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1996

### Interview with Violet Mai

Janet Joan Becker-Funk  
*Fort Hays State University*

Raeleen Kay McKinley-Reinhardt

Violet Kraft Mai

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#### Recommended Citation

Becker-Funk, Janet Joan; McKinley-Reinhardt, Raeleen Kay; and Mai, Violet Kraft, "Interview with Violet Mai" (1996). *College of Education One-Room Schoolhouse Oral Histories*. 193.  
<https://scholars.fhsu.edu/ors/193>

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## CHAPTER II

### NARRATIVE OF ORAL INTERVIEW WITH VIOLET (KRAFT) MAI

On April 2, and April 23, 1996, Violet (Kraft) Mai was interviewed in her home and at the locations of her former rural schools in Russell County. She related her many experiences from her teaching career of forty-one and a half years. Particular attention was paid to her experiences from one-room schoolhouses and from her last ten years of teaching.

After much deliberation with her family, Violet (Vi) decided to follow the suggestion of her high school principal to become a teacher. Since there was an obvious shortage of teachers in Kansas in 1948, Vi already had a teaching position secured even before graduating from high school in Ransom, Kansas. She attended Fort Hays State College that summer and earned her one-year teaching certificate.

Vi's first teaching position was at Mount Strecker School District in Lincoln Township in southern Russell County. Her cousin, Reuben Steinert, called her when he heard that she had decided to attend college to study teaching and offered her the job. Mr. Steinert was a school board member of the Mount Strecker School and had two children attending the school.

When the 1948-1949 school year began, seventeen-year-old Vi was living with the Steinert family to whom she paid thirty dollars a month room and board. She traveled the mile to school by walking with the

Steinert children except when Mr. Steinert took them. Vi received a salary of two hundred dollars each month for the eight months of the school year. There was an enrollment of five students in four grade levels. Vi only taught at Mount Strecker for one school year. She felt that the school was too small with not enough competition among the students, and she was only two years older than the eighth grade students. Even though she resigned, there were no hard feelings on either side.

While Vi was home for the summer on the family farm, she was offered a teaching position at her home school, Bethel School. She declined the job because she knew she would have not been comfortable teaching her twin brothers and three cousins who were attending school there.

In that same summer of 1949, Vi was approached by a school board member of the Trego Center School District in Trego County to teach in that rural one-room schoolhouse. She accepted the position which was within daily driving distance of her parents' home. After reaching a financial agreement with her father, she purchased a car as her means of transportation.

During her one year stay at Trego Center School, she earned two hundred fifty dollars each month for the eight month school year. The

school's enrollment of fifteen students in seven grades was more than at her previous school, Mount Strecker. She thought the larger enrollment was of more benefit for the students and herself. Even though Vi would not be returning as the teacher for the next year, the parents and students hosted a bridal shower in her honor.

So, once more, Vi moved back to Russell County where a teaching position was already waiting for her. Paul Nuss, a school board member of the Milberger School District in Lincoln Township, extended an invitation to her to come to the board meeting and become their teacher for the 1950-1951 school year. Vi stayed at the Milberger School for two school years and earned two hundred seventy-five dollars each month for the eight month school year. Each year, Vi had between twelve and fifteen students in the one-room schoolhouse.

Then, due to her husband, Alex, being drafted during the Korean War, Vi felt it was important to reduce the miles that she traveled each day. So, Vi accepted a teaching position with the Eminence School District in Russell Township. During her three year stay at Eminence School, she earned about three hundred dollars each month of the eight month school year and had seventeen students.

Vi decided that after the three years at Eminence School, she had

become too familiar with the students and their families. She felt that she was too attached to everyone. So, Vi accepted a teaching job with the Grant School District in Grant Township at the two-teacher school.

Vi stayed at Grant School for four and one-half years while teaching the first through fourth grades. At the beginning of the 1959-1960 school year, Vi found out that she and her husband, Alex, were expecting a child. The Grant School Board gave Vi special permission to continuing teaching, even though she was pregnant. But, Vi felt it would not be in the students' best interests to remain, so she quit in December of 1959 to await the birth of her son in April of 1960. Shortly after her son's arrival, the Grant School Board offered her a position for the 1960-1961 school year, but Vi declined the offer in order to stay at home to care for her baby.

Vi was a stay-at-home mother for only one and one-half school years before a job opportunity presented itself. Alex's boss, Roger Williams, was a member of the Russell City School Board, and the board was in desperate need of a second grade teacher at Bickerdyke Elementary School in Russell. The start of the 1961-1962 school year was only three weeks away, and the board had no replacement available.

Vi accepted the second grade position so as not to jeopardize her

husband's job. She had thirty students in her classroom that year. She made it perfectly clear to her principal that she would only be teaching for just this school year, and that she would return to being a stay-at-home mother.

