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Interview with Beth Page Mustoe

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Beth Page Mustoe

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CHAPTER II: MEMORIES OF A ONE-ROOM SCHOOLHOUSE TEACHER

Beth Page Mustoe began teaching in a one-room school in 1929. She was only seventeen years old when she started her teaching career. Her six years of teaching holds many memories as she taught in four one-room schools in Norton County. Beth knew that she wanted to be a teacher early in her life. Her teaching would prove to be more than a needed income; it provided an important impact on young lives in her community.

Beth graduated from Norton Community High School in 1929. In her senior year she completed a course of study which fulfilled the requirements to become a country school teacher. The study included child psychology and a review of subjects to be taught. In early March of 1929, Beth wrote letters of application and had personal interviews with three school board members. She was only sixteen at this time, not reaching her seventeenth birthday until April 22, 1929. Following high school graduation, Beth eagerly signed her first teaching contract. The salary was just \$65.00 a month for an eight month school contract. Thus began her first assignment at I.X.L. School, District 43.

I.X.L. School was located in northern Norton County near the Nebraska border, in Aldine Township. Upon the first visit to the school, Beth and her brother found an unwelcome sight. The school was unkempt and had not been cleaned all summer. Beth admitted "there were tears," but set about to get the school ready for the arrival of students. She later discovered this was due to a misunderstanding with a board member and the board apologized. She had previously located a home in which she could board. The Henry Shaw family had

agreed to provide room and board for one dollar a day and their farm was within walking distance of the school.

Beth considered herself among the fortunate to have always found room and board within one-half to three-fourths miles from her schools. Many teachers and students had a much longer walk each day. Cold weather had students dressed warmly with long underwear and layered clothing to make the long walks. One student, Paul Ballinger, rode his horse to school occasionally.

Beth realized that she learned more during her first year teaching than she had in her last two years of high school. It was a very demanding job for a young, new teacher. There were few resources at the little I.X.L. School and it was difficult to meet the needs of the fourteen students. "Miss Beth" had one eighth grade student, six seventh graders, one third grader, one second grader and five first grade students in the class. As she recalls, there were no books, encyclopedias or maps. One dictionary was to be used as a resource.

The county superintendent in 1929 was Mrs. Irene Hadley. Each school district had its own school board, usually consisting of three members. At I.X.L.School, the director was Roy Wyatt, the secretary (clerk) was Clarence Bryant and treasurer was Rolland Fowler. These board members were parents of the students that Beth taught. The chief function of the board was to supply things needed by the teacher, such as coal or more cobs for fuel or repairing the water pump. They handled the limited monies and kept some records. Other than these activities, teachers made most of the decisions and were quite autonomous in their teaching.

Beth's second year of teaching was to be at Mt. Pleasant School, District 110. The school was located five miles west of the city of Norton. The salary had been increased by ten dollars and was now \$75.00 a month. At Mt. Pleasant, Beth had fewer students and more available teaching resources than at I.X.L. Beth remained at Mt. Pleasant School only one school year from the fall of 1930 to the spring of 1931.

Beth taught her third and fourth years at Dry Creek School, District 23, eleven miles north of Norton. The teaching salary increased from \$75.00 in 1930, to \$80.00 per month for the two years she taught at Dry Creek School. Beth remembers clearly that at the time of her interview for the position, one board member requested that she not marry if she accepted the position. Another board member wanted her for the position, but would not sign the teaching contract. It seemed that he did not believe in putting his name to anything on paper, but gave an oral consent to her hiring. Beth boarded with the McCrea family during these two years. This school is of special interest to Beth and the Norton community because of an interesting history and its preservation as a museum today. Many individuals have recorded their memories of the school in written documents. It is one of the few remaining one-room schoolhouses in the county today.

Dry Creek School was also known as Deer Creek School, named because of its location near creeks of the same names. It had its beginnings as a sod schoolhouse until a wooden schoolhouse was constructed in 1887. Lena Berning (mother of Mrs. Ray Sheley) was a student in the early sod schoolhouse. The new school opened for the first students on September 15, 1887, with Ella Webb as their teacher. In the early 1900's the school hosted many community social events;

lectures, literaries, Sunday School services, missionary services and other gatherings.

Beth recalled her first introduction to Dry Creek School when she was a child. The Page family had attended Sunday School classes and a picnic followed the services. Their family were the invited guests of a cousin, Lena Ballinger. Beth was only ten years old at the time. Little did she know, ten years later she would have the good fortune to teach in the same schoolhouse.

