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Interview with Gladys Hillman Senti

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Gladys Hillman Senti

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CHAPTER II:
INTERVIEW WITH GLADYS HILLMAN SENTI

The Teacher

Gladys Hillman Senti began her teaching career of 37 years when she graduated from high school at the age of sixteen in the spring of 1937. She had gone through a one-year training session in teachers' normal training which she had taken concurrently with her senior year in high school. She went through most of the summer of 1937 without the prospects of a teaching job.

Her first job was secured, however, that same summer during the last days of August. She was to teach in Kansas in a one-room school named Caughey School located near Asherville in Mitchell County. This first job was an unusual one in that she would be instructing only one student. The student was six years old and had sustained an injury in his early years which involved the formation of a blood clot near his brain. The child was not able to hold a pencil and had difficulty in moving his arms.

Although Gladys boarded with the student's parents, Gladys and the student were taken to a one-room school each day so that the child could experience the school setting. His parents wanted to make the school experience as normal as could be under the special conditions of his handicap. On days of inclement weather, Gladys would instruct the child at the home. One complete set of textbooks were kept at the child's home so that the school instruction could continue if they couldn't get to

the school. The student, who had started the school year incapable of holding even a pencil., ended the year with not only the ability to hold a pencil, but to use the pencil to write words and sentences.

Gladys moved to three other schools during the next four years. During her second year of teaching, she instructed five students at the Fairview School. She taught her third year in Lincoln County in a rural one-room school. From the fall of 1940 to the spring of 1942, Gladys taught at the Rose Valley Rural School in Mitchell County.

In the fall of 1942, Gladys took a position with Rural District #40 in Jewell County. This one-room school was located in the southwestern part of Jewell County and had been named Chandler School in honor of a former resident whose children had attended Rural District #40 in the late 1890s. This encounter with Chandler School would be the first of three separate teaching assignments with that school.

Although Gladys liked to teach at the primary level, and really preferred teaching the first grade, her teaching assignments gave her the opportunity to teach at many grade levels. Sometimes the distribution of the students would not allow for the inclusion of every grade during the school year. She would sometimes put students into pairs in order to give a lower achieving student some peer encouragement and assistance. Gladys remarked that she didn't place more than two students together because she wasn't able to plan effectively for group

activities when she was teaching all the other levels.

Her educational philosophy was that it was important to start off the school year with strict expectations of the students. Gladys felt that she needed to be "as tough as tough can be." She felt that the students needed to have more restrictions during the first part of the school year and then when the routines were established, the teacher could allow some flexibility with the students' behavior. Gladys felt that the one-room school situation was inherent with problems that could involve five-year old students interacting with sixteen-year old students and the instructor had to keep a controlling hand on the educational setting.

It was a lonely job for a one-room school teacher. There was little chance to interact with adults during a teaching day. The teacher had to be prepared to take care of emergencies without the assistance of a telephone or another adult. If an emergency arose with a student being injured, most likely a student whose home was close to the school might be sent for additional help. If a teacher became sick at school, the teacher would probably finish teaching that school day.

In the event of a teacher's illness, there were provisions made by the school boards for the paying of a substitute. Teachers, however, would not always take advantage of the substitute arrangement because of the complexity of explaining the school day to another person. Teachers did not make lesson plans in those one-room schools and many teachers opted to go

to school to teach despite of illnesses or injuries.

Gladys remarked that she believed that she had never stayed at home for an illness or an injury during her teaching career. She recalled that she should have stayed home many times due to illness but didn't because it would have been too much trouble to explain the teaching circumstances to a newcomer. One time a car with students from Chandler hit Gladys's car on the way to school and she continued to school and taught for the next two days even though she discovered later that she had sustained two broken ribs.

In the early years of the one-room school, the teacher was instructing without a lot of outside assistance. Gladys recalled that sometimes the textbooks would include a few teaching ideas at the beginning of the books. At the start of the school year, teachers would meet in county-wide meetings where they were given some instructions on how to fill out the annual school report, handed some simple supplies including report cards, a gradebook, a picture of the President of the United States, and given a small supply of construction paper. There was little time to interact with other teachers about teaching methods or activities. Gladys did recall that teachers, in groups of ten, had met in Lincoln County for monthly meetings. Those kinds of meetings were not common, however, to the one-room school experience.

