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Interview with Norma Jean Cook

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Norma Jean Cook

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Recommended Citation

Haner, Stacy Lynn and Cook, Norma Jean, "Interview with Norma Jean Cook" (1994). *College of Education One-Room Schoolhouse Oral Histories*. 170.
<https://scholars.fhsu.edu/ors/170>

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CHAPTER II: INTERVIEW WITH NORMA JEAN (TOMLIN) COOK

Norma Jean (Tomlin) Cook really wanted to go to college. When her father said he would send her to college if she became a teacher, Norma Jean gladly accepted. She attended Fort Hays State for one winter before accepting her first teaching position in September, 1947, at a rural school called Center. The school was located south of Russell, Kansas.

There were three rural schools in the district. Because Center School was located in the middle of the three schools, that is how it got its name. Center School was situated just off the road, not back in a pasture. This made it easy for parents to drive their children to school and drop them off.

The school building was a white frame building that actually had two rooms. One room was used for teaching, and the other room was used for enrichment and fun activities on days when the weather was bad. There were windows all away around the building, except the wall that had the chalkboard. The school had wooden floors and an entry way where the wash basin was kept. The school did not have a sink. The entry way also had many cupboards that were used for storage.

The school building was a very comfortable building. It had electricity and a gas stove.

Although there was not any running water, the school had a water pump that pumped cold water. Norma Jean was able to use the gas stove to heat the building and to heat the water if needed. She did not have to carry wood. Because there was not any running water, the bathrooms were located outside. There was a bathroom for girls and a bathroom for boys.

In the late 1940's, there were not any set school boundaries for the rural schools. Parents could choose to send their children to the school of their choice. Some of the students who attended Center School traveled ten miles to get there.

The first year Norma Jean taught at Center School, she had approximately eighteen students in grades one through eight. Since she was only eighteen years old at the time she started teaching, some of her students were fourteen years old and as tall as she was. Most of her students were children of oil field workers, although she did have a few farm children.

While teaching at Center School, Norma Jean was a stern and strict teacher. Her theory was, "If students can not hear, they can not learn." Norma Jean does not remember having any discipline problems. She was granted a lot of respect. There was never any talking back or fighting among the children. Rural school was

one big family including parents and students. If anything happened at school, discipline was carried over to the home. Norma Jean had parental support. She felt she had to find what worked with each child. If she could not do that, she knew she would get cooperation from the parents.

Norma Jean felt her students had to be in control in rural school, because several groups of students were working at one time. Her older students helped the younger students. She felt her younger students learned a lot from the older students.

When Norma Jean first started teaching, she had her students call her Miss Norma because of the little ones. Even after she was married, her students continued calling her Miss Norma.

Most of the major school decisions were decided upon by the County Superintendent, who was located in the basement of the Russell County Courthouse. The County Superintendent was the teachers' boss, and she also planned the school year calendar. The school year lasted from September to May. School always began the day after Labor Day. Each school day lasted from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Although there were not any set guidelines, Norma Jean arrived at school each day at

7:45 a.m. and stayed until 4:15 p.m. Teachers were discouraged from being in the schools alone.

The County Superintendent was also in charge of evaluating teachers. Teachers were evaluated at least one time per school year. In addition to being evaluated by the County Superintendent, Norma Jean also asked school board members to come and watch her teach. Because Norma Jean was so young, one man on the school board did not really approve of hiring Norma Jean. However, the other three school board members persuaded him to change his mind. That school board member would go and stand in the entry way of Center School and listen to Norma Jean teach. Although the man tried to hide and not let Norma Jean know he was there, she always knew. Norma Jean felt like that made her a better teacher, because she knew she might have been being evaluated at times she was not aware of. At the end of the school year, the school board member went to Norma Jean and apologized for not wanting to hire her. He realized he had made a mistake.

When Norma Jean first started teaching, she was not allowed to wear pants. Otherwise, teachers were not told what they could and could not do. Norma Jean felt like she was a professional, and needed to be a good role model for her students. There were many

Honky Tonks around town. The men who worked in the oil fields often went to the Honky Tonks and caused trouble. Teachers did not go to those places. Norma Jean felt like teachers would have lost their jobs if they did not discipline themselves and behave professionally.

Norma Jean was required to teach all subjects except music. The rural schools were fortunate to have a rural music teacher. The rural music teacher, Mrs. Shearer, traveled to all of the rural schools to teach music. Center School contained a piano that the music teacher and Norma Jean both used. The students of Center School became very excited when they noticed the music teacher coming down the road to their school.

Mrs. Shearer and Norma Jean organized a Christmas program that was the big event of the year. The program was given in the school. Part of the school room was used as the stage. All rural schools contained a wire that the curtains were pulled on. Students presented poems, dialogues, and music as part of the program.

Although Norma Jean was not required to keep lesson plans, she made out lesson plans a week in advance. When she was in fifth grade, she remembered her teacher had kept lesson plans. Therefore, Norma

Jean decided to keep lesson plans when she became a teacher. Norma Jean wrote her lesson plans as if they were for a substitute teacher instead of for herself.

Since Norma Jean went to a rural school when she was growing up, she felt that experience helped her as a rural school teacher. She was used to the procedures and what subjects were taught. Norma Jean did not have teacher's guides for all of the textbooks. Therefore, she went through each book on her own and decided what to teach. Norma Jean did have a curriculum guide that listed the textbooks that were to be used. At that time, teachers were expected to teach what was contained in the textbooks. She felt Social Studies was the easiest subject to plan, because she had one book that contained what she was supposed to teach for all eight grades. Since the textbooks did not change very often, Norma Jean felt that planning was easier after the first year of teaching.

