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Interview with Athena Whorton

Arliss J. Reinert
Fort Hays State University

Athena O'Shay Whorton

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CHAPTER II: NARRATIVE OF A ONE-ROOM SCHOOLTEACHER

On Thursday, July 15, 1993, I was privileged to have the opportunity to interview Athena Whorton about her experiences as a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse. The interview took place in the dining room of Athena's home in rural Barton County, Kansas. Primary attention was paid to those years had she taught in one-room schoolhouses near Galatia and Heizer, Kansas.

When asked when her teaching career began, Athena jokingly said, "I have taught school all of my life. My dolls were my first students and they were the dumbest things. They wouldn't say a word." Athena continued sharing that she graduated from high school at the age of 16 years, and was required to wait until she was 18 years old before she was allowed to accept a teaching position. While awaiting a teaching position, Athena stayed at home to help with the farm work and spent two summers at McPherson College. Both her desire for reading and writing and her need to help others find satisfaction within their surroundings were instrumental in Athena's decision to become a teacher.

When Athena attended high school in 1930, the Preparatory College Course and the Normal Training Course were offered. The Preparatory

College Course emphasized college preparation with a lot of writing, whereas the Normal Training Course emphasized "how to teach." Uncertain of her future at that time, Athena took the Preparatory College Course. She later realized she had no training whatsoever to become a teacher. Because of her determination to become a good teacher, for two summers Athena attended teacher training sessions at McPherson College. Next she was required to pass the Kansas State Certification Test. Those accomplishments allowed her to become a certified teacher in the state of Kansas.

The Kansas State Certification Test examined her knowledge in various subject areas. She passed the exam and earned a "Second County Certificate." The certificate was good for two years. She had to take another exam to renew her teaching certificate which earned her a "First County Certificate." This certificate was good for as long as she taught in continuum.

Degrees in education were not required when Athena began teaching in 1934. However, certification classes were required for the renewal of certificates. She recalled that during the close of the 1930s, teachers

were not required to go to school to recertify due to the hardships of the depression. During that period if teachers were successful, they were automatically recertified.

Athena Whorton began teaching in a one-room country school in western Barton County, Kansas, in 1934. She was 18 years old when she began her teaching career and continued to teach in one-room schools for 12 years. During that 12-year period she served two districts, both in Barton County. For Athena, now in her 70s, the years tended to "run together," but her memories of the country schools remained clear.

When she was 18 years old, Athena was hired to teach in a one-room schoolhouse located south and east of Heizer, Kansas. She could not recall the one-room school's name, except that it was assigned a district number. Athena's personal reference to this school was "Booster School," because a natural gas booster plant had later been built near the original site of the school. Athena admitted that family influence was instrumental for her success in acquiring her first teaching position. She proudly shared that her father farmed tremendous acres and owned several grocery stores.

Her recollections of "Booster School" were very descriptive. It was located about one mile from her family home. The white frame school building was rectangular in shape. The entrance consisted of two side doors going into a vestibule or a small entrance hall. The children's coats and lunches were placed in this vestibule as they arrived. At the front of the building was a six inch stage or platform that was used for both school and community programs. The teacher's desk would rest on this stage. In front of the teacher's desk was a bench which was used for recitations. The children sat or stood on the "recitation bench" when they presented their lessons. Behind the teacher's desk was a blackboard. Desks for the students were placed in rows, graduated from the smallest in the front to the largest in the back. In addition to the school building there was a coal and wood shed, a flag pole, two teeter-totters and the boys' and girls' privies.

Utilities were nil. The school did not have electricity, running water, or a telephone. It had cross-lighting which consisted of three windows on each side of the room. Light was provided by the six clear, pane glass windows which allowed sunlight inside the schoolhouse.

Candles or gas lights were used during the evening events. A coal stove, used for heating, stood in the middle of the room. Fresh water was brought in daily and was stored in a large stone crock in the vestibule. There was no indoor plumbing, therefore the restroom facilities consisted of "outhouses."