It was the mystery of a "murdered man" near Dry Creek School that made the schoolhouse infamous in Norton County. The January 1932 homicide was never solved and the case was eventually closed by law enforcement officials. It was an early Monday morning, in the dead of winter, when the teacher arrived at the schoolhouse to prepare for the day. That teacher in 1932 was Beth Page Mustoe. "I discovered the body during routine inspection of the outhouses. On occasion a skunk or civet cat sought shelter in these buildings. It was during this checking I noticed this strange object lying a short distance off the school grounds in an old wagon trail. My frightened, inquisitive glance revealed that it was a body. While walking back to the schoolhouse, I discovered a hammer and several coins scattered on the ground. Apparently the body had been dragged from the schoolhouse to the spot where the body lay."

Prior to the murder, the schoolhouse had never been locked. Transients from the nearby highway often sought shelter in the building overnight, but even this had not warranted a lock on the door. It was common knowledge that gambling was occasionally done on weekends in the schoolhouse. Sometime during these years a bullet hole appeared in the school blackboard. Many believed this to be somehow

connected to the gambling activities. Beth speculated that gambling might explain the coins laying near the possible murder weapon.

Beth clearly remembers the Monday she discovered the body. She returned to the schoolhouse to await the arrival of the students. She noticed that fuel for the morning fire had been used up by intruders. Beth had hoped to direct the Cass children, Bonnie and Donnie, to come down the road rather than crossing the area where the body lay. They surprised their teacher by arriving earlier than usual. Beth recalls Donnie saying, "There's...There's a dead man out there!"

A few minutes later Victor Lofgreen and his two younger brothers, Volney and Denzel, arrived at the schoolhouse. Victor had discovered the body and "intercepted" his two brothers and took them around the schoolyard to the front of the school. The remainder of the students arrived from other directions.

Beth explained to the students that she and Victor were going to "check a situation" outside. As they approached the area, they were able to get a good look and it was just as they had seen it. Victor's further investigation revealed the body of a man lying face down and partly disrobed. Portions of the head and body were mutilated by animal, bird or man. The skull appeared to have been crushed by a blow from an instrument.

There was no telephone in the school so Beth sent Victor down the road to the nearest neighbor, Starr McCrea, to call the sheriff. Beth returned to the students to keep them occupied. Mr. McCrea made the phone call and drove Victor back to the schoolhouse. By the time they returned, many of the fathers were already arriving. The phone was a party line so any community incident was

known to spread quickly. The officers arrived shortly, along with an ambulance. School was dismissed.

It was a frightening occurrence for the rural community. The following morning Francis McCrae drove Beth to school to help dampen the nervousness of the previous day. The daily walk was something Beth had wanted to avoid on this day. She recalled Francis's father remarking, "Beth, just remember a dead man never harmed anyone."

The body was later identified as Roy Talkington of Wellington, Kansas. He had been husking corn in Superior, Nebraska before he mysteriously met his death. After the body was identified and the investigation completed, officials believed that Roy Talkington came to his death at the hands of Frank Field. Field was an acquaintance of Talkington's while he was husking corn. The search for Field was to no avail and the case was closed. However, the name "Dead Man School" stuck in the minds of the Norton community and is still a common reference to the schoolhouse.

Beth's last two teaching years were at Blue Ridge School, District 28. Her monthly salary was \$80.00 for the 1933-34 school term and \$85.00 for the 1934-35 term. She had only four students, as compared to the average of 12 students at Dry Creek School. Blue Ridge School held special memories for Beth. It was located two miles north and one mile east of Norton near the Page family homestead. Her mother, father, brother, sister and she had all attended Blue Ridge School. In the summer of 1933, she married Melvin Mustoe and made her home in Norton. Beth drove to Blue Ridge School each day. At the conclusion of her

second year at Blue Ridge, Beth made the decision to end her teaching career of six years. She resigned her position in 1935.

Beth has many fond remembrances of her teaching experiences and yet reflects upon the challenges of the decade. The 1930's were difficult times for many farm families. The economic crash of the 1920's followed by the destructive dust storms made daily life difficult. Beth recalls the dust storms made it hard to breathe and she continually cleaned away all the dirt which covered everything. The dust storms were devastating to the farms; however, parents always did what they could to provide for their children. They managed to find money to purchase textbooks, supplies and provide a simple lunch for their children to take to school.