After three school years at home with her son, Vi was again approached about teaching in a rural, one-room schoolhouse. She and her husband discussed the opportunity, and they decided that it would be good for their family for Vi to become the teacher at the Sellens Creek School District in Fairfield Township. The contract was finalized, and Vi was once again back in a one-room schoolhouse.

Vi was told the 1965-1966 school year at Sellens Creek School was probably going to be the last year for the school due to unification of all school districts within Russell County. But, because the lengthy unification process could not be accomplished in one year, the Sellens Creek School remained open until the spring of 1967.

While teaching at Sellens Creek School, Vi earned her highest salary at any school, so far, of over five thousand dollars during the nine month school year. She had eleven students at Sellens Creek. This was the first school where Vi had taught that had a hot lunch program. She and the students paid the state required ten cents a meal minimum price.

Vi stated that the Sellens Creek School was a wealthy one because she only had the responsibility of teaching, not doing the janitorial work as well. The students did not have to purchase their own books or supplies because the district's land value was very high due to the large amount of oil wells within the district's boundaries. Vi said that the students knew not to waste the supplies furnished to them by the district just because the students did not have to pay for them.

When unification was finally in place by the summer of 1967, all one-room schoolhouses in Russell County were closed. All the materials, equipment, and monies left in the rural districts were annexed into the new Unified School District budget and city schools.

Vi was given a choice of two teaching positions by the new Unified School District Superintendent, Verl Anderson. One was teaching in the Bunker Hill Grade School in Bunker Hill, and the other was at the Dorrance Grade School in Dorrance. Vi chose the Bunker Hill Grade School, but Mr. Anderson stated that the Dorrance Grade School could really use Vi there.

In the fall of 1967, Vi began a twenty year stint at the Dorrance Grade School. She always had between twenty and thirty students in her combination third and fourth grade classroom. When the Dorrance Grade School was transferred to a different school district in the spring of

1987, Vi was transferred to a fifth grade classroom in Russell.

During her fifth grade classroom teaching assignment, Vi's room traveled from Bickerdyke Elementary to Courtside School and back again to Bickerdyke Elementary. Vi taught fifth grade in Russell until her retirement from teaching in the spring of 1993.

During the interview, Vi reflected upon her process of change from a high school senior in May of 1948 to a one-room schoolhouse teacher that fall. She explained that she enrolled in the teacher preparatory classes for that summer at the closest college, Fort Hays State College. She attended classes all day for the entire summer to earn the necessary twelve credit hours for a one-year teaching certificate. Vi remembers that she paid two dollars tuition per credit hour that summer. She had to return to college each summer to earn nine credit hours in order to be certified for the next school year.

Vi described the exterior of a typical one-room schoolhouse as a rectangular, wooden frame structure with windows on the long sides. One end was a solid wall, while the other had the only entrance to the building. Usually, one or two large, old trees remained nearby from the horse and buggy days. Two outdoor toilets, known as outhouses, with a coal shed between, stood on the other side of the students' play area. The play area



included a merry-go-round and swings and, sometimes, a slide and teeter-totter.

The interior of a typical, one-room schoolhouse was decorated with pictures of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, a United States flag, and United States and World wall maps. Vi stated that kitchen curtains covered the windows. A globe stood on a bookcase in the corner of the room. A black slate board stretched across the wall opposite the entrance. An elevated area for a stage was located beneath the blackboard and was used for various community and school activities and programs.

The students sat at old-fashioned, wood and iron desks with folding seats, which were either bolted to boards or to the floor. Students kept their school books and supplies on an open shelf under the desktop. Vi's desk had a large, flat top with drawers on either side. It usually sat pushed to a corner of the room, piled high with papers and books. Vi rarely sat on her hard, wooden chair because she was too busy working with her students.

Her average school day began long before she entered the building. Vi thought about the day's planned activities as she walked or drove to school. She normally arrived at school at eight o'clock to prepare for the students' arrival. All of Vi's schoolhouses had been converted to gas

heating stoves, so, all she had to do was to turn the stoves on to heat the room. She had to pump and bring in all of the day's water supply from the outside water well. Vi wrote all work, such as tests, spelling words, math problems, or grade level assignments, on the blackboard.

The school day began at nine o'clock and ended at four o'clock in the afternoon. During the day, Vi spent class time teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic in various ways. These ways included individual, small group, large group, and whole school. Subjects and grade levels were combined whenever feasible. Vi had no other adult help with the school. She was not only the classroom teacher, but also the teacher of art, music, and physical education. Vi had to be the jack-of-all-trades because she was also the nurse, the counselor, and the janitor.

The lunch hour was used to eat lunches the children had brought from home and for playing their favorite games. Softball was a particular favorite with Vi being the pitcher in just about every game. Every child participated in the games and activities. Vi noticed no problems between students. The buddy system was well accepted with everyone caring for others no matter what the grade level. Following this break, the students were ready to resume their studies for the rest of the day. After school dismissal, all students pitched in to wash the blackboard, empty water

and trash, clean erasers, and sweep the floor. Vi left the school grounds when her last student left for home.

