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Interview with Rachel Siddens

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Rachel Siddens

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Chapter Two

Janice: Today is February 14, 1990. I am interviewing Miss Rachel Siddens who taught in a one-room schoolhouse. This interview is taking place in Miss Siddens' home in Satanta, Kansas. When did you start teaching?

Rachel: Nineteen and thirty.

Janice: Where was that?

Rachel: That was in Grant County just over the line from Haskell County.

Janice: Can you give me a more specific location as to what highway this might have been near?

Rachel: What's the highway going to Ulysses from Sublette?

Janice: I think it is 160.

Rachel: It's north of that about seven or eight miles north after you go on the highway not far over the Haskell County line.

Janice: Do you remember the name of this school?

Rachel: Rock Island School.

Janice: How many years did you teach in this school?

Rachel: One.

Janice: What grades did you teach?

Rachel: I taught first, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth.

Janice: Do you remember why the school was built?

Rachel: No.

Janice: Was it already established when you went there?

Rachel: It was there when I went. It was built because there were so many pupils in that district. It was too far to transport them to some place else so they built the school.

Janice: Was this a public or a private school?

Rachel: Public.

Janice: Do you know the boundaries?

Rachel: I can't recall.

Janice: Was there a school board?

Rachel: Yes, there was. Three men. Would you like their names?

Janice: Yes, if you have them, please.

Rachel: There was Mr. Dew, Mr. Schmidt, and Mr. Koehn.

Janice: Did Rock Island School have an organization that might be similar to a PTA?

Rachel: No, I would say not.

Janice: Who was in charge of hiring or firing the teachers?

Rachel: The board.

Janice: Did anyone else have any input?

Rachel: Well, I suppose the patrons would if they talked to the board.

- Janice: Did any particular activities take place between schools--like Rock Island and another school?
- Rachel: Only when we'd have socials some schools would come to that.
- Janice: What kind of socials?
- Rachel: Well, we'd call them pie suppers. They'd bring and have auctions. That time they'd have programs. The community people and the children would help with the programs.
- Janice: Did this school make any lasting contributions to the community?
- Rachel: I'm not aware because I left there after one year. I didn't keep up.
- Janice: How long did that school continue to operate before it was closed?
- Rachel: I have no idea? The school was built by the district.
- Janice: What type of heating, lighting, and restroom facilities were available?
- Rachel: We had lights like we used to use. That's why there weren't many night things. We did have butane to heat with. We didn't have to carry in coal and take out ashes.
- Janice: Would you be more specific about the lighting?

Rachel: Kerosene type.

Janice: Did you have indoor or outdoor restrooms?

Rachel: No, outdoor. One for boys and one for girls.

Janice: How did the school get its water?

Rachel: One of the men in the district was hired to bring fresh water every day. This hallway outside our classroom had a large container which he brought. It had a spout on it, and each one had their own cup.

Janice: Was it a metal cup?

Rachel: Well, they had their choice of what they wanted to bring for that. There was a case made to put it in with their names on it so we knew. Washing the cups was a weekly job.

Janice: Was that one of your jobs?

Rachel: No, they had church there on Sunday, and they cleaned that schoolhouse from top to bottom on Saturday.

Janice: Do you know how the school got its name?

Rachel: No. I tried to find out and couldn't.

Janice: I'll check with the Grant County Museum.

Can you describe the interior of the school? What was it like?

Rachel: It had plaster walls. They had nice blackboards, nice lighting, and large windows--well lighted. You see, the front of it, you came into it and the hall and the coat places were out there. In the center was a place to store things. That was about the only storage place I had in there.

Janice: What were the students' desks like?

Rachel: Oh, they were very modern desks. They weren't fastened down. Individual. Chair type. I'd call it.

Janice: Who was in charge of the building upkeep during the week since church people did it on Saturday? Were you in charge?

Rachel: Well, I was mostly in charge with the help of one of the members of the school board.

Janice: Were there ever any other special events that happened in your school other than the pie suppers and church?

Rachel: Not that I especially remember.

Janice: What were some of the physical problems of the building?

Rachel: Well, the building at that time, I couldn't find much that was a problem only in supplies instead

of the building. The playground equipment was a problem. It didn't have much.

Janice: What things did you have for playground equipment?

Rachel: One set of teeter totters and one swing.

Janice: Do you know what happened to the schoolhouse after it was closed?

Rachel: Yes, a farmer bought it. It is located in Hickock on the north side of the highway.

Janice: Do you know what they did with the equipment?

Rachel: No, I've often wondered that myself.

Janice: What subjects did you teach?

Rachel: All of them.

Janice: What do you define as all?

Rachel: Well, I'd say their long suit, the type of people I had, was reading. Reading. Then I had math, spelling, writing, and English.

Janice: Did you have any social studies or science?

Rachel: Well, that was brought in through reading.

Janice: When you say writing, are you meaning creative writing or handwriting?

Rachel: Handwriting, the Palmer method.

Janice: What was the length of a school day and the school year?