Students were fortunate to have a couple of changes of clothes and generally a new pair of "school shoes" lasted until the next school year. Families in the farm communities pulled together to help each other through the tough times and rejoiced together in good times. Many students had to delay their high school graduation to help out with financial responsibilities at home. Some returned to school after a year. Beth recalled how reluctant some students were to tell parents when they needed a school supply, such as a Big Chief tablet. They knew it was hard for their parents to find money to buy these things.

Strong "themes" of patriotism, citizenship, Christianity and living by the "Golden Rule" were expressed in the 1930's. Flag respect was observed. In a parade everyone would stand quietly and reverently as a flag passed by. Patriotic songs were sung frequently and proudly at school. Poems about the United States were memorized and recited. Every classroom had pictures of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln and their birthdays were observed. Although Beth did not

recite the Lord's Prayer with her class, many classrooms always began their day in this way. Students were taught through example to be responsible citizens and care for their fellow man.

Beth's daily schedule at school was quite rigorous. Although school did not begin until 9:00, she needed to be there much earlier. There was custodial work to be done; sweeping the floor with a cleaning compound, pumping water for drinking and washing hands, dusting, cleaning the chalkboards and erasers and checking the outhouses to name a few. Cold winter mornings had Beth "fetching in" cobs or coal to stoke the pot-bellied stove and warm the building for arriving students. There were teaching preparations to be completed prior to the start of the day.

The day began with opening exercises. The flag salute was recited, patriotic songs were sung, poems recited and possibly a continuing book story was read. The daily schedule was carried out with great liberty. Beth would lengthen or shorten it according to the need to cover the assignment. Of course, it changed year to year depending on what grade level of students were represented. A general schedule at Dry Creek School would have been:

9:00-9:10 Opening exercises
9:10-9:30 First grade reading
9:30-9:50 Second grade reading
9:50-10:10 Third grade reading
10:10-10:30 Seventh grade reading
10:30-10:45 Recess
10:45-11:00 First grade arithmetic
11:00-11:15 Second grade arithmetic
11:15-11:30 Third grade arithmetic
11:30-12:00 Seventh grade arithmetic
12:00-1:00 Lunch and recess

The afternoon schedule contained orthography (spelling) and penmanship (the Palmer method) for all students. Older students studied geography, history, language (English), Kansas history and physiology. There was a fifteen minute afternoon recess. The last quarter of the school period on Fridays was art, ciphering, spelling bees, weaving, posters, or geography matches. School dismissed at 4:00. Beth would then tidy up the room and prepare for the following school day.

Students had three recesses during the day. Beth anticipated recess as much as the students. She enjoyed being outside and playing with the students. Popular outdoor games were; "Annie, Annie over," prisoner's base, black man, hide and seek, beckon, baseball (often with a rubber ball and a wooden board for a bat), London Bridge and fox and geese. Marbles were popular with the boys and the girls liked to jump rope. Games that were contests required "choosing up sides." Two leaders were assigned and used a broom stick handle to "stack up" their fists. A brass hand bell was rung by the teacher to signal the end of recess.

In inclement weather recess was held indoors. Students played less active games such as, pussy wants a corner, blind man's bluff, hide the thimble, upset the fruit basket and drop-the-handkerchief; however, the students and teacher preferred to be outside whenever possible.

Lunches were brought to school. Students washed their hands in the wash basin before eating. Towels and drinking cups were kept in the student's desks. The crock water "fountain" was a luxury item to many schools and replaced the bucket and dipper. Student lunch boxes were lined up in the back of the room on a bench or an unoccupied desk until lunch time. Some students brought store-bought

black or blue cross-handled lunchboxes, but most used silver Karo Syrup pails. Usually the lunch was simple, almost always containing a sandwich among the other items. Lunches were usually enjoyed outside on fair-weather days.

Beth was never absent a day of school in the six years she taught. There were no substitute teachers and if the teacher was sick, they somehow managed to make it through the day. Beth couldn't remember any teacher missing a day of school due to illness! If a teacher was extremely ill or hospitalized, classes would have been dismissed for the day. Students absence was rarely a problem, parents made sure their children were in school and valued the education that many themselves did not have.

Weekly and monthly lesson plan books were to be kept up by the teacher. The county superintendent only visited twice a year (he or she had over 100 schools to visit), but always checked over the lesson plans. "Rest assured," said Beth, "Students were always on their best behavior during the superintendent's surprise visit!" Usually during recess time the superintendent would visit with the teacher about their observations in the classroom. Beth remarked that when the county superintendent visited your school it "gave your stomach butterflies." There was never any formal teacher evaluation during the years that Beth taught. Other than this visit, they were never seen unless the teacher went into their town office to ask a question or they appeared during Normal Training sessions.

