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Interview with Helen Tilton

Shirley Williams
Fort Hays State University

Helen Tilton

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Recommended Citation

Williams, Shirley and Tilton, Helen, "Interview with Helen Tilton" (1984). *College of Education One-Room Schoolhouse Oral Histories*. 26.
<https://scholars.fhsu.edu/ors/26>

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An Oral History:
Helen Tilton - Interview

In partial fulfillment
of
the requirements
for
History of American Education
Dr. Miller

Shirley Williams
July, 1984

I am Shirley Williams, Chapter I teacher of USD 293. I would like to take you back in history to the one-room school for an oral history. At the recitation bench is Helen Tilton of Quinter, KS who attended a one-room school as a student and started her teacher career in 1934 at the Whittman School in Graham County. Helen advanced through the changes of education and became the County Superintendent, was a regular classroom teacher, an EMH teacher and retired in 1980 as a Title I teacher.

Shirley: Helen, How would you like to begin this story?

Helen: I'd like to go back even further to when my parents came to Sheridan County which is right North of here and to the schools that they went to. They were both six when they came and they were both quite well educated. I'm sure that the original schools ran for about three months during the winter, the cold winter months and that's all the school they had. The children had to work to help make it and this was the three months a year when they got their education. The school house that my father attended was still being used in 1940 and that's quite a stretch for one school district. Another thing that I found real interesting was the way they formed the districts. Wherever there was a group of kids they had a school because for everyone that seemed to be their first interest was to have a school. The district I grew up in as a child didn't have many kids so we had lots of territory--lots of land. The school right next to us where my father had attended had so many children that it was a very small district and when school teaching became a matter of a tax-based pay that district could never hardly hire a teacher cause they didn't hardly have a tax-base large enough to afford a teacher. While the school that we attended as children had such a large tax-base that they could pay a fabulous sum, at that time, for a teacher. However, that did not always guarantee good teacher for you began to teach right out of high school and of course in my mother's case, right out of grade school. Then you went to normal training school for a little while at the county seat and occasionally in summers she attended Fort Hays Normal. So the education behind a teacher has advanced as much as the other processes that we think of. My first recollections of county schools were that we lived so far away that it was hard to get children to school.

Shirley: When did you attend a one-room school as a student?

Helen: I started to school in 1920 I guess, and since it had been so far--now this will sound funny to first graders now--but since it was quite a way to school I didn't go until I was fully six going to be seven a few days

after I started school, however, I could read any magazine by that time because my mother had taught me to read. Counting the eggs was something difficult but reading was no problem. The boy that was in my class was just about my age and he didn't even know an A from a B or C so I was advanced. Well there wasn't anybody in the second grade either and there were a couple of kids in the third grade so I started school in the third grade and made up for part of that year that I lost by not starting on time. Our first teacher--she must have been quite a teacher the way I remember her, because we did everything almost but have school. So country schools don't really ring a great bell with me because my parents decided enough was enough after two years and we came to town to school.

Shirley: What time did the school start and end and how did you find out if school was not going to be in session, say due to bad weather?

Helen: School was in session!

Shirley: Always. Did you have to walk to school?

Helen: Well we were two and a half miles from school and we had a horse to ride, we had a buggy to drive but that meant you had to carry extra food for the horse and it took that much longer because you had to take care of the horse and get the horse ready to come back home, but it was fun to go. You could imagine just anything, crossing deep rivers or high mountains but you always got to school.

Shirley: What did you do for lunch? What did you do at recess and noon playtime? Do you remember some of the games that you played after lunch time?

Helen: Oh, I think we played the same old games, Hide and Seek, and Blackman are the favorites. Of course we carried our lunch pail or a paper sack, whatever was handy. That's also what we had for lunch, whatever was handy for mom to fix.

Shirley: You mentioned your teachers a while ago. What punishments were you given and what rewards and grades were given at that particular time?

Helen: I don't remember ever being punished in school for anything!

Shirley: You were a good girl.

Helen: So I must have been a good girl but the awards--I've been going through things--and you find strange little

cards that said you got 100 in spelling. Maybe the kids would be inspired by them now but I doubt it.

Shirley: Describe the building a little more in detail. I think you mentioned it awhile ago but the heating, lighting, water supply, toilets and playground equipment etc.

