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Interview with Irene Relf

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Irene Relf

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CHAPTER II
NARRATIVE OF A ONE-ROOM SCHOOL TEACHER

Fairview school was east of the town of Hugoton, Kansas. It was the county seat of Stevens county. Hugoton was an average sized western Kansas town in the year 1955.

Irene Relf taught in the one-room Fairview school in the year 1955. She had a valid state certificate. Having been certified in Missouri, she was issued one in Kansas.

She interviewed for the position with three board members, one of whom acted as clerk for the proceedings. Irene recalled that she had more dealings with the clerk than any other member of the interview panel. She didn't remember any others applying for the position, rationalizing that there were not too many people interested in teaching in the rural school. She determined that one did not have to have too many other qualities, other than the fact that the board liked your answers to their questions, to be hired.

The amount she signed for was considered good money at the time, especially for a rural school. Irene felt that it compared quite favorably with town schools. She concluded that the fact that it was a big

gas area might have had something to do with the generous salary for a rural school. Farming was also a contributor to the area economy. Gas and farming were the two main strengths in the economy.

She felt respected but not held in awe by the community as she took her position at Fairview. Irene felt that the students and community looked up to the teachers, much unlike today, in her opinion.

For the most part, parents supported her and backed her decisions in the classroom, she did note that there was one problem with student's parents. But, most of the parents were very interested and were very cooperative. Most were adequate wage earners and had money to properly clothe their children, and they did not neglect them in other ways.

The school year started during the last part of August, or at least Irene thought so, reasoning that it must have started then, because school was out in May. It was a nine month school year. And the students attended from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. They had an hour for lunch from 12:00 to 1:00 p.m. daily.

There were no planned activities before school, other than to play on the outside equipment, or in the basement of the school if the weather was bad. Irene supervised the students because she was the only one in

the building at that time of day. The cook, who worked at the school preparing the lunch, arrived about the same time or a little later. Irene had to do some janitorial work in the Missouri schools she had taught in, but did not have to do it at Fairview.

To start the day, Irene started with the subject of reading. She felt that it was most important to do it while it was fresh. Usually the older ones had things to be working on while she started with the little ones. This year, she had no eighth graders in the one-room school, but had students in each of the other grades from first to seventh.

The older students used this time to finish homework or to work on other assignments.

There was a good library in the room, because the district was wealthy enough to buy books for it. The students had outside reading books and reference books right in the schoolhouse. Irene considered that an advantage.

Irene recalled that she did not stress writing as much as she should have. But remembers that children did that on their own and she never discouraged it. She reflected that today it's a big point of emphasis, and wished that she had done more.

Math, English, and spelling were required at all the grade levels. Irene also taught health, particularly in the lower grades. Social studies were also part of the daily curriculum. The older students got a lot more social studies and science.

Report card time was on a quarterly basis. And had she been teaching any eighth graders, they would have been required to take a final test before entering high school. She recalled that because they had a county superintendent, students had to pass a county test. Irene imagined that most of her students from this wealthy one-room school went on to high school.

None of her students had to leave school during the year to work or help in farming operations.

Students arrived at school by way of their parents. Most of her students lived only short distances from the school.

Irene remembered celebrating the holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas with days off from the classroom. She estimated that the vacations were a week long for Christmas, and two days for Thanksgiving.

The remainder of the school year calendar was fairly traditional, with the school board making any other decisions. Her one-room schoolhouse had a telephone, and if the wind came up after their arrival

at school when snow was on the ground, or if the dirt started blowing, the school board would call and dismiss school. The parents would then come and pick up the children. Irene recalled that she once had to initiate dismissal by calling the board clerk. She related that there was a lot of snow at that time.

There were seventeen children enrolled that year at Fairview. There were three little boys in the first grade, and three girls in the seventh grade. Irene mused that the county clerk had a daughter in the sixth grade with a boy she considered her only discipline problem. The other were bunched in between those grades, and Irene could not remember who went where.

As far as managing the class, Irene only had one "problem child", and he was only occasionally disruptive, as she recalled. The discipline problems had to be handled by Irene, in fact she was used to handling the behavior situations, as there was no one else.

When it came to physical education, recess was very important. Sometimes the students played ball and played organized games such as dare base. The older children played on the equipment such as swings, teeter-totters, and merry-go-round much like the smaller children. She doesn't remember doing any

exercises as such. And the children played outside even in the winter months, when the wind was not blowing too harshly. She provided jump ropes, and the children would bring marbles and balls. The students taught her to play many of the games they enjoyed playing.

