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1991

### Interview with Emma Coffield Dooley

Leroy Harvey

*Fort Hays State University*

Emma Jane Coffield Dooley

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CHAPTER II  
NARRATIVE OF A COUNTRY SCHOOL TEACHER

On Saturday, June 22, 1991 and Monday, July 1 informal and formal interviews were given respectively at the home of Emma Jane Dooley concerning her career as a teacher and, specifically, those years she taught in one-room schoolhouses. The interviews took place in the living room of Mrs. Dooley's home in Beloit, Kansas.

The conversation began with a background of Emma Jane and her preparation to become a teacher. During her senior year in high school Emma Jane completed The Normal Training Course and passed the State Certification Test. Those two accomplishments allowed her to become a certified teacher in the state of Kansas. She noted that a certificate was good for two years before it was to be renewed. Throughout her teaching career Emma Jane attended summer school at Kansas Wesleyan University or Marymount College in Salina, Kansas to renew her certificate and to "get more education."

Degrees in education were not required when Emma Jane began teaching in 1935. Due to taking certification classes that could not be credited towards graduation from the universities, she never earned a Bachelor's Degree. Emma Jane remembered that at the end of the 1930's teachers were

not required to go to school to recertify due to the hardships of the depression. Teachers were recertified automatically during those years if they were successful in the classroom.

Students in one-room schoolhouses were enrolled in the first through eighth grades. Emma Jane remembered having only one school year in which all eight grades were represented. Due to the various grade levels, many subjects were taught by combining grades. This assisted the teacher in planning lessons and gave the teacher easier access to the students to assist them during class time.

Attitudes of the students were somewhat similar to those seen in modern day schools. Due to personal interests and chores on the farm, "The little ones were enthusiastic; the older boys less enthusiastic," according to Emma Jane.

The majority of the students lived no more than two miles away from the one-room schools. Many of the students either walked, rode a horse, or rode in the family car or truck to and from school. Rides in the family vehicle generally occurred when the weather was bad. A barn was built by one of Emma Jane's school boards to shed the horses during school time since three or four of the families that sent children to her school rode horses. During poor weather school would be cancelled and Emma Jane would call each of the student's parents to inform them of the cancellation.

Emma Jane's first teaching job was in a one-room schoolhouse called Fairview and located northeast of Glen Elder, Kansas. She was 18 years old and had just graduated from high school a few months earlier. She began teaching in 1935 during a time of turmoil not only here in Kansas due to The Great Depression, but throughout the world. Her second job was at Center 66, her childhood school near her family's farmstead north of Solomon Rapids, Kansas. Emma Jane also spent one year at Center School located southwest of Beloit, Kansas before she began teaching in the Beloit public school system in 1946.

The curriculum in one room schools was based on the Three R's (reading, writing and arithmetic) with spelling, english, and geography/social studies also being included in the classroom. Emma Jane worked really hard with her students on their handwriting. She wanted them to have very good cursive writing.

In most instances homework was not assigned, and if it was, there was not a lot of time involved due to the students' work responsibilities at home. Even when homework was assigned, it was never given to the younger students. Emma Jane was a firm believer in trying to complete as much work as possible while in school. Emma Jane noted that, "If the lessons were not finished, we would finish them the next day and also complete what was assigned for that day."

Emma Jane reported that the "blackboard" was the most valuable teaching aid available to her. Students were able to work math problems or diagram sentences on the board, while others worked on reading or social studies. The blackboard allowed Emma Jane to view a student's work, evaluate how well the student was mastering the task, and point out errors in the problem solving process while she worked with other students studying a different subject. In addition, some of the students completed their assignments on slateboards which they had to furnish.

Recitations were a very big part of the daily routine of the one-room school. Students, by grade, would be called to the front of the classroom and sit on a bench in front of the teacher's desk. From there, students would read from their reading books or even recite their completed work.

Promotion to the next grade was determined by the student's class grade and the number of days present in class. If both of those requirements were not met, the students were not promoted. Emma Jane noted that some boys were not promoted due to working on the farm.

In order for students to continue their education at the high school level each eighth grader had to take a test and show competency. The test was given at various schools in the district, and teachers were chosen to administer the test. Graders were chosen to grade the tests at the County Superintendent's office, located at the Mitchell County

Courthouse. The majority of the students who successfully completed the test continued their education into high school and, occasionally, a student would go to college.

