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Interview with Sister Dorothy Felder

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Fort Hays State University

Dorothy Felder

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CHAPTER TWO

ORAL HISTORY OF SISTER DOROTHY FELDER

BEVERLY: Sister Dorothy, I would like to start by asking you some questions about the curriculum that was used in a one-room schoolhouse. What subjects were studied?

SISTER DOROTHY: The subjects that were studied were the social studies, reading, writing, spelling, English, art, music, and mathematics.

BEVERLY: What was the length of a school year?

SISTER DOROTHY: The length of a school day was from 9:00 to 4:00 p.m. The length of a school year was eight months. We did not have nine months. It was from September, after Labor Day, until the first week in May. The children all had to go home to help their parents in the fields, and so it was only an eight month school.

BEVERLY: Did this change anytime while you were teaching?

SISTER DOROTHY: Yes, it did; not while I was there, but it did change to a nine month school. But I don't remember the year.

BEVERLY: What teaching methods were used?

SISTER DOROTHY: The teaching methods . . . I did lecture methods, reading the lesson and discussing, drill work, question and answer, and individualized work with each student.

BEVERLY: Did they have the little slateboards?

SISTER DOROTHY: Yes, we also had the slateboards, but usually

having few children I had them at the chalkboard. We had enough chalkboard to put them there, but also students did work on the slateboards. In addition, subtraction, practicing their drill numbers, sometimes flashing the card and putting the number on the . . .

BEVERLY: Did you have teaching aids, maybe flash cards?

SISTER DOROTHY: The teaching aids--none other than those made by myself or the teacher in the school. . . I made my own duplicating material, and that was made by purchasing a bottle of some kind of liquid, chemicals and then pouring it into a pan such as a cake pan, the larger the pan the better. It was like a sheet, a cookie sheet I guess you'd call it, and then it stiffened and then you would use a purple indelible pencil and do it in writing. You wrote out your test or whatever you were going to give the child and then you laid that on this gelatin type of material and then it would come off, but it was a very slow process. You would do one sheet at a time, and let it set a few minutes and then use another and run off another sheet until you got the required number that you wanted for your students. I made my own flash cards, charts, and vocabulary words for reading. There was no way of purchasing any of these materials and so I made all of my own materials.

BEVERLY: Were there any special classes? Did they have maybe like Title I reading classes?

SISTER DOROTHY: There were no specials--no, there were none. None available, special reading, L.D. or Title Reading.

BEVERLY: Can you describe a typical school day curriculum?

SISTER DOROTHY: Yes. A typical day. I had grades one through eight, and I had fifteen students. We started at 9:00 with opening exercise, roll call, and flag salute. At 9:05 I had math for grades one through eight. I explained each of the grades their lessons, what they were going to do, and then I went from desk to desk to help students individually. Or I had upper grade students, like my eighth graders when they had finished their work, they would come and help with the lower grades. Helping with the work that I had explained and often I would combine as many lessons in grades five through eight when doing addition pages, subtraction pages or multiplication or division--then I would do almost four grades at one time. By giving problems, they worked at the board giving the problems for a fifth grader, a sixth grader, a seventh grader, and an eighth grader though it was addition or subtraction, whatever it might be. Upper grade students did much of my drill work with flash cards with the little first graders and second graders while I taught classes in grades four, five, and six. So we just kind of always shared and worked together.

BEVERLY: There was a lot of working together?

SISTER DOROTHY: Yes, students were helping each other all the time. And that was the only way I could get all my classes in. But it worked out beautifully. There were no problems. At 10:15 we had recess, and it seemed to be we always played hardball because there was nothing else. At that time football . . .

there was no such thing as we have it today, football or basketball. It was hardball. Not even softball was in, it was hardball and they loved it. Or running games, playing tag, or drop the handkerchief or something like that. Those were the games that were kind of played.

BEVERLY: Did they all play together?