The above described day was only one of the one hundred fifty-eight to one hundred sixty-two school days Vi taught in a one-room schoolhouse each year. Vi stated that school always began on the day after Labor Day and usually ended during the last week or so of April. The teacher was required to record the number of days taught each month. The monthly report was given to the County Superintendent to be put on file. School was held on every weekday except for observed holidays, inclement weather, and teacher illness. Vi remembered that there were no substitute teachers available. If a teacher was too ill to teach, the day missed was made up at the end of the school year.

As the rural, one-room schoolteacher, Vi was responsible for more than just the classroom activities. In the fall of the school year, she planned an elaborate Christmas program with preschoolers participating. Monthly birthday, pot-luck, and card parties were held which involved the entire community, not just the families of the students. Vi and other rural teachers planned play days and scheduled ball games between their respective schools.

A week before school started, an Orientation Day was conducted by

the County Superintendent for all rural teachers. Vi estimated that there were fifty to sixty rural teachers at the meeting. The basic curriculum textbooks were selected on Orientation Day. This decision was made by the rural teachers, school boards, and County Superintendent. Vi remembered vividly that there were no teacher manuals or answer keys to go along with the textbooks.

Once a teacher left the Orientation Day, the methods and materials for the lessons were decided by the individual teacher. Vi related that it was an understood policy within the county to teach certain subjects, such as geography, science, and health, during the second semester. If a student happened to move, which rarely occurred, to another rural school district, no subjects were missed.

At the start of Vi's teaching career, students were required to attend school until their completion of the eighth grade. If a student wanted to be promoted into high school, a state-written final exam had to be passed with a score of eighty percent or better. This exam was taken on a Saturday morning with all Russell County eighth graders and their teachers present at the Russell County Courthouse in the County Superintendent's Office. The comprehensive test covered all curriculum areas and was graded by the County Superintendent. Usually, the students

numbered between thirty and forty. Vi never had a student fail the exam.

Vi's general description of the average student at her first three schools was of a child from a close knit, German-speaking family. Almost all of the students lived on a farm or in an oil field camp. One of Vi's biggest teaching obstacles was having to teach English, both written and oral, to German-speaking students. Vi, herself, had spoken German until she began attending school. Her personal experiences helped her be a better teacher.

The students in Vi's classes came to school with the idea that school work was the way to improve their lives, and they did not cause any discipline problems for Vi. If students did misbehave, parents gave Vi permission to use the spanking board. Vi remembered only using the board on four different occasions, and she can still remember the names and reasons.

Vi was held accountable by both the district school board and the County Superintendent. Since the board met once a month, Vi was expected to attend all the meetings to answer questions and to discuss any problems. Vi could also expect an annual surprise visit from the County Superintendent for an evaluation, which would be forwarded to the school board. Vi stated that there was an unwritten dress code for teachers. Women always wore heels, hose, and a dress, while men wore

suits and ties.

Vi never had to submit an application or resume, and she never had an interview with a school board. A school board member always approached her to ask if she was interested in teaching in their school district. Her teaching abilities were spread by word of mouth. Vi was always offered a salary increase for the next year no matter where she was going to teach.

From a suggestion, an overnight decision, and through four decades of teaching, Vi arrived at the following conclusions about similarities and differences in education from the late 1940's to the early 1990's:

1. Only the names of the students have changed.
2. In the 1940's and 1990's, some students had short attention spans.
3. Vi had good rapport with parents, students, and fellow teachers at the beginning and the end.
4. Vi was always there for the student and parents, no matter what the student's capabilities.
5. Vi was the person in charge, not the child.
6. The school day was still the same amount of time, but it just started earlier in the day.
7. It was easier to teach the basic facts in a one-room school

because of the repetition of facts heard by the students each year.

8. Vi did not teach as many subjects in the one-room school as she did in the fifth grade classroom.
9. Vi did not have any breaks during the one-room school day as compared to one or more breaks in the fifth grade classroom. Vi felt teachers of the 1990's took the breaks for granted which she and other one-room school teachers worked so hard to earn.
10. There were no buses in the 1940's. Parents were responsible for transporting their children. Bus rides made for a very long day for the rural student in the 1990's.
11. Vi felt the basics of education (reading, writing, and mathematics) should be taught all day with all the other subjects incorporated into the basic ones.
12. Vi's ideal teacher was a person dedicated to the students, the parents, and the teaching profession. According to Vi, "If on the first day of school, a teacher says 'It would be nice if it were the last day of school'.....Something's wrong."
13. Vi's ideal teaching situation would have included students from all eight grades with all modern technologies in a one-room

school. This would have allowed for more student interaction, more cooperation, and no student cliques.

As a closing statement, Vi did say that there were days when she could have wrung her high school principal's neck for suggesting that she become a teacher. But, even when she had a bad day at school, she knew that tomorrow would be better. Vi always looked forward to tomorrow because school was her life.