Good discipline was important in the one-room school because; "You could lose your job without it," according to Emma Jane. There were instances when some of the older boys would try to control the class or even intimidate the teacher. But if the teacher maintained control, everything was fine and the teacher had very little trouble with the students. Any kind of punishment handed down for misbehavior was similar to that of the modern schools, i.e. staying after school or missing recess. Parent-Teacher Conference days did not exist with the one-room schools. If a teacher wanted to speak with a parent or vice versa, the meeting was arranged. Student grades and reports were sent home on a monthly basis to the parents.

School began in September and continued through the month of April. This allowed farm families to plant and harvest crops. Classes began at 9:00 AM and concluded at 4:00 PM. Two days were noted by Emma Jane as big events for the school and farm community. The Christmas program at the school brought the whole farm community in the area to the school for an evening of entertainment. On the last day of school, the community members returned to the school

bringing food baskets for an afternoon of fun and relaxation.

On several different occasions the farm community would gather at the school in the evening for "box suppers." Suppers were brought to the school in decorated boxes. The boxes were later sold to the highest bidder, and the money donated to the school board to help with finances. "The teacher's box usually sold for the most money," reported Emma Jane. "The young men in the community would bid on her box, even though no one was suppose to know whose box it was. Knowledge of who designed the box was suppose to be a secret, but they seemed to know which one was the teacher's."

Even though school started in September, there were times when the "older boys" did not start until late in September or early October because the wheat had not been planted. There were also times when the "older boys" left school before the end of April when much of the field work began.

Teachers had a lot of respect within the surrounding farm community. A teacher needed to be of good moral character, and the community a teacher taught in always knew about that character. "Word of mouth about morality prevailed," stated Emma Jane.

The issue of morality did play a role in the school board's mind when it came time to hire a teacher. To Emma

Jane's knowledge, there were no "morality clauses" in teacher contracts even though she was aware of these kinds of clauses in earlier times. Emma Jane even remembered being asked by one school board member if she smoked. She did not. If the school board wanted to know about a teacher's morals, they simply asked the individual being interviewed for the job. The board members would also ask people about the teacher to find out about his/her moral character.

Center 66 was the school that Emma Jane described since she taught there for several years, and since she attended school there. The school building itself was a wood frame building with wood siding. As you entered the building you walked into the anteroom where the children's coats and lunches were placed as they arrived. A bucket of water with a ladle also stayed in the anteroom. During the winter, the bucket of water had to be taken into the main part of the school in order to prevent the water from freezing. Desks for the students were placed in rows with the pot-bellied stove, used for heating, standing in the middle of the room. At the front of the room was a platform with the teacher's desk resting thereon. In front of the teacher's desk was a bench which was used for recitations. Behind the teacher's desk was a blackboard with bulletin board space to the left and right of the blackboard. There was also a small



"sandbox" located in the back of the classroom for the younger children to play in.

Water was brought into the school from the cistern, located near the steps of the schoolhouse. Despite the cold, harsh winters, the cistern never froze, allowing the students fresh water throughout the school year. There was no indoor plumbing at Center 66, therefore students had to leave the building and go to the "outhouse" when the need arose. During those cold winter days, Emma Jane remembered that the students were very prompt to return to class. Electrical lighting was not included in the school. The building itself had clear, pane glass windows that became the only source of light in which class could be conducted. Candlelight was used during the evening when events were held at the school.

The teacher in a one-room school was responsible for maintenance of the pot-bellied stove. In order to keep the school comfortable during the winter, Emma Jane had to either bank a fire overnight or arrive at school very early in the morning to build a new fire. Emma Jane explained that banking a fire was accomplished by starting a fire in the stove and then lining the stove with coal. The fire was allowed to burn slowly through the night. The next morning the teacher would need to add either logs or more coal to keep the fire burning. By banking a fire, the teacher had a much easier time warming the school for the

students. Should the fire dwindle during the school day, Emma Jane remarked that she would ask an older student to go outside and bring in additional fuel for the stove.

Another duty one-room schoolhouse teachers had was the custodial care and maintenance of the building. Emma Jane mentioned that she had to go to school early and stay late enough to complete tasks such as sweeping the floor, cleaning blackboards, banking the stove, drawing water from the cistern, and any other chore that needed accomplished.

Parents purchased all supplies for the classroom that their child needed each year, including the textbooks. Since books were not changed very often, parents might buy a set of first grade books for their oldest child and never have to buy another set of those books for their younger children. It was very common for books to handed down from sibling to sibling. Many times, there were not a lot of textbooks for the school board to choose from and the texts were not rewritten nearly as often as those in the modern schools.