Teachers were expected to buy their own supplies and to provide their own resources. They were given the textbooks but if

a teacher wanted additional supportive materials, they had to purchase them at the teacher's expense. Gladys remembered that in the latter years, when workbooks were available, she would personally purchase the supplemental material that she felt she would use in her classroom.

A teaching job was considered to be a good job in the early days of the one-room school. A teacher who made \$40 a month could expect to pay \$10 for room and board. The remainder of the salary would be spent on expenses other than basic living expenses. Before she was married, Gladys alternated between living as a boarder close to the school and staying in her parents' home. Many of the rural one-room schoolteachers took advantage of the boarding system because they weren't supposed to live very far from their respective schools.

During the early years of her teaching, Gladys would receive her paycheck in monthly amounts. She received eight paychecks when she first started teaching, but started taking her paycheck in later years in increments divided into twelve months for income tax purposes. Her check was usually hand delivered in her early years of teaching, but in later years, it was mailed to her.

Special arrangements were made with school teachers to entice them to teach at certain schools. One year, a parent, with a Jeep, volunteered to pick up Gladys at her boarding house on inclement weather days if she would volunteer to take his children to school in her car on fair weather days. One spring, when the

rains had come early in March and had left giant ruts in the ground, two rural teachers had to exchange schools because of the difficulties they experienced in reaching their respective schools. Each teacher lived closer to the other teacher's school and so, in order for them to continue teaching, they traded assignments.

A teacher in a one-room school setting was expected to be fairly independent about maintaining the schoolhouse on a day-to-day basis. The teacher was expected to arrive early in the morning to sweep the floors, carry in water from the well or cistern, carry in coal for the coal stoves, or light the kerosene heating stoves and kerosene illumination lamps. Gladys recalled one kind school board member who made it a practice to come to school every morning to warm the school before Gladys would arrive.

During the time that Gladys taught in the rural school setting, there weren't many men teachers found in those one-room schools. The teachers were almost exclusively female, and in her early years, during the 1930s, it was an unspoken, but understood rule, that teachers were to remain single. This condition, however, did not usually affect the few males that were teaching. The trend against male one-room teachers in Jewell County did not exist in the preceding generation. Gladys recalled that her mother mentioned that many male teachers existed during the decades before Gladys started to teach. Somehow, the trend against males in the one-room schools started in the early decades of the

twentieth century. Gladys recalled one capable individual who was eager to become a teacher but didn't because he was not given a chance to teach.

Teachers were expected to be role models for the students in their schools. During her years of teaching, there were not explicit rules written for teachers to follow, but there were definite unspoken understandings of general rules of conduct.

As Gladys stated, "The morals of the teacher were expected to be better than the 'common run' of the other people."

The Students

The students attending the one-room school in the early years of the twentieth century usually began their first year of school in the first grade when they were five or six years old. The school population was usually fairly stable during the school year as few students moved away from the district. The school population was made up of students coming from farms that were usually not located more than 2 1/2 miles from the school. These farms were family farms and people did not readily leave that environment. Because the students were usually familiar with the other students in the school, starting school was not a traumatic experience for the young students.

The number of students in the one-room school would vary from school to school and from year to year. Gladys recalled that the 21 students she taught at the Dentonia School constituted the highest number of students she had taught in the rural setting.

Those 21 students were distributed throughout all eight grades.

Gladys remarked that the oldest student that she had taught was 16 and she was a little anxious about his interaction with the younger students. He was mildly retarded and she was concerned about his size and how he would play with the smaller students. His behavior turned out to be exemplary and he interacted in a very positive manner with his schoolmates.

Students attending the one-room schools maintained a fairly regular attendance during Gladys's years of teaching. The trend apparent during the early years of the century for students to stay at home to help with farm work had subsided and students usually attended unless they were ill or accompanied their parents on family trips.

