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Interview with Myrtle Kueker

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Myrtle Kueker

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CHAPTER II

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

DEAN: Good afternoon! We are here this afternoon to talk with Mrs. Myrtle Kueker of Deerfield, Kansas, about her experiences teaching in a one-room schoolhouse. Good afternoon, Myrtle.

MYRTLE: Good afternoon.

DEAN: Could you describe a typical day before and after school?

MYRTLE: Well, in the two one-room country schoolhouses that I taught at I walked to school. I don't know what time I had to leave to get there, but I had to get there early enough to build a fire and pump water. That old stove in the schoolhouse wouldn't hold a bank, so I had to start from scratch every morning to get the fire going for the kids. There was a well out in front of the schoolhouse that I pumped the water from. I usually put one pail on the stove so the kids would have warm water to wash with. Everyone carried their lunch. The only students that lived closer than what I lived was maybe a quarter of a mile from the school and that was Ploeger's. After school I usually stayed till I

allow myself to get back before dark. It would not have done any good to stay longer because you could not see anything with the kerosene lamps. So that pretty well took care of before and after school.

DEAN: How far did you have to walk?

MYRTLE: Out at Florence School it was over a mile probably two miles to school. The hired man would usually give me a bad time before I left. It was over open country. There were no fences so there were animals even coyotes crossing on the way to school. I got used to that. Before I left out there the county graded up the road. It was a real mess. They raised up the road. Then the rains came. The only time I had a car out there was one week. When it was so muddy we bogged down about a foot.

DEAN: Do you know if teaching is any different now than it was when you started?

MYRTLE: The actual teaching?

DEAN: Yes

MYRTLE: Well, I'm sure the teachers know a great deal more about teaching than I did and they have better equipment, possibly better books, and more are available than I had. I don't know about the actual teaching.

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

MYRTLE: Oh Hot Dog! Well, in the country community you stayed out there all week. You might get to go home if your dad came after you. In the small towns, well at Deerfield at the time, teachers were expected to teach Sunday school class and be very careful with their dating. When I taught up at Kanorado, which had eight grades and four rooms you couldn't be married. You were single when they hired you and you better stay single until you were through with them. One of the gals that camp up there to teach while I was there had married not too long before school started. She didn't tell anyone about it, until her husband got a little drunk one night and told about it. She had to resign, which was ridiculous. Those were real hard times and I suppose she wanted that job badly enough not to tell anyone about it. I thought some of the rules were pretty stupid. I was a little rebellious, more than a little about some things. That's enough on that. I was always anxious to get away from there on weekends, if I possibly could, to have a cigarette.

DEAN: You couldn't smoke out there?

MYRTLE: No way!

DEAN: Were you in charge of any extracurricular activities?

MYRTLE: In the rural schools, that is country opposed to small town, there weren't any extracurricular activities. In the spring, they had a county track meet that the kids could come and take part in. There were things like that, but there were no extracurricular activities.

DEAN: Was there a problem with teacher turnover? Did they have a difficult time finding teachers for rural schools?

MYRTLE: I would guess not, because teachers were a dime a dozen. I don't think they had too much difficulty, at that time, finding teachers. They might have had later when so many teachers were quitting because of the salaries or maybe going into the service or something like that.

DEAN: Were you the only teacher at your school?

MYRTLE: I was the only teacher at the 2 one-room rural schools.

DEAN: Was there a principal in charge of your school or more than one school?

MYRTLE: The County Superintendent would travel all around the county and was in charge of all the rural schools.

DEAN: Did they evaluate your teaching? Did they come in watch and have a formal evaluation?

MYRTLE: Once in a while they would come around. I don't remember if they stayed long enough to do much evaluating. I don't remember if the superintendent in Kiowa County ever came out to the school. But the one in Lakin did come out, once anyway. We didn't have much supervision.

DEAN: How did you handle discipline at the one-room schools?

MYRTLE: That's a good question. I didn't really have a discipline problem. I tried to handle things as best I could. One family at Florence lived far enough away that they had a sixth grader drive a car to school. It was at one noontime or recess I went into the schoolhouse. The kids were playing. I figured I needed a little time inside, I thought I could watch them. When I looked out he had about half the students in the car way off in another pasture. Oh Boy! Well, anyway, I just had to handle things as best I could.

DEAN: Did you involve parents in the discipline process?

MYRTLE: I would if they were close enough that it did me any good. I mean things were taken care of back then. I was too young to know much about anything. I didn't have too many real discipline problems.

DEAN: Did the male teachers handle discipline differently than female teachers?

MYRTLE: There weren't any men at the one-room schools. I don't know if they would have done anything differently than anyone else would have.

DEAN: When you were teaching at Florence School where did you live?

