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Interview with Edna Bice

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Edna Bice

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Recommended Citation

Baumgartner, Jacquelyn S. and Bice, Edna, "Interview with Edna Bice" (1992). *College of Education One-Room Schoolhouse Oral Histories*. 199.
<https://scholars.fhsu.edu/ors/199>

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CHAPTER II: NARRATIVE OF A ONE-ROOM SCHOOL TEACHER

Edna Bice began teaching in one-room country schools in western Kansas in 1933. She continued to teach in one-room schools until 1952. During that nineteen year period she served five districts in Phillips County, one in Ellis County, and one in McPherson County. For Edna, now in her eighties, the years tended to "run together", but the memories of students were clear -- even from the her very first day.

The first teaching position Edna had was at Red Wing school, District number 109, located about eight and a half miles north and east of Gretna, Kansas. When Edna walked to school on that day of school in September 1933, three barefoot children met her as she crossed the street. The three students were Cleo, Maxine, and Harley Potter. All three were members of the same family and were very anxious to meet their new teacher.

Edna walked with them to the doorstep of the schoolhouse, turned the key and opened the door only to discover that nothing had been touched since school dismissed the year before. Some of the windows were broken out. Sparrows had nested inside and were now flying all over after being disturbed. Mud daubers had made nests on top of the windows and doors, so Edna had to clean the building and stop up the holes before they could start school.

The children had arrived with only two books, a geography text and a speller, for all three to share. They thought they'd use Edna's books. Unfortunately, Edna didn't have any books of her own either, and she certainly had no money to buy any. She went to see one member of the school board about the

lack of textbooks and was simply told to "teach 'em geography and spelling and send 'em home then." He didn't care because he didn't have any children in school. Edna and the children were resourceful enough to "get a few books around" and so had school.

Edna's willingness to do whatever was necessary for her students was displayed again around Halloween that first year. Edwin Day came to Red Wing from another district where he had failed seventh grade. Edwin had lived so far from the other school that he was often absent. He'd simply missed so much school that he'd failed his seventh grade year. Red Wing was closer to his home, and, when he asked if he could come to her school, Edna was thrilled at the prospect of another student. Edwin was excited enough to ask if he could take both seventh and eighth grades in one year. Edwin said he would soon be sixteen and could not come back another year. Edna wasn't sure if it was permissible to complete two grades in one year, so she contacted the County Superintendent, Clyde King. Mr. King told her to let him try it.

Everyone was set to "try it" when the Potter parents decided they didn't want their kids to go to school with "that Day boy." They called the truancy officer and asked that Edwin be kicked out of school. The truancy officer paid Edna a visit and questioned her about Edwin. Ultimately, though the authority was his, the truancy officer asked Edna if she thought Edwin should be "put out." Edna replied with a firm no. She needed an extra pupil and Edwin seemed interested and motivated, so Edwin stayed. The Potter's tried to keep their children home, but the truancy officer saw to it that the Potter children were indeed in school. A

sympathetic farmer gave Edwin permission to take a short cut through his pasture to walk to school, but he made the Potter children walk around the long way.

Edna's contract stated that the school was to close if the students were not there by 10:30 in the morning. The Potters were usually late, but Edwin always came on time. Edna told Edwin they would have to have class before school started in the morning and stay late for class after school was out, if he was going to pass both seventh and eighth grades. It was difficult for Edwin since his mother had died when he was only eighteen months old, and his father was trying to raise him. Edwin would milk and do chores, then study while his dad cooked. Edwin walked more than a mile to and from school each day. In 1934, he graduated from Red Wing school, having completed all his seventh and eighth grade work in six months with an eighty-eight percent grade average.

Graduation ceremonies were held at the town schools in the county. Graduating students went to the nearest town school for the ceremony. Edwin had no dress clothes. Edna got him a white shirt, tie, sleeveless sweater vest, belt and socks. His dad bought him a new pair of jeans, and Edwin graduated in the ceremony at Agra in the spring of 1934.

