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### Interview with Mabel Pennington Grusing

Linda Grusing Doubrava  
*Fort Hays State University*

Mabel Pennington Grusing

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## CHAPTER II: INTERVIEW WITH MISS MABEL

Mabel Pennington, or Miss Mabel as her students called her, began her teaching career in Kearny County at the age of seventeen. Her first school was in southern Kearny County, District 15. Sunrise School had been closed for a year or two, and the community wanted to keep their district. So they received permission to reopen the school and to hire Mabel to teach, even though she was not yet eighteen years old. She had seven students in the school that year.

But to better understand her desire to teach and her excitement at getting her first school, some background information about Mabel is helpful here. The oldest of nine children, one of her favorite things to do with the younger siblings was to play school--and of course she was always the teacher. Her mother, Clara Childers Pennington, had taught for four years before her children were born, and had often shared her enjoyment of those years with her family. Mabel's uncle, Amos Childers, was a college professor as well. Therefore, it was natural that Mabel had always wanted to be a teacher.

Her senior year of high school at Lakin Rural High School offered her the opportunity to achieve that dream. Classes her senior year were two hours of normal training, agriculture, practice typing, psychology, and history.

School started that year on September 6, 1937, and Mabel began the preparation for her teaching career.

Normal training at Lakin during the 1930's was taught by Virginia P. Hicks, whom Mabel credits as being "a really, really good teacher." She felt that lots of credit should be given to the normal training that she received, as she felt very well prepared through that course to teach in the small country schools she was hired to teach. Mrs. Hicks taught in Kearny County "for years and years and years," according to Mabel, and her name was always mentioned with tremendous respect.

Normal training consisted of reviewing all of the subjects that would be taught in the first eight grades of school. "We took every subject we'd be teaching," Mabel stated. In addition to arithmetic, literature and English grammar, reading, and psychology, a new area of study coming into full force in the early forties was Social Studies. Mrs. Hicks informed Mabel that "What you don't know about geography is immense." So there was a lot to be covered in those two hours each day. Also included besides the core subjects was information on management and methods. By the end of the year, the class had visited a school or two to observe teachers in action, but there was no practice teaching involved.

After passing the normal training course, the young teachers also had to take a normal training exam, which was a very stiff test. Some of them had to retake the

courses, and take the test again a year later to be given the normal training certificate.

Also a part of the normal training era were the Teacher Institutes, which were held at the end of the summer vacation. Outside speakers came to these Institutes, which were held in each county to help the teachers improve their teaching (much like the inservices currently in vogue). Both lectures and demonstrations made up the course of study during Teacher Institutes.

Another important part of teacher training in the 1930's and 1940's were the Teachers' Meetings held in early November. Mabel said she attended Teachers' Meeting in several locations during the years she taught: Hays, Dodge City, and Topeka. She felt that these sessions were very valuable, and especially so for beginning teachers.

In her diary entry for February 22, 1938, Mabel recorded that she got stationery that day to write applications for schools. On May 20, 1938, her diary entry showed that was the first day of teacher exams, with reading, geography, grammar, and psychology being tested that day. Her comments: "Grammar was hard, psychology not bad." (She didn't comment on geography, so she must have mastered that subject). The next day, May 21, the arithmetic, management, and methods tests were given. Mabel's comments: "Arithmetic was hard; management, easy; and methods couldn't have been much worse!"

Mabel applied for the Sunrise School position on May 23, and on June 4 she recorded in her diary, "Mrs. Smith came to see me today. I have a school!" She signed the contract on June 16, and her salary that first year would be \$55 a month.

One advantage the Sunrise school building offered to the young, beginning teacher was the platform at the front of the room. Being only 5'3" tall, those inches the platform added to her stature were welcomed. There were seven children in Sunrise School that year: three Jenks boys, two Whittman children, Norman Palmer, and the teacher's sister, Ruth Pennington. She was asked to bring Ruth to school with her because she was close in age to the only girl in the district, Dorothy Whittman.