Norma Jean had a very small budget to work with. She did not have a library of books in her classroom. However, she did have a set of dictionaries and encyclopedias. Norma Jean supplied most of the materials she wanted to use for art, even though she only earned \$75.00 a month for a teaching salary. However, students were required to bring all other

necessary supplies to school. Center School did not have a copying machine, but the school did have a Duplicator. Norma Jean had to put gel in the machine and let it get firm. She had to lay one paper at a time on the gel, and then peel it off. Copies were done one at a time. Everything was done by hand. The machine had to be cleaned before different copies could be used.

Even though copies were tedious to make, there were a lot of worksheets used. Norma Jean wanted to make sure her kids were able to write, not just do things orally. Sometimes the older students received homework but not very often. Norma Jean was not a big believer in homework. She felt that after working hard all day in school, the kids needed time to play.

Most of Norma Jean's students were children of oil field workers. They did not have duties they had to do after school. Therefore, the students were able to play after school. Because there were no computers and video games, children had to make their own fun. They really enjoyed playing ball.

Norma Jean made her classroom very comfortable. She allowed her students to take drink and bathroom breaks when they needed to. The students were able to do that without asking. Norma Jean never had any

problems. Her students knew that if they misused the rule, they would have had to ask permission each time to use the bathroom and get a drink.

Because Center School was located in the country, Norma Jean had to know what to do in case of an emergency. Norma Jean had a phone in the school building in case any of the students became sick or there was an emergency. She was able to call the parents. The school did not have a cellar, so Norma Jean planned to get the students in the Southwest corner of the school if a storm occurred. Even though there were a lot of snow storms, school was never called off publicly. Most parents kept their children at home during the days when the weather was bad. However, school days did not have to be made up if the teacher made it to school. Norma Jean always went to the school in case a student showed up. She lived close to an oil company, so she would stop there on the way in and let them know she was going to the school. The people at the oil company knew to go get Norma Jean if she didn't make it back out. She was always able to get back out.

Substitute teachers were available if a teacher needed to be absent. Norma Jean never had to miss very much of school. However, her mother was able to

substitute teach for her the few times Norma Jean could not be at school.

Norma Jean rang a school bell each morning to start the school day. The students did not form lines to go in the building, they just went in the school when they heard the bell. The Flag Salute and a prayer were said each morning. Sometimes they sang a song. Norma Jean started right in on the lessons for the day. She had art projects and learning centers ready if students finished their work early. Some students who finished their work early helped other students in the classroom. Lessons were worked on throughout the day, except during the lunch hour and during the recess breaks. In addition to lunch and recess breaks, Norma Jean tried to save at least fifteen minutes at the end of each day to work on arts and crafts with her students.

During recess, most students played ball. The school had swings, a merry-go-around, and a slippery slide, but most of the students preferred to play ball. Students were given a morning and an afternoon recess break. They also had recess time when they finished eating their lunch. There were not any hot lunches. Students had to bring their own lunches from home. They were required to sit at their school desks to eat.

When students finished eating, they were allowed to go outside and play. Students were given one hour to eat their lunch and play outside.

Norma Jean recalled a very unusual school day. She called the students in to the school one morning and started the daily routine. She heard a noise in one of her desk drawers. When she opened the drawer, she found a live skunk sitting in the drawer. Because it was so cold outside, Norma Jean moved all the students in to the next room and lined them up against the wall. She told them to stay quiet and to stay still. The skunk walked in the room. A first grade student picked up a broken chair and threw it at the skunk. The skunk sprayed, but it did not hit any of the students or Norma Jean. The skunk walked on and Norma Jean could not find it.

Norma Jean had all of the students put on their coats and go outside. Some oil field workers stopped at the school and went in to look for the skunk. They could not find the skunk, but they found a hole behind the stove where the skunk had entered the school. Because the school smelled so bad from the skunk, Norma Jean and her students had to have school for two months in the basement of a school board member's home.

Field trips and other special events were also incorporated during the school year. Because the students enjoyed playing ball, many field trips were taken to other rural schools on Fridays to play ball. Parents provided the transportation for all field trips. County track meets were also held. Parents drove the students to the track meet. The track meet included events such as three-legged races, the high jump, and the long jump.

In addition to playing ball and the track meets, many square dances were held. Norma Jean loved to square dance, so she taught her students how to square dance. The parents started to get involved also. Square dances were held with the students and parents.

Finally, a big End-of-School Celebration was held to close out the school year. This was an all day event. Everyone brought food that was put on a long table. Parents, students, and the teacher were involved. The day was spent eating, playing ball, and playing other games.

Students were promoted to the next grade based on their grades on report cards. Report cards were given every six weeks. Norma Jean was required to use letter grades on the report cards. Students in the eighth grade had an additional requirement besides having

passing grades on their report cards. They also had to pass an eighth grade county test. Most eighth graders went on to high school after graduating from the rural schools.

Norma Jean spent six years teaching at Center School. Her last year was the hardest. She had thirty-one students in her classroom. After that year, Norma Jean decided that was too much. She decided to accept a position in town at the public school. Center School was torn down to build a two-room school with two teachers.