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Interview with Helen Truan

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CHAPTER II: INTERVIEW WITH HELEN (HAGGARD) TRUAN

Helen Truan's opportunity to teach in a one-room school began in the Fall of 1957. She was 28 years old. The previous teacher at Hope Valley School in rural Ellis county was starting a family and had decided to resign. The board members of Hope Valley, which were also Helen's neighbors, knew of Helen's degree in education. They approached her about filling the position at Hope Valley and offered her the job. The board members did not require Helen to have a formal interview. Helen accepted the offer and took the position. She quoted the saying, "Fools step in," and laughed as she reminisced that it was about that way for her. Helen's certificate was for K-12, but she only had experience teaching two years in high school, and her college degree was in home economics with a minor in business administration. She was not elementary prepared but she learned quickly. The first year as a one-room school teacher was a learning experience for Helen. Helen quoted, "It was educational for me as well as for them. I was surprised they learned anything."

A typical school day at Hope Valley started at 9:00. Helen usually arrived thirty minutes ahead of time to prepare for the day. It was her responsibility to put out the flag every morning. She also had to haul water into the school since there was no running water inside the school building. The board members had built a cistern outside of the school and they kept it full of water. Helen filled a five gallon crock with water each morning. One dipper was used by all to obtain a drink. However, the county nurse soon put an end to that habit, and from that point on all students were responsible for

bringing their own cup from home. The same five gallon crock of water was also used for washing. The students washed in the alcove located at the back of the school. Each student brought a towel from home. The class shared a bar of soap but the students were responsible for using their own towels any time they washed their hands. It was not long until the County Health Nurse advised installing a soap dispenser and a paper towel dispenser. They always used the crock for water. That never changed. Helen recalled one Monday morning when her stomach turned at the sight of the cistern. It was after the opening weekend of pheasant season. She had gone out to the cistern to gather water and discovered that a hunter had cleaned a pheasant on the cistern. The hunter had washed the entrails right there by the spout. The board members were notified of the mess, and they cleaned and restocked the cistern. Helen was very thankful she did not have to clean it out. Even though the school did not have running water, there were inside toilets. There were separate restrooms for the boys and the girls with a chemical toilet in each restroom. Helen recalled that there were never any problems with the chemical toilets, and the board members pumped them out regularly. Day to day housekeeping was also Helen's responsibility. The older students would dust the erasers for her, but any other custodial work was part of Helen's job. The upkeep of the school grounds was always taken care of by the school board.

All the children promptly arrived for school on time. Parents brought their children by car since most of the children lived three to four miles from Hope Valley School. Helen and her family lived only one mile east of the school. The day would always start with the Pledge of Allegiance and the

Lord's Prayer. All of Helen's students came from a Catholic background, and this morning exercise was something that had always been done.

The first subject taught for the day started with the lower grades and then Helen progressed to the upper grades. The students always kept busy. Students had seat work while others were being instructed. Sometimes the older students would work with the younger ones, or they would read to each other. Helen does not recall having any trouble keeping the students occupied. She never heard the statements, "I'm bored", or "What do I do now?" The students worked well on their own and Helen thought they did a good job. Once in awhile the older children would eagerly raise their hands to answer questions that were given to the lower grades. Helen felt this helped the younger children and also reinforced skills for the older students. There was no certain amount of time allotted for each subject. Helen just went class by class and when she finished one subject she went on to the next. Helen felt she spent more time on reading and math than any other subjects. Helen also taught spelling, writing, grammar, social studies, health and some science. There were no physical education, music, or art classes. Helen would usually have some type of art on Fridays. Physical education was unheard of at that time, and Helen felt the students received plenty of exercise during recess. The school did not have a piano. Helen felt she was not musically inclined, so they very rarely sang. The only time she remembered singing was for school programs. The students sang acappella. It was a tradition to have programs so she kept that tradition alive.

Different subjects were taught from 9:00-12:00. A fifteen minute recess was held but not at a regular scheduled time. Everyone went outside to play, including the teacher. The only playground equipment Hope Valley had was a

merry-go-round. Baseball was usually played in the warm weather days. Helen remembered two of her students, one being her own son, building a rock fort in the corner of the schoolyard. It was their club house. Most of that year the students entertained themselves in the fort. In the winter the children built snowforts and had snowball fights. The game of fox and geese was also played. All ages played together with very few problems.