MYRTLE: I lived at a school board member's home until she got pregnant and had a miscarriage. So they shipped me over to the next neighbor's, which was Ploeger's. You know Ploeger's?

DEAN: Yes.

MYRTLE: It was a lot of fun there.

DEAN: So you just lived with different families in the community?

MYRTLE: Yes.

DEAN: How much schooling did you have in order to teach?

MYRTLE: Before I started teaching, there were two years of college.

DEAN: Did you have a life time certificate?

MYRTLE: Yes. It is called a Life Certificate, but they did run out.

DEAN: What subjects were studied?

MYRTLE: Reading, writing, arithmetic, health, and history in the upper grades. The basic things spelling, English, not new math, arithmetic. When we had time we had art or music. The music and art

teacher was me. So that's what we had. I had eight grades and not much time for anybody.

DEAN: How many students were at the school?

MYRTLE: Probably about twenty out there and about that many at the Haviland school.

DEAN: How long did the school year last?

MYRTLE: They were eight month schools and you were paid for eight months.

DEAN: What time did they start in the morning?

MYRTLE: I think it was 9:00 until 4:00. That's what schools used to be. When I went to school that's what it was and I think that's what it was out there.

DEAN: What were some of the teaching aids that were available?

MYRTLE: What ever a teacher could think up and had time to fix up. Really we didn't have any teaching aids. The schools did furnish the books for the children because otherwise the kids wouldn't have had books.

DEAN: Did you have a specific teaching method that you would use?

MYRTLE: No, I really can not remember too much about how I went about it except it was totally confusing. I'm sure trying to fit in all the classes and me with a certain number while the others were trying to study was very confusing.

- DEAN: When you started in the morning, did they do anything together or were they always in groups according to grades?
- MYRTLE: Well, in the country schools, they were seated according to classes and to the sizes of the desks. It depended upon the lesson if I would have the children come up to a bench in front of my desk or whether I would walk around and have them stay at their own desks. I probably did more of that. Once in a while I would have them come up front. I read a lot to the children. After roll call or after lunch when they needed a little rest or maybe just to relax, I would read books to them.
- DEAN: Did the students have to take a competency test to be moved up the next class or to get out of school?
- MYRTLE: No. We didn't have competency tests. We did get some tests out of Emporia I believe. Maybe I'm just remembering wrong. I know in some schools we had them. It was the teacher that pretty well decided if they were able to go on to the next grade. The teacher probably didn't know much either. To graduate from the grade school they had to go in and take a test from the county superintendent. That was the only competency test I recall at the time.
- DEAN: Was there a library in your school?

MYRTLE: I wouldn't call it a library. I wouldn't call it a library because it was just a cupboard with shelves with books on them. There was practically nothing in it except maybe another old schoolbook. I checked out lots of books from in town to take to the school. At Haviland there were more books available for the kids and filmstrips. Since there was no electricity, I had to stand there and crank the battery.

DEAN: How were the textbooks selected?

MYRTLE: They were state textbooks. Bobbs-Merrill Readers mostly, as far as readers go, and the old Kansas spellers. The textbooks were selected by the state. The state course of study.

DEAN: What was the atmosphere at the school?

MYRTLE: A mixture maybe. You have to be fairly strict when you have that many kids and that many grades.

DEAN: Was it a warm setting?

MYRTLE: Yes

DEAN: Did the students seem to enjoy it?

MYRTLE: Yes. I think so.

DEAN: Do you know if there are any rules that you had then that might be different from today's schools.

MYRTLE: Well, I'm sure there would be. Your own lesson plans were secondary to the state course of study. You had to try to get in all they wanted you to get in. So it was more or less learn it or else. I don't know what the "or else" would have been.

DEAN: What were some of the special observances of your school?

MYRTLE: We had a Halloween program with a box supper. It was a big social occasion. That was fun. We had a Christmas program, plays, recitations, songs and everything like that.

DEAN: Did people turn out for these events?

MYRTLE: Oh Yes! The parents, brothers and sisters.

DEAN: You had to put all of these on yourself?

MYRTLE: Oh Yes.

DEAN: Did Florence School have a graduation exercise?

MYRTLE: No. Well, the county had a graduation for the eighth graders to participate in.

DEAN: This was for the whole county, not just the students from Florence School?

MYRTLE: Yes, the whole county.

DEAN: What was the usual age a child began school?

MYRTLE: First grade started at six. Some of them tried to get them in school when they were five.

DEAN: Were some of the kids older when they started school?

MYRTLE: I was just there one year. But I don't think any were older than they should have been. They were all about the right age for their classes.

DEAN: Did many children move in or away from the community?

MYRTLE: They were pretty well settled. They were all farmers, of course.

DEAN: How far did most of your students have to travel to get to school?