Edwin worked two years for the WPA after he graduated. His father died, and Edwin moved to Lincoln, Nebraska, where he lived with his sister and attended high school. After completing high school, Edwin went on to college, but after two years joined the Army Air Force. He took the train when he left for the service. He sat next to a girl from Kensington during that train ride. He talked about his eighth grade teacher, and the girl said she knew Miss Stevens. Later that young lady told Edna that Edwin said, "What I am today, I owe to Edna Stevens".

Edna proudly displayed Edwin's military portrait signed, "Your first 8th grade student. Love, Edwin."

Edna claimed that Edwin was the best kid she ever saw, even if the Potter's didn't think so. She laughed as she told about the picnic they'd planned for the last day of school that year at Red Wing. The Potter's said their children could not go on a picnic if Edwin was going; Cleo, Maxine, and Harley would not be at school on the last day. Edna simply took that in stride and surprised them all with that picnic the day *before* school was out. They all had a ball, and the Potter's kept their children home the last day of school; Edwin had class until four o'clock.

Edna thought that her students that first year were very special, but in many ways they were very similar to the more than one hundred that followed. Edna usually had about an even number of boys and girls in school. For the most part, they were generally neat and clean. The boys usually wore overalls and shirts; most of the girls wore dresses and stockings. If the weather was nice, students often came to school barefoot. Like Edwin and the Potter children, most of her students walked to school. It was not uncommon for the children to leave home before sunrise, so they could make it to school before it got hot and before the wind and dust started blowing so hard they couldn't make it. Edna remembered one year in particular at the LaBelle school when students would arrive before seven o'clock in the morning and not leave until their parents came for them after work, sometimes as late as nine at night. This was really a problem since there were no lights in the building. She just lit the stove and told them stories to try to keep them amused. The little ones often cried and wanted to know when daddy was going to come get them. Wanting to be a teacher and not a babysitter, Edna complained to

the school board. Her complaints brought a stricter adherence to more normal school hours. Edna recalled that it was the encouragement of her county superintendent, Clyde King, that got her through some of these tough times early in her career. His encouragement and her love for children kept her in the field of teaching.

When Edna was teaching, children were allowed to start school when they were six, or if they would be six before January 1 of that school term. Edna chuckled again as she recalled one mother who thought her four year old daughter should be allowed to come to school with an older sister. The mother insisted that she was very smart, but a cousin cautioned Edna to stand firm with the age restriction. It seems that this child was a real problem for her mother, especially whenever mother went to club meetings. The other club members had begun to insist that the mother not bring the child with her to the meetings. Naturally, that was why mother thought her daughter should start school early!

Regardless of when they started school, children were required to attend school until they completed eighth grade or reached age sixteen. Public education in one-room schools was free, but survival came first for many families during the post-depression/pre-war economy of the dust bowl era. Students often missed school to help with planting or harvest even though the school year was structured around the agricultural economy, generally beginning in September and ending in April. Most students in Edna's early days of teaching did a full day's work at home as well as at school. Like Edwin Day, many students struggled to complete even their eighth grade educations.

Students who chose to go on to high school usually had to move to town. Most rented a room and did their own cooking, or found room and board with a relative who lived in town. No one had the time or money to drive back and forth prior to school busing. Early in her career, some of Edna's students went directly to work after eighth grade, but as time went on more students completed high school and even went on to college.

Even for those students who never dared to dream of a college education, Edna worked to make learning interesting and fun. She taught "all subjects -- all grades" in every school she served during her career. One year she had only one pupil in her one-room school, but another year she had twenty-one students in all eight grades. She divided the day up allowing so many minutes for each subject with time out for lunch and recess.

Social Studies was one of everyone's favorite subjects, probably because Edna believed in doing projects, as well as learning by reading and recitation. For example, when they studied Holland the students made a model of a city and the surrounding area complete with canals, artificial water, paper boats, Holstein cows, green grass, and storks in the chimneys on the roof tops of the town. It was just paper, pasteboard, glass, and crepe paper, but they had learned a great deal about Holland in the process of making that model.

Many of the students' special projects served very practical purposes and made learning fun as well. One such project was a cave they dug in the bank across the road from the LaBelle school. Kansas weather in the thirties was often extreme and very changeable. The kids knew that an excellent place to escape the wind, heat, or even a blizzard or dust storm was a cave, so they asked to dig one. Edna

agreed, and the next day they brought shovels, including an extra one for her. Their free time together before or after school and at noon was spent digging a cave. When it was finished they lined it with clean dry straw, made a brush cover for the entrance and discovered it was a wonderfully cool place to eat a relaxed dinner. She had some real "wiggle worms" who especially enjoyed the freedom and adventure of being some place other than their desk.

