabel taught her students the importance of organization throughout her teaching career.

There were numerous materials provided for the use of the students. Some of the library books were purchased, but the majority of them were donated by the patrons of the school. The reference books, encyclopedia and dictionaries, were purchased by the school. At Pleasant Ridge School there was a large dictionary that stood on a stand near the front of the room. When the children needed to look up a word, they would go to the stand and use the big dictionary or they would roll the stand to an area which was more convenient to use.

The textbooks used by the students were chosen from a list published by the county superintendent. The teacher and

parents received this list. The textbooks were purchased by the parents, and families traded the texts as their children advanced through the grades. The students were responsible for pencils and paper.

The children were not allowed to attend school until they were six years old. They continued their schooling until they completed the requirements of passing the eighth grade.

As was typical in a one-room school, there was only one teacher. Mabel taught all of the subjects in all eight of the elementary grades. There were times, however, that one or more of the grades were not represented by students. There was no principal or no teacher aides. It was the responsibility of the teacher to prepare lesson plans, make any needed supplies, send report cards home and follow the curriculum for each grade level. Mabel placed a great deal of emphasis on arithmetic and reading. Each day began with the flag salute and then the study of arithmetic. Mabel always had the students do arithmetic activities at the board. These activities might be daily practice in addition or subtraction, working out word problems that she would read to the students

or math relays. Each student took a great deal of pride in reading. There was time during the school day for the students to read a book of their choice. Many times they would read to each other during this time. There was no need for a reading incentive program during this time since reading was a top priority of the teachers and parents. Material rewards were not given. It was Mabel's belief that students should do things for the fun and accomplishment, not for prizes. Other subjects studied were spelling, which consisted of learning a list of words each week; language, which centered mostly on the grammar aspect of the English language; and handwriting, which was a page of copy work each week. Friday afternoons were often spent having math relays or a spelling bee.

Art was a big part of the curriculum. For art activities, Mabel used materials that were at hand. Most of the art projects were connected to the holidays or the programs that the children performed. She furnished many of the items and ordered others so the students would have the necessary supplies to make the projects.

Each class would come forward to the recitation bench

when it was their time. The students in the other classes would remain at their seats until it was time for them to come forward. Many times students would learn things by listening to the class recitations which were taking place at the front of the room. The children learned independent study skills since they were not always the focus of the teacher. They also learned to be patient. Mabel was not always able to give a student adequate attention due to so many grade levels in one classroom. The students, however, adapted to the learning situation and worked well together. The older students would help the younger ones with their multiplication facts, spelling and reading.

The teachers were not required to have fire or tornado drills during the school day. Mabel did talk about such things, however, with the students as part of the school lessons.

Mabel worked hard to make school an enjoyable place for children. She wanted the children to like school and to want to come to school. Mabel's classroom was a combination of strictness and love. She received many notes and letters from former students which confirmed they enjoyed attending

school.

Most of the students lived within one or two miles of the school. They usually walked to school unless the weather prevented them from doing so. In that case, the parents would transport the children to school.

Report cards were sent home each six weeks. The parents would sign the card and the student would take it back to school. At the end of the school term, providing the child had completed the requirements for his or her grade level, he or she would be promoted to the next grade. The promotion to the next grade was designated on the back of the report card. Mabel remembered the excitement of the students when they got their last report card for the school year. The first thing they did was look on the back to see if they were promoted.

There were no competency tests at that time. However, upon completion of the eighth grade, the students were required to take an exam given by the county superintendent. If the students successfully passed that exam, they were allowed to go on to high school. The students from Pleasant Ridge School attended high school in Natoma, Kansas.

Mabel stated there were very few incidents concerning discipline. The children knew what was expected of them and they acted accordingly. Most parents had a set of rules for their children at home, so following rules at school came naturally. It was her belief that the children would see things to do and they would do them. They did not have to be entertained; they entertained themselves. They would help decorate the building for programs and make all the gifts for the parents. The older students were very helpful with the cleaning and decorating of the school building. A man from Wichita came each year to take the children's school picture, and he remarked that he had never seen such a neatly decorated room.

No one would have thought of suing the teacher in those days. It was the belief of the parents that the teacher was to teach the students and the students were to follow the rules of the teacher. If a child got injured on the playground, the parents would attend to the needs of the child, but would not have blamed the teacher for the accident.

The school year began the day after Labor Day and ran

through April. The only vacation was at Christmas. The nine-month school term was seldom used in the rural schools at that time. Parents wanted the children to help with the farm work and the eight month school term worked well for that. Mabel remembered one year when there were only three months of school. There was a severe flu epidemic and most of the children became very ill. Everything in the community was shut down. Two young girls died in the epidemic. Mabel stated that it was a sad time for all involved. The students missed out on a year of school during that time.

The school day began at 9:00 A.M. and dismissed at 4:00 P.M. There were two fifteen minute recess during the day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. The lunch period was a relaxing time and an entire hour long. The students ate their lunches inside and then had recess outside. The recesses were spent out of doors when the weather permitted. The children played a variety of games such as black man, fox and geese and red rover. When the weather did not allow the children outside, they played board games, drew on the chalkboards and read books.

Mabel's salary for her first year of teaching in Rooks County was seventy-five dollars per month. The second year she received eighty dollars per month. However, when Mabel taught at Sarver School in 1932-1934, her salary was fifty dollars per month since it was all the district could afford. There were no fringe benefits such as health insurance. One thing that made it more affordable to be a teacher was the fact that Mabel always lived at home during her teaching career.

