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Interview with Wilda Obrey

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CHAPTER TWO
THE GOOD OLD DAYS
IN A ONE-ROOM SCHOOLHOUSE

Mrs. Wilda Aubrey was a student in a one-room schoolhouse in Graham County, Kansas from 1936-1944. She then taught in a one-room schoolhouse in Ellis County, Kansas, 1948-1949. The schoolhouse in Graham County was named the Crocker School District #64 after Carl Crocker, who donated the land for the school in 1916. The schoolhouse in Ellis County was named the Cottonwood Grove School District #31. Clarence Lynd donated the land for the school.

After high school graduation, many young adults obtained an emergency teaching certificate after completing twelve college hours. Mrs. Aubrey was one of those individuals. After high school she attended Fort Hays State University during the summer session. The classes she recalled taking were "Methods of Teaching," "Methods of Teaching Music," and "English Composition." Her teaching certificate was good for one year after which time she could either renew it or let it lapse. Most young adults taught for either one or two years before getting married. Some of these short-term teachers even chose to go on and attend college. Mrs. Aubrey chose the latter, and began her college career in 1949 at Bethany Peniel College.

The country schools had school boards just as schools do now. There were three members for each board, elected to

their positions by the members of the school district. Each school board member held an office, such as president, clerk, or treasurer. Mrs. Aubrey could remember three of the board members from the Crocker School in which she was a student: Virgil Eaton, Ray Noah, and Boyd Sonders. All three are now deceased. Mrs. Aubrey was related to the first two board members. The first one was her father and the second one was her uncle.

After securing a teaching position, a place to live had to be located. In the Cottonwood Grove School in Ellis County, Mrs. Aubrey lived with the Harlin Fishers family. Mrs. Aubrey paid thirty-three dollars per month to the Fishers for room and board. She was asked if she would teach piano lessons to their eight-year-old daughter, Shirley. She was also expected to help with preparing the meals. The Fishers only lived a mile-and-a-half from the schoolhouse. Mrs. Aubrey added now she would walk, but the Fishers had a daughter that was a student so they took the two of them back and forth everyday.

Mrs. Aubrey remembered that when she was a small child several of the teachers from the Crocker School lived with her family. One teacher she mentioned specifically was Elbert Myer, her fifth grade instructor. Mr. Myer only lived in Hill City, but he had no car so he stayed with them. In bad weather, the teachers would spend a night or two with Mrs. Aubrey's parents, the Eatons. Their home was located one-half mile east of the school.

School would be dismissed sometimes because of bad weather. When a flood or a blizzard came, school was dismissed by phone until the roads were passable again.

Mrs. Aubrey stated that the one-room schools that she was associated with were very nice. The Crocker school had a coal furnace, but there were no lights provided in the school facility. When first entering the school, there was a small cloak room to the left and right. In another small room to the west of the left cloak room was a small basin to wash hands, a place to put lunch pails, and a five gallon galvanized container with a lid used for drinking water. Each child had his/her own cup that was brought from home. Mrs. Aubrey's brother, Joe Eaton, would carry the water from home to the school each day. He earned twenty dollars a year for this service, and bought a bicycle with the money he earned. Outside the cloak room there was a large classroom with windows on the north and west walls. All the desks were on runners with an attached bench for them to sit on. The teacher's desk and a recitation bench were at the front of the room. A large blackboard, where all the lessons were taught, was on the east wall. Also, on that wall was a mirror with a little comb in a tin holder that they all used after recess each afternoon. The schoolroom also had a sand table where many hours of indoor constructive play were experienced. The room had several folding doors that would allow a teacher to separate part of the class from the others in order to teach other age groups. A full basement under

the schoolroom was used for recess time in bad weather. Outside the school there was a front porch with one pillar on the southwest corner, where they would pound and clean the erasers every Friday. There was a horse barn to the west side for any of the children who rode horses to school. There was also a large area to play in, and, of course, two outhouses for both male and female convenience. I asked Mrs. Aubrey if there were any structure changes made during the time she was a student there. The only change that was made was a new cover constructed over the outside stairway. This was built so the children would not get wet going to the basement.

The Crocker School was constructed of wood, and was located at the southeast corner of the Crockers' quarter of land. The quarter of land next to the Crockers was owned by the Eatons, and the Mount Pleasant Methodist Church was located on the southwest corner. The church and the school stood side by side; the land was donated by different farmers.

The last year that the Crocker School was open was in 1944 when Mrs. Aubrey was in the eighth grade. She was the youngest of all the children in the area. After her graduation from eighth grade, she went to Palco to finish High School. The Crocker School was closed one or two times during Mrs. Aubrey's childhood. She would then attend the closest school until the Crocker School would re-open. Most of the students in this rural school area lived within a

four-and-one-half to five mile radius of the school. The students that lived the farthest away came by car or horse to the school. Mrs. Aubrey and her siblings walked to school; except when the Crocker School shut down, then she rode a shetland pony to a school that was two miles away.

