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Interview with Mildred Frederick

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Fort Hays State University

Mildred Reed Colle Fredrick

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CHAPTER II

SCHOOL RULES ON FIVE FINGERS

I was born in eastern Kansas and started school there. I attended school in Raymond and graduated from Ellinwood High School in 1946. That summer I took 8 hours at Emporia State Teachers College and was granted an emergency teaching certificate. At the age of 19 I started teaching in the fall for a salary of \$125.00 a month. Of course, that was for only 8 months. My parents lived in Coffeyville. I could have stayed at home to teach for \$65.00 a month but I came out West to get more money. I have been here forty some years. I suppose about 47 years. It took me 21 years to finish my degree from Sterling College. I loved going to school and learning more and I loved teaching school. I have 30 hours of graduate work from Fort Hays. I'd like to take another course in the summer or this fall even - it's in my blood.

I taught in two one-room rural schools. At Excelsior, I taught for two years then it consolidated with Saxmon. After that I went to Lincoln school and taught for two years. It consolidated into the Midland district. Excelsior school was built in 1881. The land was given by a farmer who got the land back when the school closed. The community of farmers went together to

build the school. The money earned from the crops paid the wages for the teacher.

I taught the three R's, which were math, reading, writing, and then, of course, spelling. I also taught citizenship half a semester and Kansas history half a semester. I had all eight grades first through eighth grade.

The textbooks we used were printed in the Kansas Printing Center in Topeka. The students would go to Duckwalls in Lyons to buy their books. They could buy new or used books. Most of the time, families kept their books and would hand them down from one student to another.

We didn't have a library. However, we had books that the students could read. They were in the Kansas Reading Circle. We also had a set of World Books, a set of maps, and one big dictionary.

As for teaching methods, we had blackboards. I would present the lessons on the blackboard. At the front of the classroom we had a little recitation seat. The children would come to the front of the classroom to do their lessons. I'd call first grade, second grade, or some other grade one at a time for recitation. I worked with all eight grades throughout the day. I would present the lesson to them. Then I would send them to the blackboard for practice on math, spelling, or other

things that needed a little more instruction. By doing this, I could see if they really understood it. Then, they would take their seat and I would call up the next group. The next day they would have their lessons prepared, and we checked their papers. We exchanged papers when we checked them. We did this at the recitation seat rather than at their desks so that it wouldn't interfere with the other students who were busy working on some other subject. Sometimes the seventh and eighth graders would take the first and second graders back in the corner of the room to work on lessons. It was sort of a busy, buzzy, little place with no one paying any attention to anyone else. A little different than what it is now. In a classroom now, if somebody came to the door, they'd all stop and look to see who it is. They don't continue working.

Teaching methods probably show the greatest change. In those first years of teaching, I was the only person and short of time. Now we specialize in different areas. We also continue our education in order to be a better teacher. Special education programs and parent organizations also make the educational system more effective. Education has definitely advanced. I know I have come a long way from my first six years of teaching in that one-room school house. I taught the three

R's and that's about all I had time for, especially with only eight months of school.

The students ranged in ages five to 16. I had a little boy, Max VanNorman's boy, who was five years old. He was in the first grade. As I look back, he was pretty immature. The oldest student that I ever had was 16. In order to graduate, the students had to take a county examination and pass. He couldn't pass his county exam. At 16, he could have quit school, but he stayed.

Discipline was not a problem. I could spank a child or keep them after school. I didn't have to contact the parents. If ever a student stayed, the parent was usually there. I never had to discipline after that. The parents disciplined the student in those days. They don't do that now, and they don't want you to discipline them either.

The students had a few rules which they were to follow. I would just ring the bell. I had a hand bell in one school and in the other school, I had a big rope that I pulled to ring the bell. The students would line up outside in the fall. In the winter, they would line up inside the building. We would give the flag salute and the Lord's Prayer. Of course, that isn't done anymore, which I think isn't quite right. (I guess we have churches for that.) The students would take their seats and

they were quiet. If they wanted to speak to someone, they had to use five fingers. If they wanted to speak to the teacher, they put up four fingers. If they needed to go to the bathroom, which was outside, they put up one finger to urinate. If they wanted to go out and have their bowel movement, they had to put up two fingers. That way the teacher was aware as were the students, of how long it was going to take. If they needed a drink of water, they would put up three fingers. Everybody had a tin cup with their name on it. They would go into the coat room and dip the water from the bucket.

Our rest room facilities were the "two holers" out back. One was the boys and one was the girls. They were far enough away that they didn't smell. In the spring, one of the farmers would come with a manure loader and clean them out. It was my duty, as teacher, to make sure everything was limed at the end of the school day. We had a big stove - a coal stove. Behind the school was a shed that was full of coal and corn cobs. We soaked the corn cobs in kerosene. We put the soaked cobs and coal in the stove - like what boy scouts do now. In the winter, I'd have to bank the stove. One time I went into the coal room to get some coal and there

was a big bull snake lying in there. Occasionally, we had that little problem with snakes.