Speaking of games, Irene remembered the students enjoying spelling matches, and arithmetic matches for a Friday afternoon treat, when everyone was tired of school.

The chalkboard was the only visual aid and a record player her only piece of special equipment. She used the record player to help in the teaching of music. There was a piano in the room, but Irene did not play the piano. She had two seventh grade girls who did play the piano however.

The school furnished things like construction paper and extra things. But the students brought their own writing paper and pencils, crayons and scissors. The text books in Irene's class were not furnished, students still had to buy their own books. There was a place in Hugoton where the students could sell their used books, and buy new ones.

Irene interjected that this little district was able to operate on it's own because the patrons had

plenty of money, and they hated giving up their own school. She felt that this was the reason that the school lasted as long as it did as a one-room school.

As for special programs, Fairview had its share. The students did a Christmas program and celebrated the last day of school with a meal and a program. She didn't recall a need for fund raisers.

For Halloween, Irene was sure that they celebrated with witches and ghosts. She remembers decorations at the classroom windows. She doesn't recall that they had a party however. The end of the year celebration she did remember that the students held it in the basement facilities.

The conversation lead to the types of meals served at the school. With seventeen children, the cook was able to cook pretty much like for a big family. The students were served hot soup in the winter time, and enjoyed meatloaf and lots of the basics. Irene does not remember paying for meals. She rationalized that the government might have picked up part of the tab. She thought it was wonderful to have meals served like a big family.

Most of her students began their schooling at the age of six. Many of them did not have the advantage of kindergarten or pre-school and had to rely upon what

they had learned at home. She recalls the three first graders as being like three separate groups. Irene remembers one little boy who was very good at school, she recalls that he had older brothers and sisters. She reasoned that he had learned a lot from them. He could cut and paste and could color. Then, she added, there was one little fellow who couldn't even tie his shoes when he started school. He was an only child and was an adopted child and had been somewhat babied in her opinion, and didn't start off his schooling experience as good as some of the other students. And then, there was the average student, she added, sort of in between. Irene felt that it may have been possible to have gone to a kindergarten in the other parts of the district, but the parents were reluctant to drive that extra eighteen miles into Hugoton.

The school had several members from one family in the schoolhouse. One family she remembered had three students in the one-room school. There were also some children who were only children in the school.

Most of the families lived within a five mile radius of the school. Maybe even closer Irene thought.

The school was warmed with gas and the cook did the janitorial duties, so Irene did not have to do those kinds of chores. She would arrive in enough time

to get her materials ready and to greet the children when they arrived. She was free to leave when the children departed in the afternoon.

Irene described the school building as a one story building with a basement. It was sort of like a tri-level, she elaborated, because one went into the ground floor, and on the ground floor there were bathrooms, and then one would go up a few steps into the classroom. The students and teacher went down to the basement where lunch was served.

The exterior of the building was stucco, and had a wood floor. There was a raised platform on one of the room, like a lot of rural schools had, the students had their Christmas program there Irene remembered.

Her desk was not on the raised platform, but near the steps as one entered the room. The students had individual desks and chairs. She used a reading table with the lower grades. The students could get off by themselves because of the size of the room. They weren't separated in any way as far as dividers were concerned, and Irene was able to group the students together for activities so they could have class right where they were in the room. The first graders had a table where they could do activities such as cutting, pasting and coloring.

The students, Irene remembered, did a lot of the clean-up of daily scraps and papers. The cook had a vacuum cleaner to sweep the wooden floor to get what the students left behind.

The basement area was a nice addition to the school, even though Irene does not recall a time where she and the students had to take cover because of weather. She does remember the times when the weather was bad and the students had to play inside, in the basement.

The one-room school teacher was pretty much left on her own once the contract year started. Irene does not recall a single visit by the county superintendent in the year she was at Fairview. The woman superintendent nor any of the other board members ever called on the schoolhouse.

As far as formal evaluations, Irene tells that there were none. The board depended mostly upon what they thought of the teacher, when they were around them, and on what the students said about the teacher.

She was fortunate enough to have a member of the board's daughter in class in the sixth grade, and another board members children as well.

Irene imagined that one would have to have been a very poor teacher for the board to remove the

instructor from the school during the year. She smiled as she recalled a young man hired in the district who before the first day of school left the country with a lot of equipment from the schoolhouse. Materials that were never recovered included a record player and a typewriter.