The Cottonwood Grove School, where Mrs. Aubrey taught, was located in Ellis County about fifteen-to-eighteen miles south of Palco. It was one of the last country schools left in Ellis County, and only stayed open two or three years after Mrs. Aubrey taught there. The reason it stayed open as long as it did was because two families named Fisher had so many children. One family alone had ten children. Schoolhouses in those days were located in the middle of a large nucleus of children. There were no buses available, and the roads were bad. The country schools were located about every two-to-five miles.

By 1948, most country schools had closed, and the Cottonwood Grove School was one of the few still in use. The school was made of brick. It was a very modern and impressive country school. It was heated by a gas furnace which was easy to operate. Electric lights were not available at this time. Upon entering the school there was a foyer that opened into the classroom. The desks were on runners with a bench that was attached. There was a washroom at the back of the room to be used for coats and lunch pails. This school, however, had a pump inside which made it very handy for getting drinks and cleaning up. In the back of the room was

a large table and a bookshelf with three or four rows of books and a few puzzles. The school had a half basement under the main classroom floor which was used for recess in bad weather. There were two outhouses located outside the schoolhouse. The playground was large and had a merry-go-round bought with tax dollars.

As stated earlier, Mrs. Aubrey taught on an emergency teaching certificate. The war had ended in 1945, and after her graduation in 1948, they desperately needed teachers. Mrs. Aubrey's first teaching contract was eighteen hundred dollars. I mentioned earlier that she had to pay her room and board, but she gave most of her money to her father to invest in cattle. After her emergency teaching certificate expired in 1949, Mrs. Aubrey attended Bethany Peniel College in Oklahoma. Her parents paid for her education, but the money invested in cattle paid her other expenses. She did not have a job while in college, except for helping her parents on their farm during summer vacations. Mrs. Aubrey's other activities while living with the Fishers were taking piano lessons, weaving rugs, and crocheting. The Fishers played cards, but Mrs. Aubrey said she never took part. Sometimes they would go to visit other people, and she would go with them as part of the family. She would stay with the Fishers four nights a week and spend weekends with her parents. They drove thirteen miles one way to get her. During the Christmas season, her brother Joe would come and get her each Thursday evening, and they would travel into

Hays to practice with the community choir. That was the first time she had ever sung in Handel's "The Messiah." On Friday night, another leisure activity was going to the ballgames in Palco. One of the few movies she ever attended was with the Fishers. The movie was mentioned in a hushed tone; it was "Gone with the Wind."

The Cottonwood Grove School board was made up of three members. They governed the country school. One of their responsibilities was to hire teachers. Once employed, the County Superintendent was directly in charge of the teachers. Each month, a member of the school board would deliver her pay check. Needed supplies were purchased in town with reimbursements made from the receipts saved. Teachers staying more than one year were reviewed by the school board at the end of the school term. Since Mrs. Aubrey stayed only one year, she was not reviewed. School records were not kept on the students from year-to-year. Grade cards, however, were given out monthly. The grade cards were professionally printed and were folded and placed in an envelope for protection. The school board took care of major maintenance of the building, often. Mrs. Aubrey's job description included the janitorial duties. Each Friday she swept the schoolroom, and daily she cleaned the wash basin.

Mrs. Aubrey reflected on her early years as a student in the Crocker School when her mother would go before the beginning of the school year and clean the school to make some extra money. Each year in the spring, the County

Superintendent would come out to review the teacher. The students worked hard to be sure everything was in top shape for his arrival. In 1948, Superintendent Roth arrived to visit at least two schools a day. He would sit in the back of the room and observe the daily routine.

Teachers were expected to be of good reputation and character. Mrs. Aubrey added that she loved each one of her teachers. They were held in high esteem. The male teachers taught differently than the females, but they were all idolized in the eyes of the students.

School days began at 9:00 a.m. and ended at 4:00 p.m. The country school term was eight months, in contrast to nine months for town schools. The short year was because the children were needed to help with planting, and harvesting, and other farm work. There were no laws governing school attendance. Every child was encouraged to attend, and all were treated equally. The school district was financed through taxes, and Mrs. Aubrey mentioned that money must have been adequate for the schools she was associated with were very nice. The children's ages were six through fourteen, and grades were one through eight. I asked Mrs. Aubrey how many grades were taught at one time. The year she taught at the Cottonwood Grove School there were first, second, third, and fifth grades. The school she attended as a child and the one where she taught both averaged eight pupils.