An hour was set aside for lunch. At noon everyone would wash and sit at their desks. Once again a prayer was said before anyone could eat. Everyone brought their own cold sack lunch. Helen found it interesting to see the variety of lunches. One boy was a very picky eater and he occasionally came to school with a lunchbox full of popcorn and some pop. Helen remembered that one day by the time noon had arrived, the pop had spilt in the lunchbox making for him a very soggy, popcorn lunch. Another family's mother had made donuts, so the children in that family ate donuts for lunch. Helen hated the cold sack lunches, and she stated that after a week it was not much fun. General conversation was held during lunch, but sometimes to break the monotony, the students would journey south of the school to a big bridge and sit either under or on the bridge to eat their lunches. Other times during the noon hour, the class would go east on a nature hike to a deep draw. There was a huge tree located at the draw and an old owl nested in the tree. The students would look for owl pellets that the owl had regurgitated. Helen called it their nature study. After lunch the children would play until 1:00, then subjects were taught with another fifteen minute recess scheduled in the day before school was dismissed at 4:00. The children would be picked up by their parents. The length of the school term was from the day after Labor Day through May. The first day of school was usually a half-day in

length. School let out for Thanksgiving but resumed the following day. School was held right up to Christmas Day, and continued after the New Year. There was no spring break, and on Good Friday school was held only in the morning. The students went to church in the afternoon.

Holidays meant party times. During Halloween, the older students would decorate the basement of the school as a spook house for the younger students. Parents would come to join the fun and everyone would dress up in costumes. At Christmas time the traditional Christmas program with singing was held for the parents. Located on the west side of the one-room school was a library alcove that had a curtain. This alcove was used as a stage for the program. Programs were very popular with Hope Valley's community. It was not only a time to watch the children perform but a time to visit with friends and neighbors. A favorite time for the students was the gift exchange. They were always excited and appreciative of what they received. Valentine's Day brought laughter to the classroom. The students decorated one big box in which they placed all of the valentine cards. One student was chosen to pass out the valentine cards while the other students anxiously waited to open them. It was a tradition at Hope Valley to hold an annual Easter egg hunt. The older students would hide the Easter eggs for the younger ones. Helen recalled one particular party when an older girl who had been gazing out the window of the classroom announced excitedly that she had just seen the Easter Bunny go by in a pink Cadillac. All the children immediately ran to the window to get a look at the Easter Bunny.

Discipline was never a problem for Helen the entire seven years she taught at Hope Valley. There was definitely no talking back from the students, the children did not misbehave, there was never any disrespect, and the

parents were always behind the teacher one hundred percent. In fact, the entire community supported the school. They backed the teacher the whole way. Never was fault found with the school or the teacher. If a student did start to get a little out of hand, all that was needed was to call that student's name and the problem immediately stopped. Children were told at home that they were to behave at school. It was very important to the families that their children did well in school. The children were expected to keep up their grades. Grade cards were very important to the parents. The philosophy of the farm families was if their children got into trouble at school, their children would be in trouble at home. Helen felt that part of the reason the children behaved so well in school was due to the fact of their Volga-German background. All the students were of this heritage with the exception of Helen's own children. The students were raised with a good tradition of work, good ethics, and a sense of responsibility. All of her students continued with their education and graduated from high school. Some of them continued on to college. Helen remembered the only child she ever spanked at Hope Valley was her own son, Kent. She took him outside to spank. Kent's classmates told Helen that she always found fault with everything he did. Helen realized that fact later, and agreed that she was harder on her son than the other students and regretted that this had happened. Helen taught all three of her own children, but felt she was the hardest on her eldest son. She taught Kent for eight years, her daughter Sherri, for six years, and her youngest son, Jeff, for two years.

Helen was never fond of giving homework. She would rather the students did their work at school where she could supervise them. She would send home reading assignments out of the students' textbooks of reading,

social studies or science. As far as any pages to work, that was kept at school. The only exception would be if the students did not complete their work at school. However, Helen did not recall any students not finishing their assignments. The students always worked hard at school to get their assignments finished.