Gladys recalled that all of her students during her teaching in rural schools were proficient in English and most came from a European/American background. In the Chandler School district, there were many students who were of German and Dutch descent. Many of these families were two generations away from families who spoke in a language other than English. Many of the students in a school population might be related and many times there were several sets of siblings in a school at one time.

Gladys remarked that the students she taught in the one-room schools were more mannerly than students of today. She remembered one school whose students showed exceptional manners because she felt that their Catholic catechism training had promoted manners and showing respect for teachers.

Students brought their lunches to school in tin buckets during the early years of her teaching and in metal lunchboxes during her latter years of teaching. The standard student lunch consisted of a sandwich, some kind of fruit, and maybe some cookies or a piece of cake. Gladys recalled that students would regularly "trade" their food with other students if the students viewed the others' lunches as superior. It wasn't uncommon for a student to trade a homemade piece of cake for a store-bought cookie. There were times during the winter months that students could warm their food on top of the stove in the school. This practice was popular if the student had brought soup to school. Gladys recalled only one exception to bucket lunches and that occurred when she was teaching in a school with only three students. One of the mothers of a student brought a home-cooked meal to school each noon and warmed it on the stove for Gladys and her students.

Before consolidation of rural school districts had occurred, Gladys recalled that the school districts were designed so that no student had to travel more than 2 1/2 miles to get to school. Therefore, it was easy for students to get to school using various means: walking, riding bicycles, riding horses, and occasionally, driving a vehicle. Later, when consolidation of the districts resulted in larger geographical district areas, students were more commonly driven to school by their parents.

The transportation modes provided the school setting with additional problems. Horses had to be secured in an area where

they would not endanger students. Vehicles at the school provided potential means for students to leave the school property at their whim. Inclement weather meant that students had to find alternative ways to get to school. Gladys remembered one father who rigged up a special box on the rear of his tractor in which his son rode to school when it was especially muddy. Students riding bicycles took advantage of the opportunities to race against their schoolmates.

Students were expected to purchase their own textbooks and to bring appropriate supplies to school for the year. Usually, every student brought a lined tablet and a supply of pencils, erasers, a bottle of paste, a ruler, a compass, and a scissors. Some students would bring a homemade paste of flour and water to school.

Gladys related that students were expected to have certain responsibilities pertaining to the upkeep and maintenance of the school. Students were chosen to gather coal for the stove, go out and pump a bucket of water for the water crock, or dust erasers outside the school. Other tasks included cleaning the blackboards and washing windows. Students who were chosen to fulfill these jobs felt honored to be allowed to leave their studies to complete a task. Gladys felt that not only did they see the jobs as rewards, but they may have also felt some "freedom" away from their desks. On special occasions, when there was a program planned, the whole student body would gather and clean the schoolhouse. It was important for the students to help in making

the schoolhouse tidy and in putting up special curtains for plays and programs. The preparations for special events were almost as fun for the students as the events themselves.

The School Year Program

The rural one-room school year averaged 8 months long, operating from September to April. There was a need for the rural farming community to have their children home to help with farming operations during the late spring and summer months. School usually commenced each year during the first week in September. Labor Day was usually observed and school was out for that day. Most one-room schools in Jewell County were out before the last week of April. If a school had missed days due to inclement weather, there was no need to make up for those days during Gladys's early years of teaching.

The school day started at 9 o'clock in the morning and lasted until 4 o'clock in the afternoon. There was usually a 1 hour lunch break during which time students could enjoy their lunches and spend the remainder of their time in some recess activity. There was a short morning recess, a noon recess, and another short afternoon recess.

On days when there were storms, the students would spend their recess times in the school in various activities. At the Chandler School, there was an empty basement which was used almost exclusively for indoor recesses. Students would play relay and chase games on the cement floor, dodging around steel

poles set in the middle of the floor to support the schoolroom floor. Other students would occupy their time with blackboard games, sandbox activities, puzzles, checkers, "pick-up-sticks", other board games, and cards. Some students even played an indoor "keep away game" by rolling up an old rag into a ball and throwing it in the air from student to student.