Helen: The school houses that were first built in Gove and Sheridan Counties were the school houses that mostly stayed for as long as there was a district so the school house that I went to school in was a rectangular building with a sloping--with a two way sloping roof, windows on both sides which aren't a good deal anymore but we always had curtains and there was usually a little ante-room to keep the cold out of the room. There was a stove right in the middle of the room that heated the whole room and of course all the lighting we had was coal oil lanterns. The desks were all double desks. I don't remember ever seeing a single desk when I was in school and then the recitation bench was up in front. We did have a good, slate board though, they weren't painted black boards, they were slate boards. And they were good boards. I expect lots of us learned just as much in the country school as we ever did in town school but there was no choice of friends and no choice of reaching out a little farther. No real good library and we were readers. This was another thing that created problems as far as my parents were concerned.

Shirley: Was this building used for community special events other than just the education of children? Do you remember going there for special programs or...

Helen: Oh, you went there for school programs and occasionally a school house would be designated as the literary school house but it wasn't held in every school house. It was held in the area which wasn't ours but the last day of school dinners were pretty big.

Shirley: Is there anything else you want to tell about being a student before we shift into thinking about being a teacher in a one-room school?

Helen: No, I don't think so because, see I was only 7 and 8 the years I was 7 and the years I was 8 and they weren't exactly happy experiences. I'd just as soon not tell anymore about that.

Shirley: Okay, then let's shift our thinking to you as a teacher in a one-room school. When do you begin your teaching again, in a one-room school?

Helen: (Clock strikes) For those of you who remember the thirties everyone wanted a job and there weren't many jobs, but I was one of the lucky ones. Why I don't

really know. I taught about five miles straight east of my folks home and a good bit of the time I drove over there. The school house was in the middle of a blown out wheat field and the playground was blown. It was covered with tin--had a tin roof on the inside and I had probably fourteen children from the eighth--from the seventh to the first. For play we all--same old games somebody would come up with a new one sometimes but Blackman and Hide and Seek although there was no place to hide over there except road ditches and such as that. So Hide and Seek and, of course, I should have mentioned baseball because that's been a standard game for as long as I can remember. If you had a bat and ball or a broken off board that was about the right length you were playing baseball. These children were German descent, some of their parents didn't speak very good English and we had a ball. I still go to coffee with one of my students.

Shirley: Oh, really! What were your duties as a teacher besides just teaching? And what were you paid for the service maybe the first year that you started teaching?

Helen: Now don't laugh! Of course I had to get there early because I had to start the fire. I either had to get there early and sweep or stay late and sweep. I had two choices there. What I got paid? I got the enormous sum--I was one of the highest paid teachers in that area. I got forty five dollars a month.

Shirley: Oh my goodness! (laughs) Did you have any other duties besides janitorial and teaching then?

Helen: No, I didn't. I didn't have to do anything else. I will tell you of one unusual experience and I did say we had school whether or not but there was a couple occasions that year we didn't have school, because that was the year of the dirt storms and I went over to school one morning and this tin ceiling had so magnetized the dirt that it hung like stalagmites from all over the ceiling.

Shirley: Oh my goodness, I never heard of such a thing!

Helen: We had to clean the school house.

Shirley: I can imagine you would have too. Will you explain the type of training that was required for you to teach?

Helen: I went to Fort Hays for one year and got my Three Year State, (certificate) however, I wasn't eighteen and the law had gotten rather strict in the thirties, that was one way of eliminating a few more job seekers so I again was one of the fortunate ones and got to

finish my Sixty Hour Life the next year at Fort Hays but that doesn't really prepare you for teaching, the children prepare you for teaching.

Shirley: That's correct. Explain and describe a typical day, the curriculum used, and how the materials were supplied to the school.

Helen: The year I started teaching was the year of major change in the Social Studies Program and we didn't have a--a geography book, a history book, a Kansas geography and all the things that I had had in school and it was all supposed to be incorporated into a Social Studies Program. It was too new to be highly successful the first year and people that are really too hard up to buy new books weren't impressed, with the fact that we weren't going to use all the same books that we used the year before so in general we pretty much stuck to the same old program of Reading, Writing, Math, Geography.

Shirley: Oh really, no science?

Helen: We had Health and Physiology those were the Science classes but as far as science as we know it now, we had none.

Shirley: What about music and art? And of course no PE I'm sure.

Helen: No, no PE as such, however, everyone participated in all the games. The Music--I don't believe we had a piano over there. But we sang what we could. Of course, we all tried to draw, the teacher along with the kids, and I do mean tried! And of course some are more successful than others, however, the group at home, was rather musical so they really didn't miss it as much as another group might have.

Shirley: I see. Who was your boss? For example, who hired you and how often did you meet them and did they have certain guidelines you had to follow?

Helen: No. (laughed) My boss of course was the board. I don't know that I ever did see the board except to sign my contract because my paycheck always came to school with one of the kids. So I never saw too much of my bosses.