There was no special education or retention at Hope Valley School. The one-room schools had reinforcement of skills constantly. The students eventually caught on to what they didn't understand by listening to the lower grades being taught. Helen related a story about a first grade girl who was having difficulty when she first started school. Helen and the girl were going over the alphabet and when they reached the letter 'D' the little girl said, "D is for dumb like me." This surprised Helen and she knew the little girl's mother must have helped her at home for her to state such a thought. It wasn't long before the little girl had caught up.

Hope Valley had very few monetary resources. There was no duplicating machine. Hope Valley just had the basic teaching aides. The school was provided with the bare necessities. Helen and the students each had their own desks to sit at and the school did have a very small library of books. The parents were responsible for providing all the supplies that their children would be using in school. Textbooks, paper, pencils, and art materials were all bought by the parents or by Helen. It was estimated that it cost a family around ten dollars a year to send each child to school. The parents could purchase a used textbook for twenty-five cents and then they would save the same book for their younger children. Everyone was very frugal. Nothing was thrown away until it was completely used up. The school board was in charge of finances. There was no funding for extra teaching

Hope Valley School was built to a universal plan. It had a full concrete basement, and was a white wooden structure. Steps led up to the front door, which faced to the south. When you first entered the building you would walk through the library which contained a few shelves with books. There were small windows located in the library area. North of the library was a small room where the students kept their lunchboxes. As you continued into the building you would find a big open classroom. On the north side of the big room were two restrooms. Helen remembered it was nothing fancy, but the building was built well and sound and was lit by electricity. The only fault she found with the school building was that it did not have running water. The Hope Valley building was only used for school and regular school programs. No other outside activities were held there.

There was no kindergarten at Hope Valley School. Students started school in first grade if they turned six before the end of the year. Helen had eight students her first year. She stated she had two eighth graders, who were twin boys. That year graduation for the boys was held at Vincent, a nearby one-room school. Vincent also had two graduates, so it was decided to hold the exercises together. During the following years, graduation was held at Hope Valley. The parents gave their graduating children the diplomas.

In the one-room school there was no competition among the students to outdress one another. The dress style was typical farm style. Boys generally wore jeans and cotton shirts. The girls wore dresses. Rarely did the girls wear pants. Boys wore either boots or lace up shoes and the girls wore dress shoes. In the winter time snow suits were worn and all students wore overboots so they could go outside. Helen described a little girl that came to school one winter wearing a fluffy, sheer dress. The sight of her

about made Helen freeze. Helen never wore pants. It was not considered suitable for a teacher to wear such attire.

The county superintendent was responsible for the curriculum, and he visited the school about once a year. The school board ran the school, and they took care of the school's needs. All textbooks were chosen by the county superintendent. Neither Helen nor the school board had any input on the choice of books. The curriculum was rarely changed, and Helen did not recall using a new text the seven years she taught at Hope Valley. The first reading books she remembered were Tip and Mitten.

Hope Valley school closed in May of 1963. Helen had taught there for seven years. Enrollment had declined and the school board felt they could not keep the school open. Helen does not know what happened to the furniture and teaching supplies. The school building is no longer standing.

Helen had the opportunity the following fall to teach at Mount Brokaw, located in Russell County, Kansas. Mount Brokaw was a one-room originally, but after Helen taught there for only one year, another teacher was added to the building because of the increased enrollment. Mount Brokaw was an oil district, which made it a rich district. It was a complete contrast from Hope Valley. Everything was provided by the district at Mount Brokaw. The parents were not responsible for buying anything for their children. School lunches were even paid for by the district. Mount Brokaw's student population was more transient. Families were moving in and out because of the oil industry. Helen still did not have any discipline problems in this school, but did remember it was broken into and some things were stolen.

Mount Brokaw was a buff brick building. It contained a small gym, a stage, a kitchen, a classroom, and restrooms with showers. The building was

built this big, but started out with just one teacher on staff. Mount Brokaw closed with the consolidation and unification of School District 407 in 1966. Mount Brokaw is still standing, but it is not in very good shape. At one time it was used for storage of hay, and it looked as if cattle had been kept in the building at one time. A cattle shoot had been nailed to one side of the school.

The closing of Mount Brokaw meant the end of an era for one-room schools. Helen related that the years she taught in one-room schools were the best years of her career, but times were changing and she had to change with the times. After Mount Brokaw closed, Helen continued to teach seventh and eighth grade in Bunker Hill, Kansas. The following year Helen transferred to Gorham Elementary School located in Gorham, Kansas, where she taught for twenty-five years.