SISTER DOROTHY: Uh huh. All fifteen would play together. There were so few so, you see, even for a ball game to get all of them and you had little first graders against eighth graders so they did more circle games, in and out, they'd run in, that's kind of what they did. More circle games where all children could play together. We didn't have large rubber balls either so we couldn't play kick ball or throw the ball. The only ball I can remember is the hardball. Then at 10:30 I assigned reading and again reading about fifteen minutes for each class. And I'd try to explain each lesson, and then I would use the buddy system where students paired up, and they listened to each other for oral reading, and that's how I got the oral reading in. The upper fifth, sixth, and seventh would listen to the first, second, third and fourth. Kind of paired up like this, and we called it the buddy system. And this was done especially with grades four through eight. This gave me time to listen myself. Sometimes I would listen to the little ones because I felt they needed more individual help, and so I would work with them and then these other grades helped each other read to each other. And it was wonderful. That way I got my

oral reading, because oral reading is so essential to reading. And then as to the rest of it, I had about fifteen minutes to ask questions and try and get the lesson completed. And sometimes I assigned the seventh and eighth grade to write their answers and the questions of the story on paper if I didn't get it all finished in class. And then grades six and seven helped in teaching with flash cards of the new reading words--vocabulary. My upper grades helped with that. At 12:00 was noon and we had lunch hour. There were no hot lunches--only sack lunches. We had no cafeteria. Children ate in their classrooms at their desks. That's the type of lunch hour we had. Then at 1:00 English for grades three through eight, and my English classes were always combined--third and fourth, was the same lesson as was fifth and sixth, and seventh and eighth. That was how I taught my English. We did as much as possible. Then spelling at 1:45 was combined again--third and fourth, fifth and sixth, seventh and eighth. We did not teach spelling in grades one and two. And there was no kindergarten in those days. At 2:30 we had recess and again they played hardball or tag or some other running game or circle games. At 2:45 was handwriting and this was taught on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday to all grades--the best I could do, because first grade did manuscript, but from second grade on was cursive. So I had to try to get that in. With the handwriting for the first grade I tried to do a little of that every day, so they would learn their letters. Upper

grades would come also and help the little ones. They were my assistant teachers. Music then was taught on Tuesday and Thursday, and I combined all fifteen at one time. Then at 3:00 I had social studies, and again I combined. Social studies were taught in grades five through eight; so fifth and sixth was combined, and seventh and eighth was combined. I did art once a week, and that was on Friday from three to four. Instead of social studies, I taught art. At 4:00 the children were dismissed, and most of the children walked home. Most of them lived about two to three miles. Some of the children would stay and help. We had no janitor, and so it was either myself who would clean the building or sometimes the children would like to stay and help me clean. So that was a typical school day.

BEVERLY: It was a filled school day.

SISTER DOROTHY: It was.

BEVERLY: Were there competency tests given?

SISTER DOROTHY: The eighth grade students were required from the county superintendent to take tests for graduation from eighth grade, and those were the only tests other than the ones that I gave. I did give the children a test every six weeks. Our report cards were six-week reports rather than nine-week reports. These tests were given for the eighth grade by the county superintendent in the school on a Saturday either in late April or early May. He actually came to school and gave the eighth grade test, and they were graded somehow. Some teachers probably in Great Bend here were hired to grade

the papers, and then we got the results.

BEVERLY: Did Saint Catherine's school have a library?

SISTER DOROTHY: Saint Catherine's did not have a library at that time. We had no library books.

BEVERLY: How did you decide on the textbooks that you used?

SISTER DOROTHY: Well, being there four years we used the same textbooks that were there, but as far as I know the decision of textbooks was made by the county superintendent, and you followed. Everything came out from the county superintendent's office, and you were told what textbooks you were to use. And I think also the ordering where you got them from went through the county superintendent's office; you got your books also. Everything was handled through the superintendent's office.

BEVERLY: What was the atmosphere in your classroom?

SISTER DOROTHY: The atmosphere in the educational program in the classroom was warm but firm, I felt. It was from having children in the rural community--the children were so glad to come to school and they were so eager to learn that there just didn't seem to be any discipline problems. It was felt like you were a family--you know you treated everybody as brother and sister. Everybody was kind and glad to see each other, to be with each other during the day because when they went home, they worked. The children worked; they had chores to do, and so it was just a family spirit when they came and were very eager to learn.