Each of the school districts had its own board of education which was made up of three members of the community. The board was in charge of finances and the upkeep of the school building and grounds. The board had the final say on the hiring and firing of the teacher. The county superintendent published a directory which listed each school of the county. The directory included the teacher, credit hours, type of certificate, salary and number of students. Comparisons were made and the teacher's salary was determined.

Mabel was evaluated once per year by the county superintendent. She said the superintendent would come to the

school and spend the entire day observing what went on in the school. Many times the superintendent would participate in the class activities. The teachers sent prepared reports of attendance and grades to the county superintendent annually.

Each year there was a county wide teacher meeting held at one of the larger schools in the county. These meetings enabled all of the teachers to get together and share ideas for the school year. Mabel felt that the teachers benefited greatly from these meetings since all teachers attended and shared with their colleagues.

There were no extracurricular activities at that time. School was the children's social life, and they were eager to get to school each day to see their friends. The children had chores to do at home after school each day. After assisting with the chores, the child's evening consisted of playing table games, reading and going to bed early. A contributing factor to the progress that the students made in their education was that they came to school well rested and nourished each day. Mabel said the children seemed to be more responsible concerning their school work since they were required to take

the responsibility of doing chores at home.

The family structure was very supportive of the school and the parents took an active role. They often times visited the school and many times a parent would surprise the group by bringing a hot lunch. Every child's birthday was recognized as a special day. There would be treats and some type of organized play in order to help the child celebrate.

The children of the school put on three or four programs each year for the parents, usually at the time of a holiday. At Halloween there was a costume party. Thanksgiving brought the Pilgrim play and an egg hunt was held at Easter. The largest and most involved of the programs, however, was the one devoted to Christmas. Mabel and the children spent many hours rehearsing the play, the recitations and the songs. The decorations for the tree and the building, as well as the gifts for the parents, were all handmade. The students took much pride in the fact that they had made the gifts.

The entire community was involved with the last day for school celebration. The families would bring food for the noon meal. There would be a program put on by the students in the

morning. After lunch everyone was involved in the various activities and games.

Mabel would visit the homes of the students on occasion. She was in contact with the parents frequently since the parents would bring the children to school or they would visit the school. The parents took a great interest in the activities and academics of the school.

Mabel recalled the days of the dust storms during the middle and latter part of the 1930's. Many times she would spend extra time after school was dismissed in the afternoon cleaning the room only to find it just as dusty, or even more so, when she returned the next morning. There were no incidents of children getting lost in the dust storms or blizzards. If it looked as if the weather was to be dangerous, the parents kept the children at home.

CHAPTER III:
BIOGRAPHY OF MABEL PRUTER

Mabel Marie Kaster was born June 17, 1911, on the family farm just west of Natoma, Kansas. She was named for the two girls who lived across the road, Mabel and Marie Pruter. Who would have known that years later she would become Mabel Marie Pruter?

Mabel attended Pleasant Ridge School during her elementary years. This was the same school that her mother, Isabelle Marley, attended when she was in elementary school. Upon passing the county exam after her eighth grade year, Mabel attended high school in Natoma, Kansas. She completed high school in three years, graduating at the age of seventeen in 1929.

After graduating from high school, Mabel attended the Normal Training School in Hays, Kansas. Upon completing the Normal School training, Mabel became the teacher at Pleasant Ridge School for the 1929-1930 school year. Mabel also taught at the Sarver, Hoskin and R-7 Schools which were one-room schools. Mabel taught in the fourth, fifth and sixth grade room at Codell, Kansas. She then joined the faculty at Plainville

Elementary School where she taught the fourth grade until the time of her retirement.

Mabel married Lester Pruter on June 18, 1930. Lester was a farmer. They lived on a farm north of Natoma, Kansas, where Lester farmed and Mabel continued teaching. Mabel has one daughter, Marlene, who was born October 12, 1936. Marlene and her family presently live in Codell, Kansas. Mabel quit teaching for a few years after Marlene was born. However, when Marlene reached school age, Mabel began teaching again and took Marlene to school with her.

Mabel attend school at Fort Hays State during the summers and on Saturdays in order to renew her teaching certificate and work toward a degree. She obtained her Bachelor of Science degree in 1961 and completed the requirements for her Master of Science degree in 1964. Mabel was the first teacher in the district to receive a Master's degree. Several other teachers then obtained a Master's degree. Most of them, according to Mabel, because of the increase in salary.

Mabel retired from teaching in 1977. She did not return to the classroom as a substitute teacher. She keeps herself busy

doing volunteer work throughout the area. She works with the Red Cross Bloodmobile as well as spending time as a volunteer at the Plainville Rural Hospital and the Rooks County Home. Mabel was a charter member of the High Plains Teachers Credit Union and served as a board member for many years. Mabel is a lifetime member of the Plainville Rural Hospital Auxiliary, Delta Kappa Gamma and the Fort Hays State University Alumni Association.

Mabel remains very active today. She walks three or four miles every day. Mabel takes much pride in her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. She visits them whenever possible and always looks forward to their visits in her home.

One thing that is a source of pride for Mabel is the number of student teachers she had throughout her teaching career. She had one student teacher, and sometimes two, each year that she taught at Plainville Elementary School. Many of these people still write, especially at Christmas time, and visit when they are in the area.