On days when the weather was nice, students could be found playing a number of games outside the schoolhouse. Some of these games included "Annie-Annie-Over" which was played by throwing a ball over the schoolhouse to an opposing team whose job was to conceal the ball behind one runner and run around the building attempting to tag the opposing members of the other team. At the Chandler School, there was a lower roof that was built over an entry addition which was used by the younger students when playing this game.

Other games included various kinds of tag games where students attempted to run from base to base. The game called "Red Rover" accounted for many sore arms as students attempted to break a hold between two students as they ran between them. Softball was important to the students of the one-room school and many times games were held opposite another area one-room school student body. At the Chandler School, the playground equipment, which consisted of a set of swings, a slide, and a merry-go-round, was used by all ages. A game which was unique to Chandler School was simply called "game-in-front-of-the-schoolhouse" probably because that is where the game was

played. Students could immediately spot an "outsider" to Chandler School if they were not aware of the specific rules of the game.

During the winter months, students could be found playing tag games of "fox and geese" in the snow as they stomped out paths in the snow for runners to travel as they fled from a person dubbed as "it." The "it" person's job was to tag runners as they ran on the paths and it was against the rules to leave the paths. Other winter sports were building snow forts and tunnels and having snowball fights. Some students brought sleds to school to use if there was enough snow on any inclines near the school.

The curriculum of the one-room school was determined by state decrees. There were state-adopted texts which had to be utilized by all Kansas students and not until Gladys's later years in teaching was there any allowance made for individual school choice in textbooks. The subjects covered during the school year included, reading, writing, spelling, penmanship, arithmetic, geography, history, government, and physiology. Science as a content area was not included until Gladys's later years in teaching.

Teachers were expected to give competency tests and made the decision as to whether a student would be advanced or retained at a certain grade level. Although many rural students experienced retention, Gladys recalled that she only retained one student during her years of teaching. Report cards were sent out monthly and were sent home with the students.

Teachers in the one-room schools were expected to manage all eight grade levels of teaching and had to limit individual grade level instruction to no more than 10 minutes per subject. Students at a certain grade level were called to the front of the room where a short lesson was conducted. They were expected to return to their desks and complete practice exercises over material covered during their instruction time with the teacher. Gladys remarked that students knew they had to listen well during instruction time because there would not be too many chances to ask questions again of the teacher. Students had to be independent and could call on other students for help. Gladys recalled that she was careful to observe that students who were giving assistance didn't form a superior attitude with the student receiving the help. She wanted to be careful that students who needed assistance would not be discouraged about asking for help another time.

In the rural school, enrichment activities for students had to be student-directed so Gladys recounted that she tried to encourage students to use their extra time in reading and in using the encyclopedia for various search activities. The libraries in the schools were somewhat limited and usually consisted of a set of books in a small bookcase and a set of encyclopedias and a dictionary. The school district did not receive much money from the state so research resources were usually very minimal.

Extra classes in music and art were not usually found in the one-room school setting. Many times these areas were integrated

with the other content areas being taught by the teacher. There was one exception to Gladys's experience and that was when one school in northeast Jewell County took advantage of an adjoining room to the school and hired a teacher who would visit the school each week and give individual music lessons in that other room. The students then would form one large group for a group singing session with that music teacher.

The biggest difference in curriculum from rural to rural school in Jewell County, according to Gladys, was that some district school boards were more willing to purchase materials for students to use than other schools. Since Gladys only stayed for an average period of three years at any one school at a time, she was acquainted with the habits of many of the school districts.

An important part of the rural school year program was to put on school-wide productions that were held on special days or holidays such as Halloween, Christmas, Kansas Day, and the last day of school. At the Chandler School, special burlap curtains were strung over wire lengths running the width and the length of the small raised stage. Students would excitedly gather behind those faded burlap curtains in preparation for their dramatic and musical presentations.