Edna planned a special program, activity, or theme for nearly every month of the school year. Twice a year, in October and April, they had a picnic or wiener roast. These were usually combined with a nature hike or field trip of some kind. They had a community box supper in November, and they put on a Christmas program in December. In February, the students and parents enjoyed a Valentine's Day potluck banquet complete with covered plank tables atop the desks, and crepe paper streamers and decorations hung around the room. They all played games after the meal. March, a windy month in Kansas, was a great time to study the weather and weather and to make kites.

One wiener roast was especially memorable because of an unexpected guest. Events close to home seemed more important than world happenings, and Edna was always quick to pick up on local moments of import to teach social skills and to provide a break in the routine. Just before their annual wiener roast, they learned that a young couple had gotten married and was living down the road from the school. The couple had not been shivareed, so Edna told everyone of the kids to bring something to pound on; they would shivaree the newlyweds on their way to their wiener roast. The young man was outside cutting wood and his new wife was still in bed asleep when all sixteen kids stormed into the yard making a horrible

din. The husband cussed at the thought of having to feed all these kids. They agreed to a compromise: they'd cook their own meal, but he'd have to give up his wife for the day. The husband declared there was never a shivaree as noisy as that one. He agreed to the pact, and the sleepy young wife was spirited away for a wiener roast she would never forget.

The last field trip Edna took with students was also memorable one. She had married Dale Bice from Codell the previous summer, and in April of 1952 he took Edna and her students to Hays. Walking field trips were pretty common for the last day of school, but this was the only time she had travelled any distance with her students. Most of the kids had never been any farther than Norton, so this trip was a real treat. It was a cloudy day, so Dale made bench seats in the back of his pickup and put a tarp over the top. They drove to Hays and spent the entire day visiting the jail, the pop factories, and the college. The rain held off until they headed home where the parents were all anxiously waiting.

Edna carefully planned her students projects, picnics and field trips as learning experiences that expanded class studies and did not take time away from class. Christmas time was the only vacation time from school. They did close for Thanksgiving day, but had to be back in session the day after. The only way to take vacation the day after Thanksgiving was to have an extra day of school the Saturday before the holiday. That wasn't even possible in some schools, because the Seventh Day Adventists had church school in the building on Saturdays. Students didn't get out of school for everything the way kids seem to today.

Edna made other comparisons between today's schools and her experiences as a one-room school teacher. Edna prepared to teach differently than teachers train

today. As a senior in high school she took "normal training" courses, and substitute taught at every grade level. After graduation and a formal test, she received a Normal Training Certificate. Every two years she had to attend Institutes for active teacher training courses. Edna accumulated about seventy-five hours of college credit, but a degree was not required for certification.

There were no principals in Edna's one-room schools. She was responsible for the building, the curriculum, and the activities. The county superintendent made observation visits to watch the teachers and see how they were doing. Teachers sent prepared reports of attendance and grades to the county superintendent every two months. There was a county truancy officer, but he came to the school only if he was contacted about an attendance problem.

The school board in each district had the authority to hire and fire teachers. Contracts were usually for eight months or 160 days of teaching. There was not a stated morality clause in any of Edna's contracts, but high standards of behavior were expected of teachers. Though it changed later on, early in her teaching career it was accepted policy that a female teacher must resign immediately if she got married. This meant that it was common for teaching positions to open up during the school year. There were teachers by the dozen for every position, so it was not difficult to find a new teacher.

The abundance of teachers meant that competition for positions was keen. It was beneficial and important to have personal contacts in the community who could make positive recommendations to the school board. It was even more beneficial if that person was a board member or, as in Edna's case, the county

superintendent. That personal recommendation often made the difference in securing a position.