Rachel: Nine months and from nine till four.

Janice: What teaching methods did you use?

Rachel: I used quite a bit of phonics work in the lower grades. Drill method in math. Dramatization in reading. I used contests in geography and spelling.

I used map location work similar to what I had when I was in grade school. When I was in third grade, we use those big old geography books. I'd sit with some of the older students. We'd have to find the places. I'd locate the place. By the time I was ready for the geography work most students get now in sixth or seventh grade, I knew all the continents, all the states, and many of the towns. Even when we had geography matches, the teacher would put the name on the board to see which team could find that place first. Sometimes I could remember where it was located, so I'd yell it out.

In spelling we had two different kinds of contests. I used these methods in the one-room school. We'd start and choose teams. I would pronounce words down with the little ones using words they had. Then with the older ones going criss-cross. If they missed the word, they had to

sit down. The object was to see which team was left standing.

Then we played what we called railroad spelling. I taught them to listen. They had to listen to the word spelled before them. They had to start their word the way the previous word ended. If they missed that, not starting the word correctly, they had to sit down. They could spell any word they wanted as long as it began with the letter the previous word ended with. If it ended in g they could spell any word that began with g.

In arithmetic we had a lot of contests. We'd choose up sides and have an old-fashioned ciphering match. The little ones would start first. The one that came up last got to choose the process they wanted--addition, subtraction, division, or multiplication.

In this one-room school I had records that had multiplication and things like that. Then I had games we could play.

Janice: What teaching aides or supplies were available to you. Awhile ago you indicated that was a problem.

Rachel: They did have maps for social studies and that type of work, a few not many. Then they also had

a lot of good books. I don't mean a great number, but for that school it was plenty. Oh, I myself had games to play within math. Their long suit was books.

Janice: Do you remember any particular titles?

Rachel: Bob Merrill readers.

Janice: Did you have extra books in the area of literature to read in the school library?

Rachel: Yes.

Janice: Were there any special classes or special services for handicapped students or learning problems a student might have?

Rachel: No, I didn't have any special problems only in the first grade they were very timid so many of them came from a Mennonite background. Getting them started was my biggest problem.

Janice: Would you describe a typical school day?

Rachel: Well, we usually started, I think the one thing when it was nice weather, we even played out before we started. We'd line up on the outside and come in. That was another thing. I had my own record player. The oldest girl usually wanted to do that. She'd play that for us to come in. Then we had the flag salute. Then we had a

sharing period. We didn't call it "Tell and Show," but that's what it was. They could tell or show anything. Any of them that wanted to could. The main subject was reading. I started the day with reading. From there I would take the other subjects as they came.

Janice: Would the next subject be math?

Rachel: Yes.

Janice: Were reading and math the two biggest areas?

Rachel: Yes, then the more recreational types where I could work in the English and geography part would be in the afternoon. I did have another reading session in the afternoon.

Janice: That's where you worked in social studies and science?

Rachel: Yes.

Janice: How did you decide on a textbook or did you have any say in a textbook?

Rachel: No, that was determined by the county, but I did supplementary.

Janice: What was the atmosphere of the educational program?

Rachel: I would say it was warm.

Janice: What were some of the rules of that school that might be different from school rules today?

Rachel: Well, their idea was they come to school to learn from books. To take them out to have activities and things, they thought was a waste of time. You were playing. That's about the only difference I could see. The children were very accepting to many kinds of things.

Janice: If you had any set of rules, did the children follow them without question?

Rachel: Yes, without question. I expect sometime the parents questioned them when they told about it.

Janice: Did you have any problems with parents?

Rachel: No, I never did.

Janice: What were some special observances of your school such as Christmas programs, spelling bees, or music contests.

Rachel: No, we didn't have any music contests. We had the general programs where we'd meet and have a parent and student program together, I'd say. The parents would take part.

Janice: When did these happen?

Rachel: Mostly holidays. We had the Christmas program and things like that.

- Janice: Did you have a school graduation?
- Rachel: No.
- Janice: What was the usual age that a child began school?
- Rachel: Six years.
- Janice: Did children move in and out during the school year?
- Rachel: They were pretty stable. I had only three changes in the year.
- Janice: What was the greatest distance traveled by any student?
- Rachel: Well, it was over four miles.
- Janice: What form of transportation was used?
- Rachel: The parents brought those that lived the farthest. Some of them walked, those that lived closer. Walking and cars were the means of transportation used.
- Janice: How many students attended this school?
- Rachel: Seven.
- Janice: What grade levels?
- Rachel: First, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth. I combined a lot--like third and fourth in social studies and English. Also fifth and sixth were combined.