MYRTLE: One family traveled about four miles and the others were between that and one-fourth of a mile.

DEAN: How did they get to school?

MYRTLE: Walked mostly.

DEAN: Did any of them ride a horse?

MYRTLE: No. They either walked or occasionally someone brought them. Those families were so hard up at that time, except the one I lived with. If they had a car, it was in bad shape usually so the students got to school by walking or they didn't go.

DEAN: Was there a problem with absenteeism?

MYRTLE: Out there I don't remember much absenteeism. We did have some bad weather. I think we cancelled school once. We could have more than that. The difficulty with that was I had to get to school. There were no phones and there was no way of letting people know that no one would be at the schoolhouse. So I better be there in case they walked to school in the cold blizzardy weather. They needed a warm fire.

DEAN: Did you ever get stuck at school?

MYRTLE: Not overnight. I would have one time if the two Kitten boys wouldn't have fixed up a make shift sled. They hitched it on behind the horses and came to school for me. If they wouldn't have come, I would have been stranded or I would have had to walk home.

DEAN: What grade level was this school?

MYRTLE: Each of the rural schools were first through eighth.

DEAN: Did the students come from different backgrounds?

MYRTLE: They were all farm kids.

DEAN: What kind of occupations did the students usually take up?

MYRTLE: Some of the kids got to go to high school. Their occupations? One married a farmer and some of the students moved after I left. I don't really know about them.

DEAN: Did many go to college?

MYRTLE: The student, I know of, didn't go on to college. The brother of one of my students did go to college. He became a preacher. He was older than the students I had at Florence. Not many, at that time, could go to college.

DEAN: Did the students of Florence School come from a certain heritage?

MYRTLE: They were pretty well mixed. Some of them were of German heritage. I don't know what the others would have been. There were no Mexicans out there. They were all white.

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

MYRTLE: They usually kept them in school for eight years.

DEAN: Was that how long they were required to go?

MYRTLE: Eight years was required at that time.

DEAN: Do you remember any "Outstanding Students" from the Florence School?

MYRTLE: Not really, except this one girl. I wouldn't call her outstanding particularly. She was good in school and did well in the county test. After that I don't really know. I wasn't around here much after that.

DEAN: How did the students dress at that time?

MYRTLE: The boys in overalls and work shoes. The girls in dresses.

DEAN: Even on cold winter days?

MYRTLE: Yes. Some of the families might have some warmer trousers or some type of snowsuit for the girls. It was usually just the dresses.

DEAN: How much did it cost the families to send their kids to school?

MYRTLE: I wouldn't have any idea. I do know some of those kids would have very little in their lunch pails.

Maybe it was not much more than a cold pancake. At that time, the schools could get some commodities. We would get something like split peas. I would mix them up with water and a can of tomatoes, and put them on the old stove when I got to school in the morning so the kids would have something hot to eat for lunch. They loved it.

DEAN: You would actually fix lunch for them?

MYRTLE: Yes, but that was about all I had. Some of them had such poor lunches. They would get soup and dried prunes for dessert, if they wanted them. I can't remember what else we got. But anyway, that really helped. I always felt guilty because I would have such a nice lunch that this woman packed for me and her two children. What a fine lunch. Except the hired man put raw eggs in it. I thought they were hard boiled. The hot lunch really helped the children.

DEAN: Where was the school located from Deerfield?

MYRTLE: It's about fifteen miles northeast of Kendall. Way out in the "boonies."

DEAN: Were there trees around the school?

MYRTLE: What's a tree?

DEAN: Where did you get your wood for the stove?

MYRTLE: They bought coal and used whatever was around for kindling. Haviland had a nicer school. It was still just an old wooden school, but it had a storage place in the back of it with bins for coal,

kindling and a little more space inside for toilet tissue and things like that. I turned in a requisition for kindling. I lived at a school board members home, but I wasn't far from the school as I was before. The next morning here came their hired man with a horse pulling an old wagon piled up with corn cobs. I didn't know where to have him put them. We had corn cobs for kindling for quite a while.

DEAN: Was the land purchased or given to the school?

MYRTLE: I would assume that it just belonged to the school district. How they acquired the land, I don't know.

DEAN: Where did the funds for the construction of the building come from?

MYRTLE: I haven't any idea. I suppose through taxes.

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

MYRTLE: I was trying to think of that too. I think all the time I was teaching I rarely earned more than seventy-five dollars a month. Isn't that a lot! I think it was about sixty dollars at Florence. I do not really remember. That was for eight months. You were on your own the other four months.

DEAN: How much did you earn when you quite teaching?

MYRTLE: That wasn't better. I forgot what I earned. I know they paid me for more months. I think they paid me for one month in the summer.