The average daily routine in the Crocker and the Cottonwood Grove Schools were basically alike. Each day

started with the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag, then the assignments would be written for each individual grade on the chalkboard for that day. The first lesson was reading. The oldest children would be given their reading assignment so that they would be ready to answer when the time came. Meanwhile the teacher worked with the first graders. When the oldest children were finished, they helped the first graders with their assignment. Next in line were second and third graders. Each group would come to a recitation bench at the front of the room when they were called. Reading lessons consisted of silent and oral reading and discussion of the story. Teachers' manuals furnished additional help for individual lessons. When the students were finished with their lessons, they would go to the bookcase for other selections to read silently. Every Thursday, each child was encouraged to bring a current events news article from their home newspaper to read to the class. Mrs. Aubrey remembered her mother helping her get an article from the paper to take to school each Thursday. At 10:30 there was a fifteen minute recess and restroom break time outside.

The next lesson of the morning was math. Mrs. Aubrey stated that there was great pride in the children knowing their facts. They spent hours memorizing them. Endless amounts of time was spent at the board in ciphering matches. There were not many manipulatives. Most of their work was done either on Big Chief Tablets or on the chalkboard.

At 12:00 noon, the students broke for lunch and recess

for one hour. The teacher never had a break from the students. She was with them all day. She ate with them, and played with them.

There were many games that were played at recess time. First, was "Throw the Wicket." It was a game where one student would throw a stick and then go and find it. While he was looking for the stick, the other children would run and hide. When the stick was found, that person would go and look for the other children. I thought it sounded like an old fashioned form of "Hide and Go Seek." Another game they would play was called "Bear." The children would run from one side of the playground to the other. If the Bear caught them, they had to go to a base area away from the other children. The object of the game was to see if any of the free children could touch the hand of a person in the base area without getting caught by the Bear. There were swingsets on the playground, which were always fun, because none of the children had swingsets at home. In the winter months, the children would play inside. They loved to play restaurant, and they would cut out pictures of food from magazines or draw pictures of their own. The children would make up menus, and even make play money to buy their food with. The sand table at the Crocker School was another fun indoor activity. They spent many hours building towns and roads, and even used some kind of green paper for the grass in the sand box.

For lunch Mrs. Aubrey would take egg sandwiches, and

home-grown canned fruit in a lunch bucket. Sometimes in the winter, the students would bring a potato from home and place it by the furnace in the morning. By noon it was charred black, but you could split it open and eat the inside.

Five minutes before 1:00 p.m., a hand bell from the teacher's desk would be rung and all the children would go to the outhouses for a restroom break. After the break, they would all file back into the classroom for the afternoon.

After lunch and recess, the teacher read from a selected storybook. The stories were always books with several chapters. They would read one or two chapters from one day to the next. During storytime, some of the students would bring hand mirrors from home so they could put them on their desk and look at the child behind them. This was not meant to be disobedient, but just a way to have fun, and the teacher permitted it.

The next section of the day was used for Science and Social Studies. Mrs. Aubrey remembered doing a lot of map work in Social Studies. At 2:00 p.m. the children took another fifteen minute recess and restroom break.

At the end of the day, spelling was studied. Students took great pride in making one hundred percent on their spelling test each week. Mrs. Aubrey remembered spelling at the end of the day because the sun was setting in the west windows and the light shown a certain way through the glass. Spelling bees were another activity that the children loved. Great pride was gained by being a good speller.

Mrs. Aubrey stated that there were no curriculum changes during her years as a student or teacher in the country school.

Mrs. Aubrey and I discussed whether or not there were any students that had special needs during her years as a student or teacher. The Crocker School had only one with learning disabilities. She added that everyone just pitched in to help her. No one thought she was different. She was just one of the group, and everyone wanted to help her willingly.

Homework was not given regularly. They never really had any to speak of. At home they loved to play school, so they would practice their spelling words or drill on their math facts as a form of pretend play.

The school supplies came from the drug store in Palco. There the students could find a required supply list for the district. They had all the usual supplies-crayons, Big Chief Tablets, rulers, pencils, glue, and scissors. For art activities, they would hold a piece of white paper up to the window for tracing; that was a special treat after their work was finished. Mrs. Aubrey's teacher had one special book made up of children from different countries. Some pages had faces to choose from, and others would have the rest of the body and the children could put his/her own person together. At the Cottonwood Grove School in Ellis County, they had a very old mimeograph machine. A jelly-like substance had to be put on a cookie sheet and the master copy dipped in it.

This process was repeated over and over until all copies had been made.