The board of education and the parents were in charge of major repairs to the facility. Before the school term began, parents would get together to dust, mop, and wax the school so it would be fresh and clean for the teacher and the students. Following this initial cleaning by the parents, the teacher was accountable for the custodial-type chores. She had to arrive at school early enough to get a fire going to heat the school in the cold months. In the mornings she was responsible for supplying fresh water, stocking up on wood or coal for the stove, and ringing the bell when school was to start. After school her routine consisted of sweeping the floor, stoking up the stove in the winter, cleaning the chalkboards with water, emptying the water pail, and preparing lessons for the next day. Athena would often recruit an older student to go outside and bring in additional fuel for the stove.

Cloudy days created difficult teaching conditions. Due to the "natural" lighting system, there were limited means for light. Cold, harsh winter months required the teacher and the students to huddle around the stove in the middle of the room for instruction. In order to keep the school comfortable during the winter the teacher had to either bank a fire overnight or arrive at school very early in the morning to build a new fire. 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 throughout the night. By banking the fire, the teacher had a much easier time warming the school for the students. The next morning logs or more coal would be added to keep the fire burning.

Two days were noted by Athena to be big events for the school and farm community. The special Christmas program brought the entire community to the school for an evening of entertainment. There were special programs to celebrate Christ's birthday, there was always a visit from Santa Claus, and there were many special contests and activities. Some of the activities included cake-walks and pie socials. The money that was raised from these contests went to the teacher to buy special

things for the students. On the last day of school, the community members returned to school for an afternoon of fun and relaxation. Athena remarked, "Those dinners were so much fun, and oh, how good everything was. Everybody around came to that dinner, and they brought their goodies in huge tubs." Tables were made by putting boards across the tops of the school desks. Athena still pictures the excitement of the little kids, picking out their very best goodie, and putting more on their plates than they could ever eat. These feasts were heaven on earth for small boys with big appetites. Within the confines of the school day, Halloween and Valentine's Day were recognized, but for the most part entertainment and the celebration of holidays were confined to homes.

Athena taught an eight-month term. School began in September and continued through the month of April. This allowed the children from farm families to help at home with farm work. She said that a nine-month term was almost unheard of in a country school at that time. School began at nine o'clock sharp and concluded at four o'clock in the afternoon.

Children were not allowed to come to school until they were six years old. Students in one-room schoolhouses were enrolled in the first

through eighth grades. Students remained in school until they completed the eighth grade or until they reached their 16th birthday. Due to the various grade levels, many subjects were taught to combined grades.

The practice of combining some grades gave the teacher more time to assist students during class time, and simplified the planning of lessons.

Many times not all the grade levels would be represented by students.

Athena recalled the number of enrollment had ranged from only 5 students to as many as 30 students. The one-room schoolteacher had to be prepared to teach all grades.

Most of the students lived within two miles of the school. Most of the students usually walked, and a few rode horses. Almost never did parents drive their students to school. Rides in the family vehicle generally occurred only when the weather was bad.

The students were predominantly white, German, and of Catholic faith. The majority of the students' parents were farmers or ranchers. The families were hard-working, honest and sincere in all their endeavors.

Athena reflected that many life-long relationships have developed from this background of experiences. She vividly described the appearance of

the students: "The students always came to school clean and were moderately dressed. The girls' dresses would have been of cotton. The boys wore overalls. And of course, in the wintertime, the children wore the familiar oveshoes which were put on over their shoes so that they could protect their feet as they walked to school."

Athena described the attitudes of her students: "Being from the rural area you would expect them to cooperative, and that they were. They were compassionate and kind and polite. I don't think that I ever had one child who was abusive in any way."

Discipline was maintained at all times. No talking aloud without permission, no foolishness, no cursing, nor lack of respect was allowed. The teacher was highly respected. Parents supported the teacher almost without question. Athena believed the students should know what was expected of them. She felt it was important to follow-up on what she asked the students to do. Everything had to have a purpose. Athena proudly said, "I can't say that I had a lot of discipline problems. The schools were not at all that large, and the children were of such a nature they just didn't make problems. If they did, they were expected to

sacrifice their play time." Her concept of discipline was to find out why the children misbehaved and then take away privileges as an appropriate measure.