- Janice: What type of occupations did these students go on to pursue?
- Rachel: Those that I've followed, I'd say farming.
- Janice: Do you know if any went on to college?
- Rachel: No, I don't.
- Janice: Did the students of Rock Island School come from a particular cultural or heritage background?
- Rachel: Mennonites mainly, but I did have some that came from the Church of Latter Day Saints, Mormons.
- Janice: What was the average number of years a student spent in school?
- Rachel: Well, I'd say about eight years. I think most of them would go on and stay in there because there were pretty well acclimated to school.
- Janice: Were there any outstanding students?
- Rachel: Well, not to my knowledge. One I especially depended upon was killed in a mine accident. He went out and was experimenting in a mine and was killed out there.
- Janice: What was the dress and over-all appearance of the students?
- Rachel: The Mennonites dressed similar to what they do today. Most all looked alike. They were very

neat and clean. I never found one that wasn't clean or neat.

Janice: Did they wear a uniform?

Rachel: Not usually. Their dresses were made similar. The boys wore a type of clothes that most boys were wearing.

Janice: Did they wear a cap?

Rachel: No, but they did have long hair.

Janice: Do you know if there was any cost for education for the student or the family?

Rachel: Well, only the taxation. There was never anything paid into the school.

Janice: Was absenteeism ever a problem?

Rachel: No, it certainly was not. I think they were there more than me.

Janice: What happened when you were ill?

Rachel: I never missed a day.

Janice: Can you describe a typical day before and after school for yourself? What would you do of a morning to prepare for the day and after school?

Rachel: I usually came pretty early. I came with a family that I stayed with. They brought me to school every morning. I would make my lesson plans before I'd leave. I knew what I was going to do.

I'd put things on the board a lot in the morning. I'd get out the things I would need for art which was not much because they were not much for art. I used some of it anyway. I would also clean the water jar every morning before he got there with the water.

Janice: How far ahead did you plan your lessons?

Rachel: A week. I checked them at night to see how much I'd covered, and what I had to do the next day. I liked to know before I left what I was going to do.

Janice: How were discipline problems with the students handled?

Rachel: You know, I just don't remember that I ever had any discipline problems.

Janice: You said you lived with a family. Was this a family in this district?

Rachel: Yes, I had one of their students. Their son was a first grader.

Janice: How far did this family live from the school?

Rachel: Three miles.

Janice: How are teaching methods now different from when you taught?

Rachel: Well, I think children have much more freedom. I couldn't get these children to feel they should lead or do anything. They wanted me to be their leader. Now children are much more forward. They've had a lot more experience. There are more things they know that these children did not.

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

Rachel: There was nothing ever said. Nobody ever said anything to me. I could live my life as I saw fit.

Janice: Did you have to dress in a particular manner?

Rachel: No.

Janice: Were there any extra curricular activities that you were in charge of?

Rachel: No, I wasn't there over the weekend. I spent the weekends with my sister in Satanta. She had a store there, and I helped her. I did help with school activities when they were held on Friday nights or during the week.

Janice: How much schooling did you have when you became a teacher?

Rachel: Let's see. I had about 90 hours.

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

Rachel: One hundred dollars for nine months.

Janice: One hundred dollars for nine months?

Rachel: Nine hundred dollars a year.

Janice: How was your salary determined?

Rachel: By the board.

Janice: Did you ever have any voice in the salary decisions?

Rachel: Yes, I told them what I wanted.

Janice: Did they pay you what you asked?

Rachel: Yes, I said that I'd go any place to the end of the world for \$100.

Janice: How were you paid? How did you get your check?

Rachel: Mr. Koehn was the treasurer. He usually brought it to the schoolhouse for me at the end of the month.

Janice: You've probably had many amusing moments in your career. Do you have any that you recall which stand out that you would care to share?

Rachel: Well, you mean in any school that I taught in or just this school?

Janice: Either way or both.

Rachel: Well, I've had so many all the way through. I remember one involving eating. We were bringing our own lunches. One little boy was sitting by me. I was eating my sandwich and taking off the crust. He looked up and said, "Miss Rachel, if you don't eat that, you never will have hair on your chest."

In later life, I remember one instance where I'd been teaching about smoking. I had taught them about the dangers of smoking. Some came in and I could tell they'd been smoking because I could smell it on them. They would ask questions by saying that they knew someone that was doing it. At the time they didn't think that I knew they were smoking. Later on, one of them told me he came to realize years later that I knew he was smoking at the time I was teaching him about the dangers of smoking.

Another one was the dramatization of the installation of the President and vice-president. We acted it out. They had to find out exact words or something. That was quite interesting.

Another time we were studying social studies about Switzerland. We were talking about the dogs that

carried the whiskey to the lost people, and what they do. One little boy looked up at me and said, "Miss Rachel, no dog in this world is big enough to carry what my uncle can drink."

Janice: Would you share a philosophy of education with today's educators.

Rachel: Well, to me education is just a process of growing. I think I'd say that if every child could just be happy, they'd learn. We wouldn't have to worry about what to teach because it would just come along. I like to think that children should have a part in planning the education.

Janice: What advice do you offer for teachers today?

Rachel: Keep in mind what you liked to have done to you when you were in school. Teach children to have responsibilities of their own. They are to help keep up the room. Take pride in it and be a part of it instead of the teacher doing it all.