Mrs. Aubrey and I talked about any special discipline problems or special rewards that she remembered as a student or a teacher. She only remembered one discipline problem. The student's name was Donna Jean Berry, and she received a spanking. Mrs. Aubrey did not remember why. Other than that incident no one ever stayed in or wrote sentences. Everyone had great respect for their teachers. The children did not dare get in trouble because trouble at school meant trouble at home. The teacher was also with the students constantly which possibly cut down on discipline problems. There was never a time to take unfair advantage. She also remembered that one time a child put a tack in the teacher's chair. The teacher saw it and laughed. It was in no way meant to harm her. As for rewards, there were plenty of hugs, and building of self esteem.

Mrs. Aubrey remembered several special events that took place during her years as a student at the Crocker School. There were many spell downs and ciphering matches held with other schools in the area. Once a year, they would have a Field Day with the Brownsville School, about five miles distance away. It was great fun and taken seriously. Once a year, every child in the school would spend the night with one other child. It was so much fun to bring clothes to school for the next day and go home with a friend. It was a special treat, because children did not often spend the night

like they do now. There was usually one box supper every year to raise money for school materials. Each mother would make a good supper, and the girls would decorate a box for it. The suppers would be auctioned off to the highest bidder. The boys would really bid up the suppers made by the best cooks. Mrs. Aubrey added that her Mom was an excellent cook. When her supper sold, she was too embarrassed to eat with the boy that had bought it. There were no other community or social activities that took place at the Crocker School other than the box supper.

The highlight of the year was the Christmas program. Each year they would bring in a stage especially for the performance. Blankets and sheets brought from home were made into curtains that hung across the stage. There was a Christmas tree and a pretend fireplace for props. The children practiced hard on their parts. It was important that they do their best. All the costumes were brought from home along with the other props needed. The children drew each others names for a gift exchange. Each child received a sack of candy for their own enjoyment. Every Christmas the school was packed with parents with standing room only. In 1942 when Mrs. Aubrey was in the sixth grade, she wore a white chenille robe and sang "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas." At the Cottonwood Grove School the only extra curricular activity was the annual Christmas Play.

The Field Trip for the year was taken in the back of a wheat truck to Castle Rock, a distance of fifty-three miles.

It was an exciting time for every boy and girl.

Mrs. Aubrey and I visited about any standardized testing done while she was a student. Every year, each child was given a reading exam to see if they were ready to go to the next grade level in reading. The other test that was given was the aptitude test given before eighth grade graduation. The students studied hard to pass the exam. It was a serious step for everyone. The tests were sent to the Crocker School by the County Superintendent. When complete, they were returned to the Superintendent for scoring. Everyone was pushed very hard to pass the test, and Mrs. Aubrey did not know anyone that failed. She thought perhaps a few had not passed previously, because of the importance placed on the exam. The graduation took place at Hill City with all the other rural students from Graham County. Mrs. Aubrey could not remember anyone missing the special event. There were probably a hundred students in the ceremony. Mrs. Aubrey's mother made her dress. It was made of white jersey, had a square neck, and was quilted at the top. She stated it was very beautiful.

While Mrs. Aubrey was teaching at the Cottonwood Grove School there were no eighth graders, so no aptitude test was given.

Many of the students that graduated from the Crocker School stayed in the rural areas of Graham County to farm or be local county school teachers. Mrs. Aubrey was one of those who went on to college. All of the students from her

school went on to live very respectable lifestyles. They were all good citizens, emotionally stable and very productive in the occupations they chose.

The students at the Cottonwood Grove School were also of various occupations. Some stayed and farmed around the rural area. One student became a banker, another student went into the Armed Forces, and still another went to work for a large insurance company in the east.

Mrs. Aubrey and I talked about the religious preference of those in the community. All were protestant both in the Crocker and Cottonwood Grove School, but the greater part of them were Methodist. In the Crocker School she was the only Nazarene. In the Cottonwood Grove School there were several Nazarenes.

Both schools are still standing, but neither one is used for any said purpose at this time. The Crocker School was vandalized so all of the contents have been moved to another location. The Cottonwood Grove School has been willed to Mrs. Clarence Lynd, and is being renovated for a summer home.

Sadly, this era of education came to an end. The number of rural school age children decreased, and with consolidation, the rural schools were forced to close.

The schoolhouses were sold or kept for use as a community building. The Crocker School closed down in 1942, when Mrs. Aubrey was in the sixth grade, but it reopened in 1950. It closed officially in the spring of 1958.

Mrs. Aubrey was very eager and excited to share her

experiences as a student and teacher in the rural schools. On a personal note, it was a great delight for me to preserve this oral history, but I am not only preserving it for the history of one-room schoolhouse teachers. I am preserving it for family history. Mrs. Aubrey has been my mother-in-law for the last decade.