BEVERLY: Would you consider yourself a strict teacher?

SISTER DOROTHY: Yes, I considered myself a strict teacher, but yet loving, kind, and understanding.

BEVERLY: What were some rules of the school that are different than today?

SISTER DOROTHY: To me the rules of the school were very similar to those that we have today. It might have been that the children worked more with each other than they do today, and that was because I had all eight grades and there was no other way that I could get to everyone in every class. It was so individualized in using the buddy system--one helping the other, sharing with each other what they knew. And if they didn't know they came to me, and I had to stop and help them, so that they could go on.

BEVERLY: What were some special observances of your school?

SISTER DOROTHY: We had an annual Christmas program for the parents. We had a spelling bee but it was not in the county as yet, but we had it in the classroom. And we would give awards to those who would win, and we had monthly spelling bees and that way it varied. More children got awards instead of just once a year. We had it every month. At the end of the month--a spelling bee was on Friday afternoon. The children loved it. In place of art, maybe, we had a spelling bee. Another thing we had was an auction of lunch boxes. Our girls would decorate a shoe box, and then they would have lunch in there for two, and then a dad from the area, one of the children's dads, would come, and at noon there was an auction and the boys had the money, and they were to buy the box to be auctioned off. That was one way that we made money and used it for the school for

little incidental things that we needed in the classroom. We did this at Halloween--that was kind of our Halloween party--this lunch box. We also did it for Valentine's Day, but then the box was all decorated and then whoever made the box got to give it to the boy with whom they ate. These were the only events or observances that I recall. And at the end of the year, we had a school picnic and all parents came to that. Also at times we had, like Valentine's Day, we had parents come. They made an extra box and then they would auction it off. And the parents would eat then with each other or with the child or something--whose box they bought. And it was a big affair. This was a great thing for lunch.

BEVERLY: Did Saint Catherine's school have a graduation exercise?

SISTER DOROTHY: Yes, the school had graduation exercises. The students received their class rings in the eighth grade, a diploma, and a ribbon. It was a big affair. It meant a lot to the children in the eighth grade.

BEVERLY: Now I'm going to ask you some questions that deal with teacher expectations and discipline that was used. Could you describe a typical day before school? What went on? And then again after school?

SISTER DOROTHY: Well, I arrived at school around 8:00 a.m. and sometimes earlier, and I prepared all the needed material--my flash cards and would put work on the chalkboard that needed to be done to be copied, like if they had to copy something from the board. I saw that water was available. We had no water

in the school, no founatins. I walked a half block to get a pail of water and then we had a water jug and I made sure that the water jug was filled so the children could get drinks. So these were the kinds of things for preparation before, and then after school most of my time was spent grading the student's papers and the work that they had done during the day, because there was no time during school time that I was able to do this. I had no janitor so I had to clean the school. At times students stayed and helped in some of the cleaning--taking out the trash, cleaning the floor. We had oiled floors--oiled wooden floors--and that was when we swept with sawdust then to pick up the dirt and so forth. And that was the type of work I did after school.

BEVERLY: How are teaching ways or habits different now than when you taught?

SISTER DOROTHY: Well, the teaching ways or habits are very different today because we did not have the use of the aids that are available such as computers, videos with the VCR's, no listening centers, no copy machines to run off extra work, no cassettes, no overhead projectors, no 16mm film projectors. None of these were available. So really we had nothing other than what I said earlier. Whatever I made is what we had.

BEVERLY: How many grades were taught in the school?

SISTER DOROTHY: All eight grades were taught in the school. I was at this school four years. The first three years I was the only teacher. Enrollment increased the fourth year so an

adjoining room was opened for another teacher and then I taught grades five through eight, and the other teacher taught the first four grades.

BEVERLY: Were you in charge of any extracurricular activities outside the school?

SISTER DOROTHY: No, we didn't have time. You know with grading papers--and there were none. There were no extracurricular activities.

BEVERLY: How were teachers expected to conduct themselves in the community?

