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### Interview with Violet Jamison Riffe

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*Fort Hays State University*

Violet Jamison Riffe

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CHAPTER TWO  
ORAL INTERVIEW

- Pettijohn: This is Sharon Pettijohn. Today, October 25, 1989, I am conducting an oral history interview of a Kansas country schoolhouse teacher, Violet Jamison Riffe. Mrs. Riffe, from what high school and in what year did you graduate?
- Riffe: Webster Rural High School in 1942, with a normal training degree.
- Pettijohn: What do you mean by a normal training degree?
- Riffe: It was a class offered in which you earned a teaching degree. Normal training was intermingled with the classes taken during high school.
- Pettijohn: Did you then enter college immediately after high school?
- Riffe: No. I did not begin until the summer of 1946.
- Pettijohn: For the normal training, you were then granted a teaching certificate?
- Riffe: Yes.
- Pettijohn: Did you have to take a test in order to begin teaching?
- Riffe: Yes, a written test. We were tested over famous painters and subject matter, etcetera.
- Pettijohn: Were several people given the test at one time?
- Riffe: Yes. Most of the girls going to high school at that time took the test.
- Pettijohn: When was the test given?

Riffe: It was only given in the spring.

Pettijohn: You took the normal training in 1942. When did you begin to teach?

Riffe: In 1942. I taught two months at New Hope.

Pettijohn: How were you hired?

Riffe: That's a good question. I was at home. When someone needed a teacher, they thought of me and they came and asked me. The only time I made an application for a school was when I went to Stockton.

Pettijohn: What other country schools did you teach at?

Riffe: From 1943 to 1945 I taught at Webster. I also taught at Pleasant View from 1946 to 1947 and at Mt. Nebo.

Pettijohn: Where were all the country schools in which you taught located?

Riffe: New Hope was located north of Stockton, near Woodston. Pleasant View was located west of Stockton and Mt. Nebo was north of town. They all were in Rooks County.

Pettijohn: Tell me about the typical country schoolhouse facility.

Riffe: Usually there was a cloak room at the entrance of the building. It was used as a closet. I had a water stand for drinking water and a place to wash one's hands. The other room was the main part of the school. There were outdoor facilities—one on one side for the boys and the other on the other side for the girls.

Pettijohn: I gather that there was no running water in the facility. Was there a pump or water well outside the building?

- Riffe: Most of the facilities had a cistern. There was a hole dug for the cistern with a pump on top. A chain went around and lowered the bucket to the water. We carried the buckets of water into the school.
- Pettijohn: Was the water far from school?
- Riffe: No, it was fairly close.
- Pettijohn: And the restrooms?
- Riffe: They were a little further out.
- Pettijohn: Describe the desks for the students and for yourself.
- Riffe: The students had a regular type of desk into which you could slide books and raise your seat up. In one school there was a double desk. If needed, two children could use it. I never had to do this. All the desks were placed on a board on the floor to prevent them from moving around. My desk was big with several drawers.
- Pettijohn: What type of playground equipment was there?
- Riffe: Not much. There was a swing, a merry-go-round, and a slide. We mainly played games.
- Pettijohn: At what age did a child begin school in 1942?
- Riffe: Around age six the child began first grade. There was no kindergarten.
- Pettijohn: What was the student turnover during the school year?
- Riffe: The student population was relatively stable.
- Pettijohn: What was the distance traveled by most students to school?
- Riffe: About three to four miles.

Pettijohn: How were the students transported to school—by the parents or by the district?

Riffe: They came in their parents' cars or they walked.

Pettijohn: Did all the students attending the school live within the school district?

Riffe: Yes, most lived in the district.

Pettijohn: For those who did live outside the district, was there an out-of-district tuition charged?

Riffe: No.

Pettijohn: How many students were in your schools?

Riffe: My first school had approximately eight. Another school had fifteen students.

Pettijohn: What grade levels did you teach?

Riffe: It would vary according to what grade the child was in. If you had a seventh grader and an eighth grader, you would have both classes, unless you could work them together in classes such as social studies.

Pettijohn: Upon finishing the eight years of country schooling, did most of the students go on to high school?