Irene told an interesting story regarding discipline. Looking back she tells, it seemed funny. But at the time it was not funny. There was a sixth grade boy who was quite a character. He was good, Irene remembered, at causing little problems, nothing too serious she mused. One time, however, he began chewing paper, making spit wads, and blowing or shooting them with his fingers. Irene caught the young man chewing the paper, and had him stand in front of the class and shoot paper wads. The story later returned to Irene with a different scenario, his parents she learned, had publicized that Irene had forced him to eat paper and it had caused him to get very constipated. The boy had to go to a doctor. Irene remembers that she never intended for him to swallow the paper if in fact he did swallow it. Other than that incident, she just handed out a few scoldings, and never had to spank a child for disciplinary reasons.

There were quite a few boys in the group of seventeen. Irene remembers over half being boys. Most were younger boys, but the one who created most of her discipline problems, was the oldest boy in the school. Irene has since discovered that this young man married a school teacher, a fact that causes her to wonder if he hasn't let her in on a few secrets about behavior.

Another incident that stands out in her mind with regard to her male students, had to be with one of her first graders. He had been attending a bonfire for one reason or another, out of school time, and fell into the fire with both hands. He was burned quite badly, and had to have his hands bandaged with large wraps. His mother brought him back to school on the first day that he felt able to return. His mother was concerned about his attendance even if he couldn't write or use his hands. Irene was happy to have him back in school, and decided that he could read, listen and talk, and therefore could participate in some ways. He had an older brother in school who took him to the bathroom, and at noon, the cook would come upstairs about ten minutes before she was ready to serve lunch, and take him downstairs and feed him. It embarrassed him to be fed in front of the older children.

The students by and large looked after each other. Irene does not remember any jealousy or problems between families or siblings.

The students in her class were permitted to say a memorized group prayer before their noon meal. She did not open with a daily prayer, Irene guessed that most of her students were regular church goers.

When talking about parent conferences, Irene related that the school did not hold formal scheduled parent-teacher conferences. However, she was able to informally conference with the parents when they brought their children to school in the morning, and when the parents picked the children up in the afternoon. If there was a problem, the teacher could always catch them or the parent would come to the teacher with a concern. She laughed as she remembered the little first grade adopted boy. It was related that his mother came to school to talk to the cook. It seemed that the little boy had gone home and told the parent whenever asked what he had been served at lunch four days in a row, that he had been served meatloaf. So the parent came to school to find out why they were having meatloaf every day. So Irene thought, at least they were interested in what the child had to eat. She added that they never had meatloaf four days in a row!

Most often Irene found the parents very supportive, except for the boy who had eaten the paper. She remarked that was the only time she heard any criticism of her teaching philosophy or methods of discipline.

Our discussion then centered upon current teaching philosophy and the question of advice to teachers today. She does not suggest that everyone should have the experience of teaching in a one-room schoolhouse, but she does appreciate the years of teaching she had in the one-room environment. Irene felt that it made her a better teacher. She said that she learned a lot from her students in her first few years, and summarized that it probably would be a good experience for teachers now to teach in a one-room school. Irene felt that's how to help the different age groups and levels work together, was very similar to the movement of peer tutoring in the schools today. They share a lot of similarities, just like the times she remembered the older children helping the younger ones in the one-room schoolhouse.

She also could see a benefit in taking each student from where they were academically, and to let them work at their own pace. Irene decided that it was much easier in a small environment, rather than in the

classrooms where you have twenty or more trying to work at their own pace.

When asked if she had knowledge of any of her students successes after the one-room experience, she didn't have direct knowledge except for one girl. This young lady was holding down a good job and had raised two or three children who were out in the working world. The behavior problem child married a school teacher. Other than those two students Irene did not have any knowledge of any of her students.

In summation, Irene reflected that the school was definitely not typical of the time, or that part of the state. It was not typical of many one-room schools because of the financial base, but Irene liked the idea that it allowed the district to provide supplies, that before she had to purchase from her own pocket.

She remembered that when she was the teacher and a female, that she had to march right into the boy's restroom to settle scuffles and fights. And by the time she got in the restroom, of course, she added, they were just playing.

Some of Irene's thoughts on the one-room school as we finished our conversation, were in regard to the location of the last one-room schoolhouse in Kansas. She would have liked to have known where it was and

when it was last in operation. I assured her that if anyone would know, it would be Dr. Alan Miller at Fort Hays State University, as the one-room schoolhouse in western Kansas is one of his favorite topics.