Teachers had to learn to be their own negotiators, bargaining with school boards in person or by mail. Edna received thirty dollars a month (ten dollars went for room and board) in her first position at Red Wing school. Usually a teacher told the school board what salary they would work for, but sometimes Edna would find out how much they would pay her and went that way. The Red Wing school board asked Edna to teach a second year for only twenty-five dollars a month. She refused to take the pay cut, but the board found a young lady who would work for that salary and walk three miles a day one way to do it. That year Edna went on to work at Inavale for forty dollars a month.

A few years later, a beginning teacher asked her to read through her letter of application to another school board. In the letter the young lady said she'd like to have forty-five dollars a month, but she would take forty. Edna was quick to advise her that, if she used that approach, the most she could hope for would be forty dollars. Men were lucky to get fifty cents for a day's work. The times were tough; teachers had to be tough, too.

Funds for teacher's salaries came from taxes as they do now. Teachers were usually responsible for making their own arrangements for room and board which might or might not be considered part of their salary, depending on the district. Teachers usually roomed with a student's or board member's family. Perhaps this was one of the reasons Edna and other teachers seemed to have fewer discipline problems than some teachers today.

Another reason Edna may not have had many discipline problems was because she so obviously cared about the students. At the time Edna began teaching there was no hot lunch program in Phillips county. In those first years, kids came to school with hardly anything to eat, maybe cold pancakes. This concerned her, so she went to the bakery and picked up big empty peanut butter cans. She put boards in the bottom of the tins, added water and created mini-steam tables by putting them on the heating stove in the school. She encouraged the kids to bring their lunches in glass jars or tin cans. Each morning she put the jars in the steam cans and by noon their lunches were steaming hot. She could not provide food for all her students, but she could provide a way to heat and serve what they brought.

Tomatoes with macaroni was the most common student lunch, but if potatoes were the only thing in the house it might be potato soup. Beef and noodles, and bread and milk were pretty standard fare. Some of the kids had nothing but eggs. They brought those and Edna boiled them, but she made them put their names on them first. She didn't want anyone to get someone else's egg since occasionally one might be rotten. The students put paper over their desks at noon, and one eighth grade boy helped Edna get the hot jars or cans out of the tins on the stove and put them on the students desks. There was always something hot to eat, such as it was. Even if it was soup and beans or corn bread and beans, it was something. It didn't cost anything; it was just work. In the end it paid off because the kids felt better. It was interesting, too, because they'd take their jars home, wash them and bring them back with something different the next day. No

one knew what everyone would have for dinner the next day. The kids liked the hot lunch, and their mothers really appreciated it.

The county superintendent saw what Edna was doing with student lunches during one of his routine observations. He noted the benefits for the students, the fact that there was no cost involved, and liked the idea so much that he immediately wrote a letter to every teacher in the county asking them to give it a try. Some didn't want to bother with it, but others did. Edna's hot lunch program was the prototype in Phillips County.

Edna says jokingly that she was always the last one in the county to finish her lunch, but the kids always waited for her. One student would stand with the baseball bat and watch while she ate. When she was almost finished, he would run out and tell the others to start choosing up sides for ball. They would never start a baseball game without her. She loved to play ball as much as they loved having her play with them.

Edna was quick to point out that not everything about teaching was fun and games for the one-room school teacher and her students. The one-room school teacher had numerous responsibilities besides working with the students. One of those was taking care of the schoolhouse. As Edna's recollections of her first day of teaching illustrated, that was no easy task.

The school buildings Edna taught in were "old as the hills." Most were built specifically as schoolhouses, but some may have served as churches or gathering places for people in the rural areas. All the buildings she taught in were loosely constructed frame buildings. Since that was during the dust bowl there were problems. When the dust storms hit, dust flew all over the desks. Young

students would cry because they got so much dust in their eyes that they couldn't see to do their work. There were holes all along the mopboards where the mice came in throughout the day, too.

The school board was responsible for major repairs. For instance, they had to repair the holes Edna found in a desk and door when she began teaching in a different school. A student explained that the holes were made by a boy the previous year. He had brought a rifle to school and threw it in the heating stove. It was loaded and went off making a hole in the stove, a desk and the schoolhouse door. Edna was glad that happened *before* she taught at the school.