The curriculum in the one-room schoolhouse was selected by the Kansas State Board of Education. The curriculum was based on reading, writing and arithmetic. In addition to the Three R's, spelling, geography, physiology, and Kansas History were often taught in the country school. At the beginning of the the year the teacher was handed a guide called "A Course of Study." This guide, provided by the State Board of Education, listed all the subjects taught and some teaching suggestions for each one.

In 1934 social studies was included in the curriculum. Athena remembered her reaction to this curricular change: "I recall that little blue book and I was scared to death. I really didn't know how to handle social studies. I never had picked up any information on it from the schools I had attended. I was just left out there by myself wondering what to do." Because she had always enjoyed reading about pioneers, the first social studies lesson Athena taught was a unit on pioneer life. Athena vividly remembered the unit because she supplemented it with

Laura Ingalls Wilder's book, Little House In the Big Woods. This was Wilder's first book and it was introduced the same year as social studies was introduced to the schools. Athena credits the popularity of Laura Ingalls Wilder's books in Kansas to the onset of the social studies curriculum in the schools.

In most instances homework was not assigned. Athena believed the students should be responsible for completing their assignments while in school. "You must remember," she said, "that we were teaching all eight grades. Each grade had its moments when it could study and get its lessons before the tomorrow."

Promotion to the next grade was determined by the students' attendance records and class grades. If both requirements were not met, the students were not promoted. Parents often kept the older boys home to help with the farm work. If this was a frequent practice, the boys would not be promoted.

All the seventh and eighth grade students took county-wide final examinations. Their final grades for the year were computed from their daily average and their examination scores. Upon successfully passing the

exams by obtaining minimum scores of 80%, eighth grade students could continue their education at the high school level.

Athena described a typical school day as arriving early enough to complete her custodial chores. She would bring in fresh water for drinking and prepare the stove during the winter months. Materials for the day would need to be gathered. Lessons would need to be written on the blackboard. Then at nine o'clock she would ring the bell for school to start. Every school day began with the flag salute and the Lord's Prayer. Praying the Lord's Prayer with her students was a priority for Athena. She carried on this tradition until a few years before her retirement, at which time the school administration prohibited her to continue this practice. Fifteen minute recesses started at ten thirty and again at two thirty for students to use the bathroom, get drinks, and play games. Another break was the lunch hour. The lunch hour was well organized. The children were expected to wash their hands in an old tin basin before getting their lunches. Almost everyone had lunch pails of a tin nature. The lunch pails may have been syrup buckets or lard cans. Students sat at their desks to eat their lunches. When everyone was finished eating, the children

would put up their lunch pails, put on their wraps, and go outside to play. School was dismissed at four o'clock in the afternoon. Athena remained after school to sweep the floor, clean the blackboards, and prepare lessons for the following day.

Athena characterized her teaching methods as "spoon-feeding" her students. Teachers who allowed their students to have any say in what was being done were ostracized. The belief was that the children should be told what to learn and how to learn it. She believed the students should know what was expected of them. Oral recitation and flash cards were two popular teaching strategies. The blackboard was the primary teaching aid available. In those days, there were no worksheets. The students performed drill and practice on the blackboard. The blackboard allowed the teacher to view and evaluate the students' work and point out possible errors.

There were no special community requirements to qualify for a one-room schoolteacher. The abundance of teachers meant competition for positions. It was beneficial and important to have personal contacts in the

community who could make positive recommendations to the school board. Athena shared that her first teaching position was a result of her family's influence: "My father farmed many acres and was very well known around the community. My mother was a very active lady in the community. Just before I started teaching, my father set me down and said, 'Now, Sister, you have decided to become a teacher and I want you to be a good one.' I can hear him to this day telling me that. My father called me 'sister' when he was pleased with me, but when I was being reprimended I was called 'Little Lady.'"