Riffe: Yes, and several went on to college.

Pettijohn: What type of occupations did your former students enter?

Riffe: Some went in to farming, teaching, homemaking, mechanics—various professions.

Pettijohn: Did the majority of the students you taught in those country schools remain in the area?

- Riffe: I believe they did.
- Pettijohn: As you were teaching during World War II, did you see any changes in the attitudes of the students or the parents you had contact with?
- Riffe: Not really. The war did not affect many directly.
- Pettijohn: To attend a country school during the early 1940s, what was the cost to the student? For example, did the student have to buy his own textbooks?
- Riffe: Yes. Usually they got them secondhand at the County Superintendent's office. Sometimes they got the books from brothers and sisters.
- Pettijohn: How much would a typical textbook cost?
- Riffe: About one dollar.
- Pettijohn: What if a student could not afford that textbook?
- Riffe: He probably had to use mine. I had to buy some of the textbooks too. We lived in the time when money was in short supply.
- Pettijohn: In teaching several grades in one classroom, what difficulties do you remember?
- Riffe: While I was helping one group of children, the others were preparing their lessons. I had a list of things required for the students to do. If they finished the work ahead of time, they could go to the blackboard and practice spelling or math. They were kept busy.
- Pettijohn: I gather that there was, from time to time, a behavioral

problem. As there was no principal or authority figure to support you, what was the chain of command if there was a serious problem?

Riffe: I would have been solely in charge, unless I wanted to talk to the County Superintendent. I didn't have any major problems. I imagine in some schools there were instances where the teachers had to go through the entire chain of command.

Pettijohn: Were parent-teacher conferences held yearly?

Riffe: Yes. We also had little programs so the parents could see the work of the children.

Pettijohn: What subjects were typically taught?

Riffe: The basics—reading, writing, and arithmetic. Also there was social studies, physical education, art, and music.

Pettijohn: How were the physical education classes conducted?

Riffe: We went outdoors and played. Folk games were worked in with music class. Sometimes we would have the children do simple exercises at their desks if they were getting fidgety.

Pettijohn: For physical education class, did all the students do the same activity no matter what the age level?

Riffe: Yes, but we did try to base the activities according to the students' abilities.

Pettijohn: What were the types of play activities in stormy weather?

Riffe: Mainly the ones I already mentioned. We generally always went outdoors, as we had to go out to the bathrooms anyway.

Pettijohn: Was there a piano for music class?

Riffe: Yes, every country schoolhouse had one.

Pettijohn: Did you yourself furnish the art supplies for art classes or did the children buy their own supplies?

Riffe: Usually the children bought the colors. I used inexpensive items to make projects. We bought scrap paper from the Record office (the Record is the local newspaper) and used wrapping paper.

Pettijohn: The children received grades for the basic subjects. Were grades also given for physical education, art, and music?

Riffe: For physical education, no. Grades were given for art and music classes.

Pettijohn: When were grade cards issued?

Riffe: Every six weeks.

Pettijohn: Were the grade cards given directly to the students or were they mailed home?

Riffe: They were handed out to the students.

Pettijohn: What was the length of the school day?

Riffe: It varied. Classes were usually held from 9:00 to 4:00 or from 8:30 to 3:30.

Pettijohn: What was the length of the school term?

Riffe: It was an eight-month school term, in which school began in September after Labor Day and ended at the end of April. Ending in April gave us the time to get the five-week college class in.



Pettijohn: Explain this class.

Riffe: It was not a required class. It kept up our training and could be applied to college hours.

Pettijohn: Was school ever called off due to snowy weather?

Riffe: No. The weather never was considered bad enough to call off school. One time, however, I got very sick so school lasted a week longer. If the weather got too bad to drive home, I had a place or two nearby where I could stay.

Pettijohn: There was never a time when a severe winter storm suddenly approached and you had the sole responsibility to get those nine to ten students home?

Riffe: I don't remember having to send anyone home but one time we had a snowstorm. I had walked to school. By the end of school it was snowing, so we all bundled up. One little boy and I were to walk to the corner where my folks were to meet us. It was the worst walk I had made. I didn't know if I was going to make it. I kept talking and checking on the little boy. We finally made the mile walk. The snow was packed in huge snow drifts. That was the worst storm.