None of Edna's schools had indoor plumbing or water. They all used outhouses. During the years of the dust storms, Edna couldn't let a little tot go to the outhouse without a seventh or eighth grader because they might get lost in the dust and not find their way back to the schoolhouse. She had to watch carefully even with the seventh and eighth graders. Edna and her students had to pack their drinking water from other wells. She was thoroughly disgusted with one incident she recalled. She and the students hiked about a quarter of a mile to get a drink and bring back a bucket of drinking water before recess. When they returned, they set the bucket of water in the hall and went out to play ball. After the game, they came in for a drink only to discover a neighbor's goat drinking their water. Of course that meant another trip to the well.

Winter brought it's own problems. It was the school teacher's responsibility to gather kindling, build and maintain the fires for heating the building. One time Edna found a load of cobs to use for kindling, but the man who brought them to the school on Saturday just kicked them out onto the ground. It

rained all weekend, so when she came to school Monday morning she had a huge frozen pile on the ground. She had to break some off and put them in a pan on the stove to thaw and dry out for kindling the next day.

Kindling also caused Edna problems in one school district where the Seventh Day Adventists used the building for church school on Saturdays. Edna chose a nice day to go down across the creek to gather old dead limbs and make a nice pile of kindling. The Adventistss had school the following Saturday. When Edna came for school on Monday, she had no fuel left and it was *terribly* cold! The next week she left them a note on the blackboard: "If you use my kindlin', *please* get me some more." She still ended up getting her own, though they once left her a bunch of sunflowers.

Sunflowers probably would have seemed like a true gift during the years of the dust bowl. That was the one historical event that Edna felt affected her and her students the most. One morning a school board member rushed to tell Edna to close the school because a dust storm was coming. The dust came so thick and fast that by the time Edna closed the door and walked to the road the school building was out of sight. She was able to make it home by walking between a two rows of trees that ran from the school to the home where she stayed. At home they ate meals from their plates in the cupboard in order to keep as mush dust as possible off their food.

Edna vividly remembered the time her brother and his two month old baby came to school to walk her home. They got caught in a dust blizzard that was so bad they couldn't see their hands in front of their faces. When they couldn't go on, Edna stayed put and kept the baby all covered up while her brother followed the

fence line to a house to get help. The owner got in his Model-T to come get them. The dust was so thick they couldn't see the road, so her brother had to walk in front of the car with a flashlight and guide the driver.

Limited transportation was probably the major reason that schools rarely got together for activities. One year the husband of the family Edna boarded with taught in a neighboring district so they got together for an afternoon of baseball. The only other interschool activities she worked with were *Literaries*. *Literaries* were monthly programs consisting of special music, recitations, and plays. The programs were community affairs with everyone in all the surrounding schools and communities, including the town districts, invited. They provided public entertainment during in an era when radios were rare, television was nonexistent, and people had no money to spend. Each year the *Literaries* were hosted by a different school district. The year that Edna taught at Inglewood, these programs were held at the Plummer school.

At another school, Edna and her students put on a Halloween masquerade party for everyone in the community who wanted to come. When Edna taught at Crystal Creek, she and her students provided their own entertainment. A certain day during the school year was designated *Tacky Day*. On that day, the students wore old, frayed, patched and miss-matched clothing to school. The student with the tackiest outfit was awarded a prize.

Edna provided learning experiences and special activities that were fun, practical, and demonstrated an enthusiasm for learning and for life. She travelled to the county library to check out books so her students would have something to read. She invited friends, relatives and community members to share in school

activities. She spent extra time with slower students who "just couldn't get it" until they finally did get it, even if that meant repeating a grade. She was extremely satisfied remembering that in her third year of teaching she was rewarded with a monthly salary of fifty dollars, one of the the highest salaries any teacher earned in Phillips County at that time.

It was clear throughout the interview that Edna's most prized reward was knowing that her students understood how much she cared. The boys she reprimanded for trying to dig a skunk out from under the coal house knew she cared when she made them understand the consequences of having an angry skunk in the schoolhouse. The boy she paddled because he was trying to beat his brother into packing his books home knew she cared when she carefully explained the punishment. The "wiggle worms" who ate lunch in their cave, the newlyweds who her students shivareed, the High Prairie students who travelled all the way to Hays... they all knew she cared. She cared about their education, their physical and mental well-being, and she cared about their quality of life.