In most schoolhouses, there were a lot of windows. Ours were on the east and the west. The school was very drafty with high ceilings. When the wind was out of the northwest, the kids were usually around the stove. I would bring blankets to put on the west windows. We could see the wind moving them. In warmer weather, there was a fly problem. There was no screen door. When it was hot the door had to be opened and we had to fight the flies. I can remember times going outside the building in the shade to study. The wind would keep the flies away. We also had mice. My desk had a screen on the bottom so the mice couldn't get into the drawers and eat everything.

Our lighting system was white kerosene lamps. We pumped them and then would light them. We used them for programs or any other evening activities. For water, we had a water well and a pump. We filled the bucket with water. The students would dip the dipper into the bucket and fill their cup. We also had a wash pan to wash their hands before they ate their lunch. Everybody brought a sack lunch. Sometimes in the winter, the kids would bring milk and potatoes. I would make potato soup on an old kerosene stove. Sometimes the roof

leaked and the floors creaked. There's no comparison to the classrooms of today. I wouldn't want to go back to those days. Some people call it the "good old days" but I don't see any good about it.

The greatest distance any student lived from school was about two miles. I don't know of anyone who brought their kids to school.

I walked about a mile and a half to school. I didn't have an automobile because I couldn't afford one. Snow or rain, I made it to school. I wore overshoes, a raincoat and I had an umbrella. Of course, if there was a real bad blizzard, we just didn't have school. However, it was my duty to get to school to make sure the fire didn't go out.

Extra curricular activities consisted of competition between Lodianna, Walnut Grove, and Libby School. We played ball and had a spelling bee in the fall. Most of time we walked to the contests. If we didn't, a farmer would load the kids up in truck and take them. We always called it the Sea Biscuit.

We had a Christmas program and a Halloween program. The Halloween program consisted of spooky one-act plays. We also had a Thanksgiving program. That was usually a community thing. In the evenings they would bring in covered dish. We'd

always have our supper and then have the program. We also had a program at Easter. Our biggest program came with the last day of school. We had a covered dish dinner and everybody played ball afterward.

For graduation, the students had to take a county examination and pass. If they didn't pass, they had to take the eighth grade over. It wasn't a decision of the teacher. Students really worked and the parents drilled their students for the exam. A lot of times we'd stay after school and work on examination questions. Graduation exercises were held in the Lyons City Hall and Mr. Baldwin, the county superintendent, presented the diplomas.

There was no principal. Each teacher was principal of her own school. As the principal, I had reports to fill out and send to Topeka once a month. Mr. Lewis Baldwin, the county superintendent, evaluated the teachers. He would come once a month and take my plan book and grade book. They needed to be complete and accurate. He would fill out an evaluation sheet, but I never knew what he wrote about me. He would also go around and check the children. They would have to show him papers they had done. After this, he

would tell a story. The children always looked forward to seeing Mr. Baldwin.

The school board hired and fired the teachers. But to fire a teacher, they had to have the approval of the county superintendent. If it got that hot, the teacher would just quit and go somewhere else. Once hired, a teacher usually stayed in the school system. Each time I was in a school, for a two year period, and they consolidated. Teachers stayed until they met a handsome man and married. A person couldn't teach if she were married. In the second school district I taught in, the teacher could be married, but if she became pregnant, she had to quit teaching.

Teachers had certain moral responsibilities. I always went to church - that was the thing to do. One of the questions they asked, was if I attended church, and if I were a Christian. I said yes. Teachers couldn't date during the week. If one did, she was called "on the carpet," which I was. At the board meeting called to discuss the situation, they had three board members and the county superintendent. The county superintendent was appointed to come and make sure I wasn't sleepy and I was doing my job. He visited me five days in a row. He reported to the board members that I was

doing an excellent job. I didn't let down because I loved my teaching.

I boarded with one of the families. I had to pay board and room of \$10.00 a month. I had an agreement with them. If they wanted to go somewhere for the weekend, I would milk the cow, feed the chickens, and slop the hogs, - and I did.

I don't think it cost much for a student to go to school compared to what it does today. The same textbooks were used year after year. The family could use the same book and pass it down from student to student. The textbooks didn't change like they do now.

There was no dress code. The girls wore dresses with long cotton socks and the boys wore overalls. A lot of the students wore the same dress or the same overalls all week, but when they got home from school, they took their clothes off and hung them up and put on their work clothes.

I had to buy my own textbooks, my own grade book, and plan book. I had to buy all of my paper for art work and decorations. The school furnished the chalk, the coal, the white gas, and things like that. If I wanted Christmas treats I had to furnish them. At Christmas time I would give the kids apples and fix them a treat of some kind,

usually popcorn balls. I brought treats on Halloween. It was just a tradition to do that.

I was making about \$1,800.00 a month when I quit teaching, compared to the \$125.00 that I was making when I first started teaching. It's a better life now than it was then. I wouldn't want to go back to those times.