Pettijohn: Were there any problems with the water freezing?

Riffe: No real problems.

Pettijohn: What teaching materials did you use? For example, did you have adequate maps for geography classes?

Riffe: Yes. Most of the country schools had pull-down types of maps. Erasers and chalk were adequate.

Pettijohn: If you wanted to reproduce materials for the students, did

you have a ditto machine or was everything written on to the blackboard?

Riffe: Everything went on the blackboard.

Pettijohn: Were there typewriters?

Riffe: No.

Pettijohn: Let's go through a typical school day. What classes did you generally teach first?

Riffe: We generally began with reading as it was one of the more difficult subjects. Arithmetic, social studies, English, spelling, music, and art then followed.

Pettijohn: When were the recesses?

Riffe: In the morning, in the afternoon, and at noon after eating lunch. We all ate our dinner at school.

Pettijohn: What was a typical lunch period like? What special duties were required of you?

Riffe: It was about forty-five minutes long, including the recess. The students had certain places to sit and eat lunch. Before eating lunch they were to wash their hands and each could say a silent prayer before dinner. Prayer was up to the student.

Pettijohn: For those subjects taught, were all the subjects studied each and every day?

Riffe: Generally so.

Pettijohn: Were there dress codes for students, such as the wearing of shoes or shorts?

Riffe: Yes, most wore shoes. No one ever went barefoot due to the stickers outdoors. The little girls wore jeans. This was especially handy to play games outdoors.

Pettijohn: Did the school board stipulate what you were to wear?

Riffe: No, they didn't. At that particular time women weren't wearing slacks so I usually wore a skirt.

Pettijohn: At the end of the year were special tests given to the students, such as the SRA tests of today?

Riffe: No such tests were given, only final exams.

Pettijohn: Were most of the students promoted?

Riffe: Yes.

Pettijohn: Did you have any "skip-em ups"?

Riffe: No.

Pettijohn: Whose decision was it to promote the student?

Riffe: It was solely mine.

Pettijohn: If there were eighth graders, was there a special graduation ceremony?

Riffe: Yes. All the country schools went to town for the afternoon ceremony. All the students wore their best clothes. The County Superintendent would give the certificates.

Pettijohn: How did you decide which textbooks to use?

Riffe: It was the decision of the County Superintendent as to what texts to use. Every school in the county would use the same book.

Pettijohn: Were requisitions used in order to get teaching supplies?

Riffe: The school board apparently ordered the supplies, as I didn't. We usually had ample supplies.

Pettijohn: Who provided the sports equipment, such as softballs and bats?

Riffe: The school did.

Pettijohn: If you did run out of basic teaching supplies, what did you then do?

Riffe: I remember having to buy some materials, such as chalk, myself.

Pettijohn: Are there any special school programs or activities you can remember?

Riffe: For one Christmas program, I had bought a rhythm band. Each student played an instrument. There would be some singing and, usually, a play. Of course, there would be the Christmas tree. Sometimes the ladies of the community made popcorn balls for the children.

Pettijohn: Was it customary to have gift exchanges?

Riffe: Oh, yes! The students would exchange gifts and I would buy each child a gift.

Pettijohn: Were the Christmas programs religious-oriented or traditional?

Riffe: A little of both.

Pettijohn: Were there box suppers?

Riffe: I don't believe that my schools had these.

Pettijohn: Were field trips taken and who was responsible for organizing them?

Riffe: Yes. I was responsible for organizing the trips. We went looking for leaves for science projects and there was always the last-day-of-school field trip.

Pettijohn: Were there excursions to town?

Riffe: One time the school board let us go in to Santa Claus Day. This was at the time the festivities were held in the middle of the week. One of the mothers drove us in. We got candy.

Pettijohn: Did your school compete with others in sports?

Riffe: Not mine, but some schools did.

Pettijohn: What meetings were held at the school facilities?

Riffe: I'm not for sure.