Other special events held as part of the school year were money-raising ventures such as the "box supper." Individuals would bring a decorated box filled with food to the supper and would try to conceal their ownership of the box. Bidding would commence on each box with the winner of the bid gaining the

opportunity to eat the box's contents with the box's creator. This method of money-raising was an entertaining as well as profitable way for the school to raise money for its needs.

One Leap Year, Gladys recalled that she boarded with a couple that year and the husband had to make and decorate the box lunch since only men could take box lunches on that occasion. The man tried to conceal the box from Gladys fearing that she would bid on his box and run up the bid against his wife. He carefully concealed the box from her until one evening when she came home from school early and discovered his box. When the box supper arrived, Gladys did just as the man had feared-she ran up the bid against his wife!

A tradition that was held at many one-room schools was a "last-day-of-school" picnic. This was a time for students and the teacher to really relax and have one last fun time together. Many times the picnic would be held on the property of one of the students. Eating lunch and playing games were the two main activities for this kind of day.

Problems with the weather would many times affect the school year calendar. Heavy snows and rains would prevent both students and teachers from attending the school. Many of the roads were dirt roads and could not be traveled during extremely inclement weather. Days missed to inclement weather were not usually made up for later in the year.

Each year the school program would involve some interaction with neighboring schools for many different occasions.

Sometimes area schools would meet for track meets, softball games, arithmetic matches, and spelling bees. Some schools would travel to the county seat city to participate in county spelling bees and other contests.

The Facilities

Most of the one-room schools in Jewell County were wooden-frame buildings consisting of one main room where school was held and sometimes some of the buildings had received additions to the main room in later years. The original school building at Chandler School had been moved from a previous site to the site where it then was placed on a basement and a small entry/cloakroom was added which included the basement stairs.

Gladys recalled that some of the one-room schools had other buildings on the school property. These buildings might have included small horse barns or coal sheds but these buildings were not attached to the main school.

None of the rural schools that Gladys taught in had restrooms with indoor plumbing fixtures. All of the schools utilized the outhouse arrangement where a small wooden shelter was built over a toilet seat set over a deep hole in the ground. Most schools had separate outhouses for girls and boys and they were usually located some distance from the schoolhouse. Gladys recalled that this distance sometimes caused some problems as visits to the outhouses were potential areas where students could

spend wasted minutes on pursuits other than restroom needs. Students had to ask permission to use the outhouse and their needs were usually recognized by their display of one or two fingers indicating a need to visit the facility.

The lighting needs in the early-day rural schools were met by the usage of kerosene and gas lamps. Electricity was an addition to the schools in the later years. The windows at Chandler were typical of the types of one-room school windows in that they were tall and narrow. There were three windows at the east and west sides of the school which allowed for light to enter the building and provide adequate illumination for students on even the cloudiest of days. Three large white-glass incandescent lamps hung from the ceiling from heavy brass chains. These lights were only turned on at night and during extremely cloudy weather.

The heating needs were met by the usage of coal and kerosene-burning stoves. One of the most aggravating problems cited by Gladys was enduring a winter day of teaching without the benefit of additional heat from the stove. Sometimes the stoves would malfunction and not run or perhaps the stove-pipes would clog and would need cleaning and everyone would have to endure the cold.

The walls were finished with a wooden wainscoting which rose about 3 feet from the floor. The walls above the wainscoting had been papered during the 1950s.

The north end of the school, where the small raised platform stage was found, was the location for the slate blackboards which

covered the walls above the wainscoting along the stage's width and length. These boards were utilized for practice work and for the teacher's lessons to the students.

In the southwest corner of Chandler, improvements had been made to the school after its move and a sink with a drain was built into a small wooden cabinet. The drain was connected to a pipe which ran outside the west side of the school. Gladys remembered the sink with the drain as being innovative as far as rural schools were concerned. She stated that most of the time she was used to "washing in the wash pan and throwing it out the door."

It was unusual for a one-room school to have running water. Most of the schools had a well or cistern outside the building where students took turns pumping water from a hand-pump into a bucket and carrying it inside the school for drinking and washing purposes. Chandler School had a special shelf built for students' cups that set next to the large spigoted crock used for dispensing the well water. Students marked their cups and kept them there all year. There was one exception in Gladys's experience with running water and that was the one school in Mitchell County that had a running water system.