SISTER DOROTHY: Well, teachers were expected to conduct themselves according to the code of ethics and morals. I was a nun, a religious, from the Sisters (Dominicans) at Great Bend so I followed my religious decorum of teaching. That was the way I carried on. There were no lay teachers during the time I was there, so we followed the professional code of ethics in the teaching profession.

BEVERLY: Did more than one teacher work in the school?

SISTER DOROTHY: For three years I was the only teacher, and then the fourth year another teacher was with me.

BEVERLY: Did they have a principal over the school?

SISTER DOROTHY: No, there was no principal. We didn't even call it a principal at that time--just head teacher. But when you're alone, you're everything. You weren't even called a head teacher, just teacher, but you still were in charge of everything--responsible for the report cards, and turning

everything in to your county superintendent and so forth.

BEVERLY: What evaluation system was used for the teacher?

SISTER DOROTHY: At that time, as far as I know, there was no evaluation system as such, but there was an official visit at the school by the county superintendent once a year. He would come out and sit and observe your class, and then he would visit with you after school and tell you that you did a good job, you're doing wonderful work, now keep it up, and that was about it. There was no written report or anything that was turned into you or made, as far as I know. It was just this, and we always thought that it was a big special event when the superintendent came to visit.

BEVERLY: Okay. How were discipline problems with the children handled?

SISTER DOROTHY: The discipline problems were very few. I guess because everybody worked and helped each other. But if there was a discipline problem, it was handled by the teacher and at times parents were informed or called into the school to discuss with the child his problem. And parents were very good, as I say, the problems were few, because of the country children coming from rural areas.

BEVERLY: And the need to learn was great?

SISTER DOROTHY: The eagerness to learn, and that was the purpose of them coming and they were happy, I think, to be in school because of all the work at home.

BEVERLY: Where did you live while teaching at Saint Catherine's?

SISTER DOROTHY: I, being a religious nun, my living quarters were in one part of the school building.

BEVERLY: Now, how much school did you have in order to teach?

SISTER DOROTHY: I finished my high school and at the end of the fourth year, if you wanted to become a teacher, you were required to take a test in all the grade school subjects from your county superintendent. I did this at Roosevelt Junior High. Then if I passed the test, I then was given a four-year teacher provisional certificate, and that was giving me permission to teach.

BEVERLY: When was the schoolhouse built?

SISTER DOROTHY: The schoolhouse in which I taught was built in 1921. It was a public school and it was called District #98. The people had completed a new church and the old church was used first as a public school. Lay teachers were the first teachers, but later the people were concerned about the spiritual education of their children. After the public school term would end, the children would attend two or three months of Catholic instruction in the new church. The education was given by lay teachers. The new church was completed in 1885. In September, 1921, the pastor secured Dominican Sisters from Great Bend as teachers in Saint Catherine's new school, and they have zealously provided the Catholic instruction and education in the parish since that time.

BEVERLY: Do you know who actually built the school you taught in?

Would it have been the people?

SISTER DOROTHY: It was the community, the farmers, the parents of the children that built the new school.

BEVERLY: And do you know what materials were used in the building?

SISTER DOROTHY: It was wood--constructed of wood--it was a wood building.

BEVERLY: Was Saint Catherine's school a public school?

SISTER DOROTHY: Yes, it began as a public school and then when parents wanted really a Catholic education, then it was Catholic for a number of years. But then it became very difficult for the parents to keep the Catholic school going financially, so then they went to the state and then it became a public school again. District #98 was what it was called, and then funds came from the state to help keep the school going. And it was a public school all the rest of the years until it was closed at the time of unification.

BEVERLY: What type of heating, lighting, and toilets were available?

SISTER DOROTHY: The type of heating was a coal furnace in the basement. The type of lighting--we had electric lights; and the type of toilets--they were outdoor toilets, no indoor, because there was no water. All water was carried into the school.

BEVERLY: Okay, could you describe the interior of the school?

SISTER DOROTHY: The interior of the school was simple. We had wooden oiled floors, four plain white painted walls, some

double desks and single desks in the room, the teacher's desk, and an organ, and a shelf where we could put books and things.