Emma Jane started her teaching career earning \$45.00 per month. Families offered a room in their home to the school board to be used by the teacher within their district. Since Emma Jane's schools were close to her parent's farmstead, the school boards allowed her to stay at home. "Some districts made their teachers stay in the district in the home of a parent," commented Emma Jane.

During her year at Fairview, Emma Jane arranged for a place to stay in case of bad weather.

Other than the monthly salary of \$45.00 and the possible housing, the teacher of a one-room school in the late 1930's and early 1940's had no other form of compensation. No fringe benefits per se were available at that time.

The district's school board contained three elected members. The board was in charge of finance and the hiring of a teacher for their school. When a board searched for a teacher, the prospective candidate was interviewed by each of the three board members. Following the three interviews, the board members met to discuss the teacher and make a decision about hiring that person for the job.

Once a teacher was hired, he/she was visited by the County Superintendent three or four time during the school year. Emma Jane remembered that the County Superintendent would sit inside the school and "watch" to see how classes were run in order to evaluate the teacher. As noted previously, word of mouth did reach the board and County Superintendent and played an important part in the evaluation process. "People knew what kind of teacher you were," remarked Emma Jane.

During the 1938 - 39 school term, Emma Jane and some of the children's parents prepared hot meal commodities. This was a program sponsored by the state during the later stages

of the depression. Dried eggs, powdered foods, and soups were given to the district. The teacher, with some assistance from parents, would prepare the commodities for lunch. There were times that Emma Jane took the commodities home and prepared them for the following school day. When teaching class, Emma Jane would warm the commodities on the pot-bellied stove. Some days she prepared the meal while she conducted class. This was another duty that was expected of the teacher. "I got tired of it," exclaimed Emma Jane as she spoke about the preparation involved with the commodities.

Emma Jane shared various memories of her experiences while she taught during the early part of her career. She remembered taking the test for The Normal Training Course and not knowing what her grade was. The County Superintendent needed to know if she had passed, so he drove through the mud roads to reach her family's farmstead. After he spoke with Emma Jane, he returned to his office still not knowing her test results. Just a couple of days later Emma Jane received a message that she had passed the test. She then contacted the County Superintendent and informed him of the news. Soon after, Emma Jane received her first teaching assignment.

Music was not offered everyday in the one-room school. The county had a music teacher that would travel from school to school and did some work with the students. Emma Jane

remembered having two students selected for a choir that sang in Salina, Kansas on the radio. That was a moment of great joy and satisfaction to Emma Jane, the students and their parents, and the entire farm community.

An occasional event that took place at the schoolhouse was the Pie Social. Once again the farm community came to the school, this time bringing pies that were auctioned to the highest bidder. The money that was raised went to the school board to help finance the school. At events such as these, it was common for school board members to visit with teachers and parents about needs of the school. In many instances, the board members were parents too. Emma Jane recalled, "I had a board member build the bulletin boards in my classroom." When asked if the school board followed up on teacher requests, Emma Jane replied, "Yes, if it was deemed essential."

One of the great joys Emma Jane had was working with "the little ones" or younger students. She remembered how enthusiastic they were and the amount of energy they had towards learning. Emma Jane felt that they were fun to work with and a joy to watch grow and develop. Their desire to learn made teaching enjoyable and fun for Emma Jane. Emma Jane told a story about a first grader named Pauline. Emma Jane gave the students some coloring to do if she was busy with other students. Pauline worked on her coloring, and when she finished she took her work to Emma

Jane. When Emma Jane examined Pauline's work, she saw that Pauline had scribbled all over the paper. This was very unusual for Pauline according to Emma Jane. When Pauline was confronted about her work she commented, "I just got too nervous."

This story led to talking about writing. Emma Jane said it was difficult for students to switch from printing to cursive writing. She felt that in order to have good writing students must practice daily. "Otherwise," she stated, "They will print half and write half. So I made them write everyday."

One final duty was recess. There was a short recess in the morning and a one hour lunch/recess during the noon hour. Teachers had to monitor student activity outside the school. All students were expected to be outside during recess if the weather permitted. Students who chose not to participate or whose behavior was unacceptable had to sit on the steps of the schoolhouse. In most circumstances, sitting on the steps was no fun, so the student was willing to participate in an appropriate manner.

As the conversation ended, Emma Jane was glad to have participated in the research project. She said, "I enjoyed doing it very much and appreciated you asking me, because I believe it was an honor."