Teachers earned a lot of respect within the community. They were to conduct themselves in the community like ladies or gentlemen. They were expected to attend church and become active in the community. In some areas teachers who participated in dancing, drinking, playing cards, or getting married would risk losing their jobs. However, Athena taught in a community consisting of German-Catholic families which advocated dancing and card parties. These spirited patrons expected their teachers to participate in community functions. Athena further explained that she was reared in a home that allowed neither dancing nor card playing. The

board of education allowed Athena some flexibility in dealing with the social issues involving her family's values.

There were no extra-curricular activities. In the evening the students had chores to attend to at home. Limited transportation was probably the major reason for the lack of after school activities.

When asked how teachers were evaluated in the 1930s, Athena said, "Probably mouth-to-mouth." Then she chuckled and quickly added, "Word of mouth did influence the County Superintendent and the school board members." The County Superintendent evaluated the teacher once a year. Athena remembered that the County Superintendent would sit in her classroom for a day and watch her teach. A good report would usually result in employment for the next school year. She was not sure what the criterion was for the evaluation other than how well discipline was maintained in the classroom.

The school board set the teacher's salary. The beginning teacher would expect to receive a low salary and there were no benefits. Athena recalled that her beginning salary was \$50 for an eight month term or \$400 for her whole winter's work. She was pleased to add that when she

retired after 40 years of teaching she was one of the highest paid teachers in Barton County.

"While teaching at a one-room schoolhouse," Athena stated, "I taught everything. I did everything." There were no special classes offered. There were no other teachers to share duties with. Planning took considerable thought. An art lesson suitable for eighth grade students might not work for first grade students.

The experiences Athena encountered while teaching in a one-room schoolhouse have greatly influenced her retirement activities. Most rewarding for her were Laura Ingalls Wilder's writings and their influence on the early social studies unit on pioneer life that Athena had taught in 1934.

The interest in Laura Ingalls Wilder inspired Athena to dig deeply into research about Wilder's life. Athena has become an authority on the life of Wilder. She has read all of Wilder's books and has visited all of the settings of these books. Athena presents lectures on this subject to many professional groups and area schools. Athena became emotional when she added, "Laura Ingalls Wilder was a real sister of mine. I have

enjoyed her so much. She had done so much for me and my classroom. And bless her heart, I never did get to shake her hand because she died two years before I really became involved in her life." Athena shared that the notable thing about Laura Ingalls Wilder was "that she took what she had and was happy with it. In none of her works was there evidence that Laura was a grumbling type of a person." Athena and Wilder shared a common message to children: "We have found that the best things of life are to be honest and decent." Athena continued, "And what more could we tell our children today?"

After experiencing a vast array of educational changes over the past sixty years, Athena felt strongly that students should be taught in the confines of their own classrooms. She acknowledged that not all students will progress at the same rate or in the same way, and that children should not be ostracized from their peers and be put into a special room because they cannot attain the levels expected of them. Athena stated, "I would like to see educators take children from where they are, and encourage and develop them in their own classroom. I feel this is the only way children can be truly mainstreamed into society."

CHAPTER III: A BIOGRAPHY OF ATHENA O'SHAY WHORTON

Athena Whorton was born April 10, 1916. She was born on a farm located four miles north of Heizer, Kansas. This farm was the home of her parents, Charles and Pearl Morris O'Shay. Athena confesses that she felt like an only child, as a younger brother died when he was only four. He died when the family was visiting in Anderson, Missouri. He was buried in Anderson, but Athena, then six, can still remember how the neighbors flocked out to comfort them on their return to the farm in Kansas.

Her parents farmed several thousand acres, had interests in oil and a grain elevator, and owned five grocery stores. The stores were located in Larned, Ellinwood, Great Bend, Hoisington, and Heizer, Kansas. Athena recalled, "Dad would drive to the western slopes of the Rockies and come home with fruit, vegetables and honey for the stores." She added that it was her job to help her mother feed the 25 men who worked on the farm. Athena told of the time she bought a large round tray for her mother's birthday. One day when her mother had gone to town, Athena stacked 25 plates on the tray and proceeded to carry them to the table to the hired men. "Of course, I dropped them and broke almost half."

She could remember preparing food without the advantage of refrigeration. The butter was cooled by water as it came out of the well

to irrigate the land.