The furnishings for the schools may have included wooden student desks, a teacher's desk, a piano, a sandbox, and assorted stools and chairs. Chandler School had student desks arranged in rows with the smallest desks in the front and graduating back to the largest desks. These desks were the

original ones that had been used at the first Chandler School site and had served three generations of Chandler students. They contained holes where ink bottles had been placed during school days in past decades and wore the evidence of ink spills and carved initials. Students could follow a family's history with Chandler School just by reading the marks left on the desks. The desks were set on wooden runners which made them easier to move as a set when the teacher would sweep under them.

The school facilities were used for occasions other than school programmed events. During voting days, the school might dismiss so that polling booths could be set up in the main room. At Chandler School, the basement was utilized for the polling places and school could continue on the first floor while voters were polled in the basement. Other uses for schoolhouses included services held by traveling evangelists, school board meetings, parent/teacher meetings, and entertainment/money-raising events such as the box supper.

Other Personnel Affecting the School Environment

The rural district school board members had several avenues of contact with the one-room schoolteacher. It was appropriate for a school board member to visit a teacher on another school district and try to "lure that teacher away" with promises of additional salary. Gladys was known to spend no more than 3 years in one position so she was visited many times by board members who would try to hire her. It was through the county

superintendent that Gladys received some of her information about vacancies at other schools. Gladys left Chandler School after her first year of teaching there in 1942-43 because of the dramatic offer for a raise in salary. The teaching did involve teaching for a 9 month period, however.

It was after that first year in Lovewell, where she acted as the principal of a two teacher school, that she left for Pleasant Valley School. The other teacher at Lovewell, who had seniority, had decided to take the principal job for the 1944-45 school year and Gladys felt slightly insulted about this situation so she resigned from Lovewell without securing another teaching position.

A school board member from the Pleasant Valley School had been asked by the rest of the board to go and "look over this Miss Hillman" and to make sure that "her slip didn't show." Before the board member arrived at Gladys's parents' home, Gladys and her mother were busy putting up wallpaper and Gladys had donned her oldest pair of slacks for the task. Soon after, the school board member arrived and later commented to his fellow board members that "not only did her slip not show, she wasn't even wearing one!" Gladys was hired by the Pleasant Valley School for that fall of 1944.

Another person who affected the school environment was the county superintendent of schools. The superintendent was in charge of the annual rural teachers' meetings at the beginning of each year. He also would make one visit to each rural school throughout the district. This visit would usually come in the fall and

he would bring each student in the school a small favor, such as a pencil, or a bookmark. Gladys recalled that she didn't ever remember him staying very long or advising her on anything. His visit was mandated and he came once a year. Gladys said that she only remembered two different superintendents in Jewell County during her time of teaching. The last one was Carl Menhusen.

Gladys believed that the school board members were elected and served on boards composed of three members. It was the members' jobs to deliver a contract to the teacher and to write out the salary paycheck and deliver it somehow. The boards met at the schools at times and other times met in their respective homes.

The people of school district also had direct influences on the lives of the one-room schools and teachers. The district's residents had to encounter the push for consolidation of the states' school districts. Many districts fought hard for the right to keep their schools open. The residents were fighting for their small communities' survival as their identities were wrapped up in the functions of the one-room school. It took many meetings and a lot of communication before the district residents could see how consolidation might be accomplished. Many districts were promised better roads by the state because if consolidation occurred, students would have to travel longer distances on roads that were, at times, difficult to traverse. The schools dwindled in numbers from 80 rural school districts in Jewell County in 1942 to

17 districts in the county in 1955. A further loss of districts occurred in the remaining years until there were only 8 districts left in 1962.

Gladys recounted that it took many meetings and a lot of drawn-out conversations to finally see consolidation take place. Many teachers were displaced through these years from the one-room schools and either left the teaching profession, or went to schools in the surrounding towns and cities.