But before school began was the Teacher Institute. From her diary on August 22, 1938: "Started to institute. It is very interesting. We have 3 lectures and one demonstration. Miss Spencer is teaching." The institute went on through August 26, and included these speakers: Miss Jackson, Mr. Watson, and Mr. Johnson (from Loveland, Colorado). Mabel did not know where the other speakers were from, although one of the early Kearny County Superintendents, Matilda Copeland, wrote for the Kearny County History book that the Teacher's Normal (later called Teacher's Institute) was often taught by "professors of the larger cities like Topeka, Emporia, Salina, etc."

On September 1, her diary entry said, "Went to my schoolhouse and put up pictures," and on September 5, Mabel wrote, "My first day of school. Door stuck and kids had to crawl in window." Since the school, a block structure, had been vacant for two years, mice were a terrible problem in the building all of that year. Also making the job unpleasant was all the dust. Mabel's diary often just said, "Dirt, dirt, dirt." It was a continual battle.

Mabel and Ruth lived at home with their parents and drove the family car, which was not always reliable, to school for part of that year. Later they shared rides with another teacher who drove right by Sunrise School to get to her school.

Getting out of the car one morning, Mabel cut her finger very badly when the door handle broke off. Although she assured the driver that she was fine, and did make it through the day of school, by the time her ride home had arrived, she was pretty light-headed from having her finger bleed all day, and when she got back to town, the doctor put several stitches in the wound. Days like that one made Mabel glad that no other incidents occurred when she was "way out in nowhere" with no way to call for help.

Another incident at Sunrise School happened the first cool day, when it was time to light a fire in the coal

heater. The stovepipe, unused for two years, fell apart, and soot flew all over the schoolroom.

By the end of the first year of school, Mabel had saved enough of her salary to buy a typewriter and tires for her parents' car, and still had enough money left to pay tuition for summer school at Hays. Although her normal training certificate was good for two years, and she wasn't required to get college hours yet to renew it, she was eager to attend college. That first summer, she roomed with Edith Grusing, who would later be her sister-in-law, in Wesley Hall (now the Education Wing of the First United Methodist Church in Hays).

Spending four summers at Fort Hays State College, Mabel lived in a variety of housing in addition to Wesley Hall: Custer Hall, a basement apartment, and one summer session she lived in Lewis Field Stadium. The rooms under the stadium had provided housing for soldiers from the Fort in earlier times, and that particular summer, housing on campus was very crowded, so Lewis Field was reopened. One summer she attended an early session at Fort Hays, then fit in an August course at Emporia as well. One of the courses she took there was music, and Mabel still remembers having to sing in front of the whole class, to her embarrassment.

Her second school, Morning Star, was in District 17, also in southern Kearny County. Another one-room school, Waechter School, was also a part of District 17. That

year, 1939-40, Mabel's teaching contract was for a \$65 salary per month. There were nine pupils in this school: Don Johnson, three Walker children, and five Davison brothers and sisters. This school was really located "in the middle of nowhere," according to Mabel. She lived in a cookshack in the school yard, with a "topsy" stove for heat. The coal-burning stove in the schoolhouse could be banked at night, and more coal added in the morning. But the cookshack was very cold in the mornings and evenings after school, and there was a lot of snow that winter, which made for a difficult year. Nobody had electricity in the country yet, so the only light was from kerosene lamps.

In the 1940-41 and 1941-42 school years, Mabel taught at Columbia School, 12 miles north of Lakin on Highway 25. This school and Wonderland School jointly made up District 6. Columbia was a unique building because it was located in different places at different times, depending upon where the children lived who were attending this school. At one time it was two miles north of the site where Mabel taught, and at another time it was one-half of a mile west. A small frame building, it was simply put on skids and pulled to its new location. This is the only building in which Mabel Pennington taught that is still in existence. It is now a part of the Kearny County Museum, and was moved in 1978 to its permanent location in Lakin,



where the fifth graders come to have a day of "country school" once a year.

During the two school years she taught at Columbia, Miss Mabel lived with the Wray family in a round-top. They had a little girl who was one of her students.