Pettijohn: Each morning what time were you required to get to school?

Riffe: Usually about an hour before the students arrived, around 8:00. When the students came in they were all bubbly and wanted to visit. Therefore, I didn't get much accomplished. A lot of my work I took home.

Pettijohn: Before students arrived, what special duties were you responsible for?

Riffe: I unlocked the building, brought the water in, and usually swept the floors. I had to do the simple janitorial work, such as sweeping the floors and cleaning the blackboards and erasers. At one school I had to bring in the coal. At New Hope there was a furnace in the basement. It too was heated by coal but the coal was stored downstairs. I also was responsible for putting up and taking down of the flags.

Pettijohn: Were all the schools heated with coal?

Riffe: Mt. Nebo had gas heat.

Pettijohn: Who ordered the coal?

Riffe: The school board.

Pettijohn: Where was the coal kept?

Riffe: At all the schools except New Hope it was kept in a little shed behind the school building.

Pettijohn: At the end of the school term, was someone hired to do spring cleaning, such as painting and repair work?

Riffe: Sometimes.

Pettijohn: You have mentioned the County Superintendent in that you, as well as all the teachers of the county, were governed by her or him.

Riffe: She would come around once per term and visit your school and make general comments about the school. We never knew when she was coming. It depended on the school she began with.

Pettijohn: Who was the Rooks County Superintendent at the time you were teaching in the country schools?

Riffe: Edith Harris.

Pettijohn: How did a person get to become a County Superintendent?

Riffe: The person would be elected on the ballot.

Pettijohn: Were you required to have on file certain reports for her?

Riffe: We had to turn in attendance records and the grades to her.

Pettijohn: Did the school board ever visit the school?

Riffe: Yes, some board members did visit.

Pettijohn: Tell me what you remember about the school boards of the country schools.

Riffe: There were three members, each elected to a two-year term.

Pettijohn: Were there female as well as male members?

Riffe: Yes, there were female members. At one school the board was all male but at the other school there was one female.

Pettijohn: When did the school board hold regular meetings?

Riffe: I suppose the meetings were monthly so as to be able to write our checks.

Pettijohn: Where were the meetings held?

Riffe: At the school.

Pettijohn: Were you ever asked to attend a school board meeting?

Riffe: No.

Pettijohn: Did the board members have any special duties outside of writing the checks and ordering supplies?

Riffe: Their duties were primarily financial in nature.

Pettijohn: How often were you evaluated?

Riffe: If I was evaluated, I didn't know about it. I was never told about an evaluation by the board. The County Superintendent did tell me about her evaluation. She was the primary evaluator.

Pettijohn: Was there an evaluation form?

Riffe: Not to my knowledge. I was told verbally what Mrs. Harris saw at her visit.

Pettijohn: You've already mentioned that you were the only teacher in those country schoolhouses, and that if you were ill there was no school that day. Were there no substitute teachers?

Riffe: That's correct, unless I could find someone to substitute. I don't know who I could get to substitute for me. I usually just wasn't sick.

Pettijohn: In the country school, what was done when a child became ill?

Riffe: I would usually call the parents. Telephones were in all the schools.

Pettijohn: Was there much of a problem with teacher turnover in the country schools?

Riffe: Some stayed for only a short while. When I began teaching, I thought that one should only stay two years. At Mt. Nebo I stayed four years.

Pettijohn: Which of the schoolhouses in which you taught are still standing today?

Riffe: None are. Most of the schoolhouses were either torn down or moved off during the late 1950s.

Pettijohn: When did you quit teaching in the country schools?

Riffe: In 1955. In that year I went to Stockton. That was the time when they said the country school would be a thing of the past, so I thought I had better begin to teach in town.

Pettijohn: What was your first salary?

Riffe: I don't recall the salary at New Hope in 1942, but it was ninety dollars per month at Webster Grade School.

Pettijohn: Were there any fringe benefits?

Riffe: No.

Pettijohn: How was your salary determined?

Riffe: In those days it was determined by how much the district could afford, by the taxes taken off the land.



Pettijohn: You mentioned that you returned to college during the summer months to take additional training so as to keep up your certificate.