DEAN: How was your salary determined?

MYRTLE: I suppose just the way the school board wanted it.

DEAN: The school board set your salary?

MYRTLE: Yes.

DEAN: Did you have a voice in your salary decision?

MYRTLE: NO! NO! NO!

DEAN: How did you get your paychecks.

MYRTLE: They paid me at the school.

DEAN: Do you know when the schoolhouse was built?

MYRTLE: No, I don't remember.

DEAN: Was it a wood frame building?

MYRTLE: Yes, it was wooden.

DEAN: Where did the materials come from?

MYRTLE: It was an old building when I went out there. I don't know where they came from.

DEAN: Was Florence School a public school?

MYRTLE: Yes.

DEAN: What type of heating, light and toilet did you have at Florence School?

MYRTLE: Two outdoor toilets. They must have been there a long time also. We had kerosene lamps and a wood stove for heat. At Haviland, I think we had some of those pump-up lamps, the Coleman kind.

DEAN: Was it hard to work in the building on dark days with kerosene lamps?

MYRTLE: Yes, we needed more light. The building had four windows on either side for light.

DEAN: Where did you get your water?

MYRTLE: I would pump it from a well outside the schoolhouse.

DEAN: Is there any significance in the Florence School name?

MYRTLE: I don't know.

DEAN: Describe the interior of the school?

MYRTLE: There was a little entry with places for coats. The stove was off to the side of the desks. The desks faced the front of the room where the teacher's desk was. There was a blackboard across the front of the room. There was an old piano and one small cupboard back in the corner. There was a place to wash your hands in the hallway. The floors were old and very hard to sweep and keep clean. All of the kids tracked mud in.

DEAN: Did the students have individual slates?

MYRTLE: No. Just the one in the front of the school. It was a slate blackboard.

DEAN: Who was in charge of the upkeep of the building?

MYRTLE: The teacher was expected to clean the schoolhouse. If there was any repair work to be done, the school board would try to do it. I don't recall that they ever did.

DEAN: Was the school in good condition?

MYRTLE: No, it wasn't in very good condition. The one in Kiowa County was in much better shape than the Florence School.

- DEAN: Were there any changes in the schoolhouse while you were there?
- MYRTLE: I would say there were some. At Haviland they were putting in rural electrification the year I left. Up to that time, there was electricity in the towns but all of the rural people didn't have it.
- DEAN: Were there any physical problems with the buildings?
- MYRTLE: No, I don't recall any problems with the school. I'm sure there were much better rural schools at the time.
- DEAN: What happened to the school?
- MYRTLE: I don't know. I haven't been out there.
- DEAN: As far as you know, it is still out there?
- MYRTLE: I would guess not, no. Unless it would have been bought for a storage grainery. I don't really know.
- DEAN: Do you know what happened to the supplies that were in the school?
- MYRTLE: I doubt if the desks and supplies were worth doing anything with by that time.
- DEAN: Do you know what the boundaries of the school's jurisdiction were?
- MYRTLE: No, I don't know how big the district was.
- DEAN: How big was the school yard?
- MYRTLE: It was probably as big as my yard (140'x140').

DEAN: How was it decided who went to school at Florence School?

MYRTLE: I suppose the houses in the district or the closest people went there. I really don't know. I think that's the way most of them were.

DEAN: Was the schoolhouse used for community social events as well as school?

MYRTLE: It was used for elections and the school social events. I don't know if it was used for anything else.

DEAN: Was there a school board?

MYRTLE: Yes, for the district.

DEAN: How many members were on the board?

MYRTLE: I don't know. I haven't the foggiest idea.

DEAN: Do you remember any of the names of the board members?

MYRTLE: I just remember the one name, the people I lived with. He is dead now. I don't remember about the rest of them.

DEAN: Did Florence School have any organizations similar to a PTA.

MYRTLE: They may have had some after I left. There weren't any while I was there. I don't know.

DEAN: Who hired and fire the teachers?

MYRTLE: The school board.

DEAN: Did anyone else have any input.

MYRTLE: I suppose that if a family didn't like the teacher they would be sure to tell the school board. As far as I know, the only board member I talked to before I was hired was the one at whose home I stayed.

DEAN: Did any activities take place between schools?

MYRTLE: No, they were too far away and people didn't have transportation. The county track meet was the only time.

DEAN: Are there any controversies surrounding Florence School?

MYRTLE: I don't know of any. I did have one with a mama. Her kid got cut at school and the only thing I had to put on it was some alcohol. After I did this, the mama tells me she is allergic to it and don't use it again.

DEAN: Do you know why the school closed?

MYRTLE: No, I don't.

DEAN: Thank you for your time and cooperation. This concludes the oral history interview of Myrtle Kueker.