BEVERLY: Who was in charge of the upkeep of the building if it needed a roof or any upkeep?

SISTER DOROTHY: The people of the community took care of the painting of the exterior and upkeep of the building. It was the farmers themselves that came in and did the work. The children helped with the inside. The cleaning of the school was usually done by the children. However, just before school started, the mothers would come with their buckets and rags and clean, and see that everything was ready and cleaned up. We had no janitor.

BEVERLY: What special events happened at the school?

SISTER DOROTHY: The special events were the annual Christmas program and school parties for the children at Christmas and Valentine's, and a picnic at the end of the year. And again the auction of lunch boxes for special occasions. That was one way to get in money to buy a few things for the school, in order to make aide things, cardboard and so forth for the children.

BEVERLY: Okay, what physical changes occurred to the schoolhouse during the four years you taught there?

SISTER DOROTHY: There were no physical changes as such during those four years.

BEVERLY: Were there physical changes in the building or problems?

SISTER DOROTHY: Yes, the physical problems were that there were no

indoor toilets and no fountain for drinking and later these did come in. But not during the time I was there.

BEVERLY: What happened to the schoolhouse?

SISTER DOROTHY: The schoolhouse was torn down and a new brick modern schoolhouse was built. It was two rooms--and as I say, the old one was torn down.

BEVERLY: I'm going to ask you some questions about the students. What was the usual age a child began school?

SISTER DOROTHY: The usual age was six years old because there was no kindergarten so children--because the state, I think, it was that all children had to be six by September the 15th at that time. That's how they came.

BEVERLY: Did many children move in and out of the school during the year?

SISTER DOROTHY: No, not many moved in and out. They were rather stable--stable farmers.

BEVERLY: What was the greatest distance traveled by any one student?

SISTER DOROTHY: I think the greatest was probably three to four miles.

BEVERLY: How did most of the students get to school?

SISTER DOROTHY: Well, it varied from year to year, but on the average it was twelve to fifteen.

BEVERLY: And you taught?

SISTER DOROTHY: All grade levels. Grades one through eight.

BEVERLY: What type of occupations did the students usually take up after they left?

SISTER DOROTHY: Most of them continued the farming as an occupation.

BEVERLY: Did many students go on to college?

SISTER DOROTHY: Many students did not go to college.

BEVERLY: Was it because of lack of funds or . . .

SISTER DOROTHY: Lack of funds--yes, having hard times, the thirties especially--you know--going through the dirty thirties. The dust storms and people just didn't have the means to do it. And this was also during the time the Catholic people did not have funds enough to finance their school because of during that time of the thirties--you know--the dust storms, losing the crops year after year after year. So there were no funds available, so then the state went back to a public school as a district.

BEVERLY: Did the students of Saint Catherine's come from particular heritage backgrounds?

SISTER DOROTHY: Yes, the students were American born but their parents and ancestors were Polish, Irish, German, Luxemburgers and Bohemians. It was a very mixed nationality settlement there.

BEVERLY: What was the average number of years a student spent in school?

SISTER DOROTHY: The average number of years spent in school was eight years in elementary and four years of high school.

BEVERLY: Did you have any "outstanding" students?

SISTER DOROTHY: Not that I recall, I don't recall. They were just average students.

BEVERLY: What was the dress and the overall appearance of the student?

SISTER DOROTHY: The dress and overall appearance of the students was neat, plain, simple clothing--no shorts or tank tops at this time.

BEVERLY: I was going to ask you about the comparison of what they wear today.

SISTER DOROTHY: Usually the length of dresses was below the knee.

BEVERLY: What was the cost of education to the student or his family?

SISTER DOROTHY: The cost of education to the student and the family was very meager--books, fees possibly \$5.00 to \$7.00. And there were no other fees.

BEVERLY: Okay, now I'm going to ask you some questions about the school district itself, and the community. Why was the school built to start out with?