The next two school years, from the fall of 1942 through the spring of 1944, Mabel taught at Hillcrest School, which was one of 4 schools which jointly made up District 18. This was the most prosperous district she taught in, since it had more land and therefore a higher valuation. The school building there was the most modern one, too. It had a coal-burning stove for heat. There was a nice chalkboard on one wall (most of the rural schools then had a painted blackboard, which was not especially useful.) The building had windows on the east side. There was a separate library, a cloakroom, and a small coal room behind the stove. There was even a telephone and a small stove to cook on. During the winter months, one family would provide something warm for the children's noon meal for a week at a time.

At Hillcrest, she was given a subscription to either The Instructor or Grade Teacher magazine each year. There was actually a budget for supplies at Hillcrest. Students at this school were two Moore children, four Moyers, and two Walkers. Often the students and their teacher would take nature hikes, and Indian arrowheads were sometimes found as they explored the surrounding fields.

From 1944 through 1946, Mabel taught her last two years before getting married. Those years she taught at Eureka School, District 7, which she had attended herself as a seventh and eighth grader. The location of Eureka was twenty-two miles north of Lakin on Highway 25. With the Kuhlman home just across the road, this was the least isolated of all her schools.

This school was unique in that it had an oil-burning stove, which was a quicker way to get the room warm. Mabel lived at the John Grusing home when she taught at Eureka. Edith Grusing and Mabel had remained best friends since they'd met in seventh grade.

By this time, salaries had improved quite a bit from her beginning salary: her contract for Eureka was for \$140 a month. The students at Eureka included a Kuhlman girl, three Kysars, one Wilken boy, and a Mirr girl, for a total of six students.

Mabel and John Wesley Grusing were married the summer after her second year of teaching at Eureka School. She decided to give up her teaching career to be a full-time homemaker, as most women did in the 40's. There were some teachers who were married, but the majority were not. After her marriage, however, Mabel did continue to work with children and youth in various capacities: she was a Sunday School teacher for many, many years, a 4-H foods leader for fourteen years, started a Daily Vacation Bible

School in the Lydia Methodist Church, and of course, raised a family of four children as well.

After this review of each of the schools that Miss Mabel taught, she made some observations about the one-room schools in general. In Kearny County during the years that she taught, there were around sixteen or seventeen one-room rural schools, and "town school" in both Deerfield and Lakin. Not many of the one-room school teachers were men, although it was not unheard of for a man to teach there. However, the pay was generally quite a bit less than in the bigger schools in town, and therefore a male teacher would be more likely to teach in town, especially if he had a family to support.

The students that Mabel taught were from the age of six up to the age of fifteen, with a school enrollment of from eight to twelve students being about average. With these small numbers, she never did have a school with students in all eight grades.

The school population was very stable throughout the school year. Rarely did anyone move in or out of the district, although sometimes when a boy reached age sixteen he would quit school instead of finishing eighth grade. The students dressed well, having clean school clothes that were different from work clothes worn at home. Teachers wore dresses, since this was still the pre-war era, and trousers had not come into acceptance for women to wear.

Evaluating students' work consisted of grading papers, making up tests, and so on, and assigning percentages for the amount of work that was correct. Anything below an eighty percent was considered failing. Report cards went home to parents once a month.

Noting that there were no outstanding discipline problems in any of her schools, Mabel did comment that she was lucky some of the older boys were so well behaved. No one took advantage of the fact that she was only seventeen her first year of teaching, nor of her petite size. Respect for the teacher was expected both by the schools and in the home, so there was no lack of respect to contend with.

The subjects taught in the elementary schools at the end of the thirties and through the forties were: spelling, reading, writing, art, English, literature, math, health, history, Kansas history, geography, and agriculture. Many of the one-room schools had very few supplies. At Teacher Institute each teacher was given a box of supplies from the County Superintendent, which contained school records and report cards. Every school did have a few dictionaries and usually a set of World Book or other encyclopedias. Every school had some sets of maps and a globe for teaching geography, and most one-room schools did have a picture of either George Washington or Abraham Lincoln on one of the classroom walls.

The first year or two of teaching, Mabel used the Bobbs-Merrill readers, the same series of books she read in her own grade school years. By 1940, the reading series was called Prose and Poetry. Mabel thought that all schools in the state used the same textbooks, and that the State Board of Education probably chose which series would be adopted for use.