There was always a big pot of beans cooking. Every other day, her mother took fifty pounds of flour and baked bread in a large, white, granite dishpan. When chicken was served, six had to be cleaned and cooked for the twenty five men. Athena recalls that it was hard work for her as a child to help feed the men three meals a day, and declared, "Those men ate!"

When she was old enough, Athena attended District 5 Grade School, southwest of Hoisington. She walked almost two miles each way.

When she was older, she rode with the neighbor kids to Hoisington High School. She graduated from high school in 1932. After a year at home helping with farm chores, she had made up her mind to become a teacher. She spent two summers at McPherson College.

Athena taught in rural schools near Galatia and Heizer before going back to college to get both her bachelor's and master's degrees. Since then she has taken graduate studies, either by attendance or correspondence at the Universities of Kansas, Colorado and Southern California, and at Kansas State University, Fort Hays State University and Wichita State

University.

It was on a day when she was picking cherries that she met her husband, Webb. "He kept dropping cherries on my head," she exclaimed with a twinkle. "I had known who he was before, but we never really met until then. We were married in a whirlwind courtship of nine years!" Webb was deferred during World War II because of the importance of farming. They were married in 1946.

Out of this marriage was born a daughter, Marla, who lives with her mother and teaches forth grade at Pawnee Rock School. They also have a foster son, Richard "Bud" Brocher. Webb passed away in 1990 and Bud assumed the farming operation. Hereford Haven Farms is located in Barton and Pawnee counties. "We raised feeder cattle when Webb was alive," Athena explained, "and now we grow acreages of wheat, corn, milo, and soybeans."

After teaching in the one-room schools in the 1930's, Athena taught for twenty years at Eisenhower School in Great Bend, Kansas. She was later transferred to Riley School and remained there until her retirement in 1979. After retiring, Athena "fell into the hobby" of speaking about

"Laura." She had been invited by a Bluebird group to speak about Little House on the Prairie, and that got her started. She still gives lectures on this subject and the Santa Fe Trail to library and professional groups, EHU and church groups, retired people, and many area schools.

While working towards her master's degree, Athena wrote theses on both "Laura," as she calls her, and the Santa Fe Trail. "Few people know it," she said, "but Eisenhower School in Great Bend was built on the ruts of the Santa Fe Trail. Can you imagine how excited those little children are when I tell them the ruts are under their school?"

The life of Laura so intrigued her that Athena and her family have visited the books' locales in Pepin, Wisconsin; Walnut Grove, Minnesota; DeSmet, South Dakota; Independence, Kansas and Mansfield, Missouri.

"At Laura's last home in Mansfield," Athena shared, "we saw the six-foot-by-six-foot room where she wrote all her books. In the waste paper basket were still pieces of blue-lined school paper on which she wrote her stories."

Athena explained that the ten-room house had been built with lumber cleared from the land. In the living room was a large fireplace of native

rock. The ceiling was supported by huge, hand-cut beams. Both Athena and her daughter, Marla, got to play the old pump organ it housed.

"Laura was married to Almanzo and they had a daughter, Rose. They are all buried at Mansfield, Missouri. Rose was the only grandchild of Ma and Pa Ingalls in the TV series," Athena stated.

Laura died at the age of 90 in 1957. While at Mansfield, Athena met Laura's best friend who had since found a diary written by the author. She had urged Athena to write a book on the life of Laura, but she declined. Athena believed that it was for Rose to write about her mother, and eventually she did just that.

Athena has now concluded thirty five years of research on Laura Ingalls Wilder. After Rose's death, the estate was settled and the copyright of Little House on the Prairie was sold to Michael Landon who used the first thirteen episodes from the book for the television series. He later added other episodes of his own creation.

The Whortons love to travel, which they have done extensively in the United States. They have also visited Canada and western Europe. Athena is a member of the First Southern Baptist Church, Northwest EHU and

Barton County Retired Teachers Association.

"I have been fortunate enough to have learned from childhood up, that hard work, perserverance and compassion are important, but," she stressed, "God's leadership is necessary."