SISTER DOROTHY: The school was built because parents wanted their children to get a good education--a good academic education as well as teaching of correct morals and values. And it was predominantly a Catholic community, so they did want their children to get good instructions, spiritual as well as academic.

BEVERLY: What were the boundaries of the school's jurisdiction?

SISTER DOROTHY: As far as I know, I can say the school was located in the Northeast corner of Barton County. And it was a three mile square--the school area was.

BEVERLY: How was it decided who went to school there?

SISTER DOROTHY: I really don't know, but since all the parents were farmers, the children all came to the school.

BEVERLY: Anyone close by . . .

SISTER DOROTHY: Close by in that area.

BEVERLY: Was the schoolhouse used for community activities as well as the education?

SISTER DOROTHY: Yes, it was used for social activities--it was kind of a gathering for parents. They even had dances down in the basement. On the floor they waxed it and put some type of dirt on. And gatherings, once in a while meetings--not necessarily for school--they were just gatherings or meetings.

BEVERLY: What were some traditions peculiar to Saint Catherine's?

SISTER DOROTHY: I really don't know. It was hard times when I was there, and most of them being farmers they were so busy because they had their own chickens, pigs, and milking cows and there just wasn't that much of getting together. I think we visited more after the services on Sunday morning at the church. One got to know the people. I don't know of any traditions other than the way we have it today.

BEVERLY: Was there a school board for your school?

SISTER DOROTHY: Yes, we did have a school board for the school.

BEVERLY: Did Saint Catherine's have an organization like P.T.A.?

SISTER DOROTHY: No, there was no organization--ever. I don't even recall that we had parent teacher conferences. We gave out the report cards every six weeks and if there was a problem, we wrote a note and asked the parents if they would stop or come in after school to visit with the teacher. Other than that, there never was a meeting with parents, other than on Sunday morning after services.

BEVERLY: Who hired and fired the teachers?

SISTER DOROTHY: The teachers, being nuns, were assigned by the mother superior in Great Bend. Sometimes the pastor and also parents or school board members could have an input as to which sister, if they wanted a sister removed. That input was allowed or permitted, but most of the time they were just assigned if there were no complaints of any kind.

BEVERLY: Did any activities take place between schools?

SISTER DOROTHY: No activities took place between schools.

BEVERLY: There was no time?

SISTER DOROTHY: No.

BEVERLY: Did the school make any lasting contributions to the community?

SISTER DOROTHY: I think the school did make a lasting contribution to the community by carrying on the morals and values that were taught in school. And later these children moved out into the larger area and communities and carried on beautifully.

BEVERLY: Why did the school close?

SISTER DOROTHY: The school closed due to the state unifying the small districts in the small area and then children went to the city schools by bus.

BEVERLY: I would like to close this interview with a few questions on finance. I've asked you how much it cost a student in relationship to books. There was no enrollment fee as such?

SISTER DOROTHY: No.

BEVERLY: Just taking care of the books?

SISTER DOROTHY: Yes, that was all.

BEVERLY: What was your salary when you first started teaching?

SISTER DOROTHY: The salary was \$50.00 a month and being a nun, I think I probably was paid somewhat lower because one of the school board members told me that the other teachers in public schools were getting about \$70.00 a month. But see, they provided the house, and so we did take a lower cut in salary.

BEVERLY: How was your salary determined?

SISTER DOROTHY: It was determined by the school board, more or less, with the state.

BEVERLY: Did a teacher have a voice in salary decisions?

SISTER DOROTHY: No, there was no choice in the decision. And there were a number of years where the sisters were not even paid. During the time it was a Catholic school, the teachers received no pay, because parents didn't have the money to pay. So the teachers did it gratis.

BEVERLY: How did you get your pay checks?

SISTER DOROTHY: Usually in writing, handed to you monthly.

BEVERLY: Is there anything you would like to add?

SISTER DOROTHY: I would like to say that the land was given to the school. That's how the school was built. It was one man that donated the land to start a school.

BEVERLY: There must have been a great desire for education in that area.

SISTER DOROTHY: There was. These mixed groups really wanted their children to learn the American language. We didn't really have a language problem when I came, but probably in the