I bargained for my salary the second year, I just hem-hawed around with the board. They tried to hire me back for \$175.00 but I held out for \$225.00. I went from \$125.00 to \$225.00 a month. That's the way it was done. If I was a good teacher they would pay me the wages. Teaching experience, discipline, and morals also determined the pay. The school board would ask the county superintendent for recommendations. The pay checks were given to me every four weeks by the clerk at the board meetings .

A typical school day began at nine o'clock. We had the flag salute and the Lord's Prayer and then sang songs. The opening exercises took about 15 minutes. The morning continued with math, reading, and English. At noon, we ate our lunch and then played softball or other games such as red rover. In the winter, we played "hide the thimble" and "spin the milk bottle." Those were a lot of fun. We dismissed for lunch at twelve o'clock and

returned at one o'clock. I read a story to them and then we did spelling, reading, citizenship and Kansas history. We didn't have social studies. In citizenship we learned about U.S. Government. That was in eighth grade. In seventh and eighth grade the students had American history. School was dismissed at four o'clock. I didn't have to worry about students not having their lessons done or telling them to get busy. They just automatically did it. They knew when it was time to recite that it would be embarrassing if they weren't prepared. I think the younger students were afraid that the older students might laugh at them.

The highlights of teaching in a one-room school were: I had no discipline problems and everybody was working; they wanted to get an education; they hated to miss school. However, sometimes they had to miss because the parents needed help on the farm. One boy's dad had a thrashing machine and he helped thrash. But they were so willing to come early in the morning or stay after school later and get what they had missed.

The parents were very supportive. I'd send the homework home and students would get it done and send it back with one of the other children in the family. It was more of a family thing. It made me much closer to my students. We were in a

farming community. I always knew the parents. I was often invited in their homes for meals. Everybody would have the teacher over for Sunday dinner so I was in every student's home. I never had to worry about eating on Sunday because I always had some place to go. Parents also came by the school to see how their students were doing. It was beautiful. The closeness brings found memories. I have not forgotten any of my 26 students' names from the first year I taught. I can't say that of some of years.

I've had students come into my classroom today that I had never met the parents. Even though we had open house and called the parents, they never came.

At Excelsior, one boy grew up to become a veterinarian. Another is a lawyer in Washington. Some girls grew up to be nurses. All of them went to high school and did very well.

It wasn't long before the school consolidated. The state passed a consolidation law because the enrollment was going down. I suppose it was more efficient and provided better wages for the teacher. It was a great advantage for the students and the teachers when the schools consolidated. Of course, many people in the community hated to lose their school because that was a community center.

However, after a couple of years, the parents were convinced that it was a good move. In the consolidated schools, we had a janitor and electricity, we didn't have to build fires, we had a butane furnace, hot lunches prepared by school cooks and more equipment to work with. We had a gym for the boys and girls to play in. That gave us a place to go play when it was snowing or raining. That was another nice thing.

The school I was in, Excelsior, consolidated and they called it Saxmon. When I taught at Lincoln, it consolidated with five schools and was a "three-room" school system.

After the one-room schools closed, the consolidated districts were called unified districts. The old schools were torn down and the equipment in the schools was sold at auctions. My husband bought my desk from Excelsior where I began teaching. After the consolidation I taught at Rockwell. I had first, second, third, and fourth grades. I was also the principal. At Midland I had sixth, seventh, and eighth grades and was the principal. I was also the basketball and softball coach. We had tournaments among the other districts. Believe it or not, I was a pretty good basketball coach. I had some winners! I was the only woman coach so I had some rough times once in

a while, but I stood my ground. My kids stood behind me and the board members did too. I had a winning basketball team and was voted Coach of the Year in the Kansas Central Prairie League in 1952.

I taught in the Little River school system for five years. I taught language arts for the seventh and eighth grade and was the girls' coach for softball, volleyball, basketball and track. From Little River, I went to Great Bend and taught at Morrison School two years. Then I came to Lyons in 1971, and I taught until 1991. I still love teaching!

Those days are fun to look back on but I wonder how I got everything in. I see those students in professions and think, "I was their teacher." I'm glad that we have advanced in education. Some of that things I was teaching to my sixth graders in 1991 are the things my eighth graders were learning in my first years of teaching. We are living in a computer world. We didn't have computers or science. We had some health, but nothing like we have now. Although it is costing the parents more, they are getting a better education. Compare even the farming. They were farming with horses, some of the people had tractors, very few, but look and what we have today.

With the education that we have today, I cannot believe that a student could go through school and not be able to read. We have so many special services as well as summer school. I don't know of any students in the Lyons area, but maybe in the ghetto districts there are students who can't read. If they can't read, I just don't think they want to learn. When they become an adult they want to learn because they know that they need to be able to read to get a job. Then who do they blame when they can't? They blame the school system for the fact that they can't read. They ought to be pointing their finger at themselves. I think we have a wonderful school system. I'm enjoying my retirement but I'd still like to get back in that classroom. I'm sure our education is going to get better and better.