Normal Training was a "refresher course" to be attended each summer. Upon completion of teaching courses and high school graduation, teachers were granted a two-year teaching certificate. The Normal Training renewed the certificate each year. Teachers had to pass a type of competency test at the end of

each year to qualify for their certificate. This test was an examination on subjects taught in school. In 1931, Beth did not pass the music competency portion of the test. County superintendent Irene Hadley informed her that she would need to attend college to renew her certificate for the next school year. Broken-hearted about this, Beth attended summer school at Fort Hays College in 1931. She remembers taking two courses, kindergarten primary methods and psychology. Beth recalled that during the depression years the State Certification Office automatically renewed certificates due to the low salaries paid teachers.

Classroom discipline was never a problem for Beth. Children were taught at home and school to revere those in authority. Beth never had to spank a student, although she recalled the rare use of a ruler struck across a student's hands. One incident in particular came to mind. One older male student tried to "pull a fast one" and bring eighth grade textbooks to the beginning of the school term. Unfortunately, he had not passed the seventh grade examination and needed to repeat the seventh grade. Beth, although new to this school, knew he was to repeat seventh grade. This did not meet with his approval. After two months of misbehaving at school, an argument erupted and Beth used a ruler on his hands as punishment. In the shuffle, he threw his glasses down and broke them. The angry parents threatened to sue "Miss Beth" and went to the superintendent to report the incident. Fortunately, the school board and superintendent supported Beth in her actions. Beth has always regretted that the superintendent said, "It isn't worth the annoyance of having him in the classroom," and he was "requested" to leave the school. He would occasionally come and visit on different school days in the

following year without causing any problems. Beth still thinks about this uneducated student and said , "I feel responsible for him not getting an education."

Beth clearly remembers being disciplined as a child at Blue Ridge School. The teacher had observed Beth and two cousins making a face at another child. All three girls were spanked by the teacher with a rubber hose. They knew that the worst was yet to come. When they told their parents about what happened, they received even harsher punishment at the hands of their parents!

Beth credits herself as a "nitty-gritty" teacher. She believed in "getting down to the basics," in her teaching methods. Beth taught from the grade level curriculum guides which told which skills were to be learned at what years. Almost all new ideas, patterns and teacher information came from two publications, The Instructor and The Grade Teacher. They arrived each month in the mail. Young students in the classroom enjoyed learning games with flash cards in both reading and arithmetic. The student who could claim the most cards at the end of the game was the winner. Students often worked at the chalkboard, especially during arithmetic lessons.

Much time was spent memorizing material to be learned. Students memorized math facts, vocabulary, spellings words, poems, lines of play parts, famous speeches, songs and many facts in the subject areas. A recitation bench (table) in front of the teacher's desk was where the class "revealed their knowledge" to the teacher. Each grade level would be called to the recitation bench for study in their subject area. Students not working with the teacher at the recitation bench would work individually at their wooden desks. Students were given working assignments to complete. Beth referred to the amount of time it took to prepare the written

assignments. There were no copiers and the teacher often had to write out all the copies of anything needed. No homework was generally given because students had much working time at school and there were many chores to do on the farm when they arrived home.

Beth managed her classroom with a few simple "understandings." Students never got out of their seats without holding up their hand for permission. Some common questions might have been, "May I sharpen my pencil?" or "May I look up something in the dictionary?" For permission to "leave the room" and use the outdoor toilet, students would hold up one finger. To request permission to speak to a classmate was two fingers. A nod of her head in approval would help avoid confusion while she was conducting recitation with other students. On occasion students were allowed to study a lesson together, perhaps to solve arithmetic problems or show how well they had drawn the ear and all its parts.

The students' parents always managed to find money for required textbooks. They could be purchased at the Raney Drug Store in Norton. Textbooks were chosen by the state department. Teachers never assisted in choosing the texts nor questioned their contents. Textbooks were rarely changed. This allowed them to be "passed down" for younger siblings to use.

Required student supplies were a tablet, pencils, a large eraser and a pen, ink and blotter for older students. Students were very responsible in using their supplies conservatively. The schoolroom contents were nearly the same in all schools. The standard items commonly were: wooden desks (that could only be set in rows), the United States flag, a blackboard with erasers and chalk, a wash basin, a bulletin board, "pull-down" type maps on the wall, a pencil sharpener, a

teacher's desk and chair, a recitation bench, pictures on the wall of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, a pot-bellied stove, a coal bucket, a washstand with a push-button crock with water, a globe, a Webster dictionary, a set of encyclopedias and perhaps a dozen storybooks. None of the schools Beth taught in had clocks on the wall. The teacher relied on a watch and there were no problems with students being clock watchers! In many schools there were old upright pianos or in the case of Dry Creek School, a pump organ.