Most of the one-room country schools had a very small collection of books. The teacher could go to the County Superintendent's office, however, and check out many books for use by her school, check them in two weeks later and take out new ones. Mabel said that the library in the County Superintendent's office was quite large for that era. Another source of books for the students was the Traveling Library, a trunkful of books which would be kept for a semester, then traded for a new trunkful. The Kansas Reading Circle catalog was available to order books from, and each district had some money budgeted to buy a few new books each year.

The Reading Circle also was a source of professional reading materials for teachers. Each year at Teacher Institute, there were several Reading Circle books to choose from, and they made the rounds of the teachers in the county. Each teacher was required to read one of these professional books each year, and this requirement lasted well into the fifties in Kearny County.

The typical school day began with the flag salute, then the teacher reading aloud a chapter of a book. Classes began with the older students being given preparations for their lessons while the teacher had recitations from the lower grades. Some classes had recitations three days a week, some twice a week. As the day progressed, each grade level would be called up for recitations with the teacher in each subject studied. Older students would occasionally have longer writing assignments to work on at home, but there was very little homework assigned, as most of the children did all their work in school.

Competency tests called Reed-Tracey tests were given at every grade level in the spring, and the seventh and eighth graders went to Lakin for two consecutive Saturdays to take their final exams. Seventh graders had to pass their tests to enter eighth grade, and eighth graders had to pass to graduate from grade school.

These final exams were quite difficult, as they covered all of the subjects studied all eight years. Lots of time in the spring was devoted to studying old tests and other review manuals to ready the older students for these exams.

Upon passing this final exam, the eighth graders were graduated from grade school into high school. The eighth graders from the country schools had their own graduation,

separate from the town school graduation. They had printed programs, and it was a big event.

Recess time was important in the one-room schools as it is everywhere. Mabel soon learned that recess went better if the teacher was out on the playground with her students. Games they played were Prisoner's Base, Beckon, Dodge Ball, Gypsy, Clackman, Drop the Handkerchief, Ante Over, Cat and Mouse, New Orleans, and Long Base. Indoor recess on inclement days would probably include some blackboard games such as Hangman, Tick-tack-toe, Math games, or Fruit Basket Upset. All of her schools did have playground equipment, which included swings, a merry-go-round, and a slide.

During the school year, programs usually included one in the fall, around Halloween. This might be a box supper to raise money for Christmas treats, or other needs of the school. Christmas programs were a big family event, and were usually planned entirely by the teacher, although some years in Kearny County there was a county music teacher who helped with the programs, as well as teaching music classes in the rural schools. In the spring there were sometimes programs at school for the mothers to attend, on Francis Willard Day, Washington's birthday or Lincoln's birthday.

At this time in Kearny County there were no school nurses, nor county health nurse. It was up to parents to take their children to the doctor for their immunizations,

although Mabel thought there was an epidemic of some disease and all the school children got shots at that time. She felt very lucky that in her eight years of teaching there were no accidents, especially since most of those years she was teaching in schools that were quite isolated, there was usually no phone, and some years she had no car to drive either.

Evaluation of the teacher was conducted by two parties: the county superintendent always came to the rural schools once or twice a year, unannounced, and visited for most of a day. In some districts, a member of the school board might come and visit school as well. The school boards consisted of three board members for each district, usually whoever was willing to take the job. School Board elections were held, but usually anyone who would run for the position was unopposed. The elections for school board as well as other local, county, state, and national elections were conducted in the schoolhouse. That was about the only other use ever made of the one-room school buildings that Mabel taught in, as there were few other community events.

All of the six schools that she taught were closed when the school population of the area grew too small to warrant keeping the school open. Some of the buildings became houses, some sheds or garages. Columbia School was moved to Lakin and is permanently on display as a part of the Kearny County Museum.



When asked what she would like for people to remember about the one-room schools, Mabel replied, "I think they definitely had their place. They fulfilled the need of that day." Comparing those small schools to today's large, often overcrowded classrooms, she wondered if being a part of a smaller group might have helped to develop children's respect and morals.