Riffe: That's correct. It developed into different types of certificates. There were sixty-hour certificates, for example.

Pettijohn: Your salary was never based on college hours?

Riffe: In town it was, but never in the country schools.

Pettijohn: How much did your salary vary from school to school?

Riffe: Each year my paycheck was a little more. One check was one hundred seventy-five dollars per month.

Pettijohn: Your salary was solely at the discretion of the school board. Did you ever appeal the salary offered?

Riffe: I suppose it was done, but in my situation I never did.

Pettijohn: How often did you get paid?

Riffe: Monthly, usually at the end of the month.

Pettijohn: Who wrote the checks?

Riffe: The clerk of the board.

Pettijohn: Were there particular reasons why you left any of the country schools?

Riffe: Not really, except I had it in my mind to move every two years. Possibly I didn't want to get too attached to the children. After the two years in the first school, I did feel sad that I was leaving.

Pettijohn: We've previously talked about the layout of the country schoolhouse. Was there a section for a library?

- Riffe: No, there were shelves to store a few books.
- Pettijohn: What if a child wanted a library book to read?
- Riffe: I made arrangements to get the books from the County Superintendent or, sometimes, I would check out books from the public library in Stockton. These books the children would have to leave at school.
- Pettijohn: Where was the office of the County Superintendent located?
- Riffe: It was in what is now the County Assessor's office in the courthouse. Near the windows were alot of shelves with books.
- Pettijohn: In checking out books from the County Superintendent, how long could you keep the books?
- Riffe: Only for a certain period of time.
- Pettijohn: Getting ready for the summer months, were you required to make an inventory of school materials, such as maps, desks, erasers, and what special arrangements were required in order to store supplies?
- Riffe: I must have made an inventory. There were no closets, so everything was left out.
- Pettijohn: What are some of your fondest memories of those years of teaching in the country schoolhouse?
- Riffe: One time I had the seventh and eighth graders reading out of the same reading book. After reading the play, I told the children it would be a nice one to present sometime. The children said: "Let's do it"! It really turned out to be a cute program. The parents came. . At another school

we didn't have any little chairs so we used orange crates. Someone sawed them. One part was used for the back and the other for the seat part. We would bring old materials from home and decorate the chairs. If we needed some shelves, the whole orange crate would be left intact and we would have three shelves. One time we had a crock for our water container. There was a frog in it. I asked the children how that frog, a dead one, got in the water crock. They all looked so dumb-founded. I said that they must all remember that we'd all been drinking that water! Nobody got sick, so I guess a little frog water won't hurt anyone! Another time the fire went out at Mt. Nebo and I had to call the parents. I don't remember what the reason was that the fire went out, but some of the parents took us to their homes by horse and wagon. After the furnace was fixed, we all returned to school. Also, around Christmas time I bought a small Christmas tree. My family had one at home also. One of the ladies of the district asked if I needed the tree as she wanted to give it to some poor family, so I lost my tree.

Pettijohn: In 1955, after teaching in country schools nearly ten years, either full or part time, you then began to teach in the Stockton School System. Were there still country schoolhouses in operation?

Riffe: Oh yes, but only a few.

Pettijohn: Are there any outstanding comparisons you can make between teaching in a one-room country schoolhouse and teaching in a town school?

Riffe: In the rural school the older students would watch the younger children. It was like a family group feeling. Everyone worked together and cooperated. When I stepped onto the playground with grades one to three in Stockton, I certainly could see the difference. Students were always fighting each other. It was something else! There just wasn't that feeling for each other that you'd get in the country school.

Pettijohn: In the country schools, did the students have siblings in the school?

Riffe: Yes, several students were related. But that didn't seem to be a point to the fighting. Also, in the town school there were special classes for art and music. I missed not teaching those classes. But now there was a special library. We were very appreciative of that.

Pettijohn: Do you recall if any children had difficulty in making the transition to Stockton?

Riffe: There might have been a few, but not enough to cause too much concern.

Pettijohn: Violet, I would like to thank you for an interesting journey back to school days in the country schoolhouse.

Riffe: You're welcome.