The piano or pump organ was used in the most important of all occasions, the Christmas program. A teacher's merit could be judged on how well this program was carried out. A "stage" was constructed with wire strung across one end of the room and bed sheets became the curtains. The schoolroom would likely be decorated with twisted crepe paper streamers and bells. The songs, plays and poems performed were usually ideas found in The Grade Teacher or The Instructor teaching magazines. Everyone in the farm community crowded into the small schoolhouse for the big performance as students performed well rehearsed parts.

Each spring students participated in County Exhibits Day. School works of art would be displayed in downtown Norton store windows. Beth always managed to get Frank Palmer's store window which displayed their projects well. Each school's work was judged and prize ribbons of white for third, red for second and blue for first were awarded. Dry Creek School won a blue ribbon for their work during one of Beth's two years at the school. Students had displayed a variety of projects; constructed birdhouses, a sequenced story poster of Little Black Sambo, penmanship work and woven baskets.

Birthday parties were also special events. Parents would "surprise" their son or daughter by arriving during the day with treats for everyone. They often had other students stay overnight at their home to help celebrate their birthday. The teacher made the day "extra special" for the birthday boy or girl.

Another special time of year was the eighth grade graduation program. Held in May, it was the end of the student's rural education. They would now attend the Norton High School. What an adjustment that must have been for the country school student! Many of these students boarded at homes in Norton, as there was no bus transportation provided at this time. The graduation ceremony was held for all eighth grade graduates from around the county. When Beth was teaching, the ceremony was held on the stage of the Norton theatre.

Some fond remembrances have stayed with Beth all these years. There was the day a cow stuck his head in the school window and nearly scared her "out of her wits." At times the wind would cause the schoolhouse attic door to raise up and slam down, convincing students that someone or something was in the attic. She laughingly recalls the time she was walking to school and hid in the tall sunflowers. Johnny, a neighborhood young fellow, would try to make her ride with him in his car. She knew he was "sweet" on her, but she didn't feel the same about him. One winter Hervey Wyatt made a homemade sled and Beth and some of her students came to school on the sled, being pulled by a car!

Teachers were occasionally asked to stay for supper and overnight in the homes of their students. Beth always dreaded this, but knew it would be extremely rude to decline an offer. She preferred to always sleep in her own bed. One day, Mrs. Saathoff asked Beth to come to their home as an honored guest. Beth

accepted and was surprised when she was offered the finest bed in the house, a bed with a cornshuck mattress with the best quilts and sheets upon it. The bed was terribly noisy any time she moved and she was fearful that she would awaken the family. So Beth didn't sleep or move the entire night! In the morning, Mrs. Saathoff remarked, "You slept good didn't you? You know how I know? I didn't hear you turn over even once!"

Another event would change her life forever. While teaching her first fall term at I.X.L. School, she knew she had met her future husband, Melvin Mustoe. Mel's vocational agriculture class was on a field trip and stopped at the I.X.L. School. Mel was one year behind Beth in high school and although they were acquainted, he had previously not shown any interest in courting her. They were there to take part in the geography matches being held at the school on that Friday. Before they left, Beth wrote her name on a card and put it in the brim of Mel's hat. Even now she can not believe she would have done something so bold. "Whatever possessed me, I'll never know!" she remarked. On February 14 they went on their first date to a high school basketball game. They dated for four years and were married in 1933, before she began teaching at Blue Ridge School.

Beth honored an unwritten "code of conduct" observed by one-room schoolhouse teachers. She set a good example for her students and the community. She dedicated herself to educating students in a professional way. Beth knew it was important that there be mutual respect between them, "The same feeling I had about my teachers." She recalled how Elsie Welner, a fantastic teacher, changed her attitude about school and improved her self-concept. "Miss Beth" made a

difference in the lives of her students with her compassion and positive influence on their young lives during a time when the present and future looked quite uncertain.

Upon reflection, Beth knows that one-room schools were a unique part of our American history. It would be impossible to hire one person to work as hard as these teachers did. No one would want to serve as custodian, nurse, librarian, drama coach, music teacher, gym teacher and counselor in addition to all the regular teaching duties. Beth and other one-room schoolhouse teachers utilized their experiences, caring and common sense to become special teachers and earn a place in our history of one-room schools.