Shirley: What did you decide to teach? Like did the State tell you you had to teach certain things?

- Helen: Yes, yes. The State had a regimented program. They also had a regimented daily program really that you spent so much time --so many minutes on this and so many minutes on that and if you got all seven grades in you were doing real well.
- Shirley: You mentioned earlier when I visited with you that you would like to tell of some of the organizational changes you experienced in your teaching career and would you expand on these now going from the one-room school on up to when you retired? Briefly.
- Helen: I didn't teach for twenty years and when I went back in twenty years it was much easier because well, in the first place because probably I had so much more material available but in the meantime while our children were in school had come the big reorganization. Even though we lived in a country district and sent our children to a country school district for one year that was the year of the reorganizational fight and we then became a part of the Quinter District. The bad thing about school fights is that sometimes neighbors don't speak to neighbors because there was those that wanted to keep the one-room school house (noon whistle blows) just as strong for it as those that wanted to increase the potential for their childrens education.
- Shirley: When did you become County Superintendent then?
- Helen: Oh I got, well I'll go on, I taught out in the Harmony District for three years--a country school--before I got involved in the County Superintendency. And of course you won't beleive this either, probably, because this was in the late fifties and I had twenty-four children time and again. We had one home that kept kired help and one year it changed about every month and everyone of them had four children. So we had quite an involvment. Many of these children had not been in school regularly. So this was different. And then we got involved in the office--The County Superintendency Office. The Superintendent was retiring and he asked me if I wouldn't like to do this and I thought well, it might be fun. And it was fun! That's when I learned budgeting and organization and all those good things that are really the business of school rather than the teaching but it's all been a fun time. I also was involved as County Superintendent in the second reorganizational period which eliminated all the rural schools, and again, there were very hard feelings and neighbor against neighbor and it was real, a real hard time. It was harder for me then in the office then it even was as a fellow neighbor.

Shirley: How many years were you a County Superintendent?

Helen: Six, I think, and I was in until the County Superintendency was being phased out and the last two years of being--of the County Superintendency I no longer was there and started teaching again. Really, it was the writing on the wall.

Shirley: Now, what did you teach after you left the Superintendency?

Helen: I went to Grainfield and we tried a Cooperative for the County in EMR. It was quite an experience for all of us and really wonderful things happened. I think it was the beginning of our systems EMR programs because these children finally became interested in what they could do and even though we are having trouble with this tape recorder today those kids wouldn't have had. They could have mastered that with no problem at all. If it was a machine that was going to work for them they could master it. And through mastering a lot of machines they became pretty adept at living. And then the count-- and then again districts couldn't agree on the payment and the cost of things so once more it lasted for only one year and I became a classroom teacher.

Shirley: And you stayed in the regular classroom as teacher then for several years.

Helen: Oh yes, unhuh.

Shirley: Even kindergarten. I remember you as a kindergarten teacher. Waht other grades did you have?

Helen: I had the fourth grade before I came back to Quinter and taught kindergarten. And I loved kindergarten just...

Shirley: They're kind of everybody's special.

Helen: Unhuh

Shirley: Then after kindergarten you went to Title I. Right?

Helen: To Title I, unhuh.

Shirley: Would you like to....

Helen: Kindergarten was only a half day program and the Title I teacher got sick and couldn't fulfill her contract that fall. The Superintendent ask me if I wouldn't take that the other half of the day. Well coming home at noon is kind of boring so I said, "sure I'd just as soon stay all day" And so we got into the Title I Program and that involves lots of testing which I became quite involved in and really enjoyed the testing. And the fact that people say that tests don't tell you

anything--but they sure showed gain when you read them correctly and read them every year. The other parts of Title I, well, Shirley can tell you just as much about it as I can--it's a slow, slow process and I was about ready to retire. So I didn't get maybe as involved as I should have and I didn't want any part of (What does Janice do--what do you call that?) disabilities, because I felt a disability program should be carried on by the same parson for quite sometime and I just wasn't interested in that phase of it. But through Janice(Roberts) I certainly learned right quick how to recognize disabilities in kindergarten.

Shirley: I think this about concludes our visit here. Have you received any honors--teaching honors?

Helen: No, not particularly, the kids around are honors enough.

Shirley: Right, you did recieve a 25 year...

Helen: Yes, unhuh, A 25 year award.

Shirley: From Kansas Department of Education. I think I was there that evening when you received it. Well it is through devoted teachers like Helen Tilton that the education of our youth had made strides forward. Thank you Helen for a very interesting account.

Helen: Okay. Thank you for asking me.