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### Interview with Thelma Mitch

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Thelma Mitch

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Chapter Two  
Oral Interview

The following interview with Mrs. Thelma Mitch was conducted in her home on March 21, 1989. During this session she told the researchers of her experiences in one-room schoolhouses in Kansas. She taught in Gray County from 1937 to 1940 and in Grant County from 1948 to 1951.

Researcher: How many years of schooling did you have prior to your first teaching position?

Mrs. Mitch: I had two years and I had sixty-seven hours from Southwestern College in Winfield, Kansas.

Researcher: What specific educational training did you have before you began teaching?

Mrs. Mitch: Almost none. You simply took a methods course and you took a history course in education. Then you did have practice teaching. Only you did it sort of verbatim. It was more of what we would call now a teacher's aid.

Researcher: What were some of the district requirements for employment?

Mrs. Mitch: The ones where I taught, none in particular.

Researcher: Did there tend to be more male or female teachers?

Mrs. Mitch: I think in our area, probably half and half.

Researcher: What was the usual age a child began school?

Mrs. Mitch: They had to be six before the first of January.

Researcher: Did this age ever vary?

Mrs. Mitch: Not that I remember.

Researcher: What grade levels did you teach?

Mrs. Mitch: The first year I taught I had four groups; first, third, fifth, and seventh, I think. But the second and third year, I taught all eight grades. The second year I taught, not only did I have all eight grades but I had two first graders who didn't even speak English. They spoke German.

Researcher: Did you speak German?

Mrs. Mitch: Not a word. There is an interesting story to go along with this.

Researcher: Tell us.

Mrs. Mitch: The very first day of school we hadn't any more sat down in the desks, the children hadn't, until these two boys who spoke only German began to cry. I went over to try and get them interested in pictures and this type of thing. The closer I would get to them, the louder they would cry. By the time I got to their desks they were hysterical. I would back away and they would just kind of sob a little.

Finally I went to the seventh grade boy who I knew spoke German and asked him if he would

take the pictures and the coloring things I had for them to color and see if he could get them interested so they would quit crying. He said, "How?" I said, "What do you mean, how?" He said, "Well, how can I explain? They don't understand anything but German." I said, "Look, if I could speak German, I wouldn't need you. I expected you to speak German." He said, "You mean you want me to speak German here in this classroom?" I said, "How else are you going to talk to them? Of course, you're going to speak German." He looked at me as if I'd lost my mind. But he went on over and got them shut up anyway.

That evening in discussing it at the home I was staying in, they told me that they had formerly gotten a licking even if they said a German word on the playground. That's the reason they were so frightened.

Researcher: What was the average number of students in the school?

Mrs. Mitch: The first year I had five, but then the next two years I had twenty each year.

Researcher: Was there much student turnover during the school year?

Mrs. Mitch: None. The students I started with were the same

ones I finished with in both schools.

Researcher: How many years were students required to attend school?

Mrs. Mitch: Until you graduated from the eighth grade, and most of them did, or sixteen. But all of those kids simply went through the eighth grade.

Researcher: Are there any special students that stand out in your mind?

Mrs. Mitch: Well, yes, one of the students particularly in that group later became a teacher, and then switched to music and is a music teacher in Sublette.

Researcher: How did the students dress?

Mrs. Mitch: The boys in overalls and the girls in dresses.

Researcher: Was there any cost to the parents for the child to attend the school?

Mrs. Mitch: You bought your own books, materials, everything. The school didn't furnish anything.

Researcher: What subjects were studied?

Mrs. Mitch: Reading, spelling, arithmetic, history, geography, some science, Kansas government, writing, and English.

Researcher: How were textbooks adopted? Where did they come from?

Mrs. Mitch: The state. Statewide adoption. You were just told what books you used. A drugstore in each

town would be the seller for the books. So you simply went to the drugstore and bought your books.

Researcher: What were some of the teaching methods you used?

Mrs. Mitch: We had teacher institutes each year before you started school and all elementary teachers were expected to attend.

The only particular thing I can remember was how you were supposed to unify your subjects and teach them by units, that is, your reading and your geography. You were supposed to think of ways to combine all of this together. That's the only thing particularly beyond following the textbooks that I can think of. But I remember they kept telling me that, and here I had all these grades and all these books and I couldn't really see how to organize all of that so I could get it all together and teach a unit.

Researcher: Did you have any audio-visual aids?

Mrs. Mitch: Nothing but maps.

Researcher: How did you evaluate your students?

Mrs. Mitch: You used a plain number system. You simply figured it out using 100% and you evaluated them. Your county told you what percent was A, B, and C and you graded them.

Researcher: Your county told you?

Mrs. Mitch: The county superintendent if you taught in a rural school. Your grade cards came out through her and she always visited you to check to see how you were doing. Consequently, your grading system was evaluated and your major tests at the end of the year were given by the county superintendent when I first started. Later, you were just sent the questions and you gave them.

Researcher: Were you evaluated on how the students did?

Mrs. Mitch: No, because the teacher was hired depending on the school board and whether they liked you or not. Remember, I knew both of my school boards.

Researcher: What were some of the discipline problems in your school?

Mrs. Mitch: I really don't remember any discipline problems in my first few years teaching school at all.

Researcher: Did the students have more respect for the teacher at that time?

Mrs. Mitch: Well, the first year I taught I had so few kids and I was young enough that I simply went and played with them all the time. When we came back in to the school, I had a lot of learning problems. I had a kid or two with emotional problems because of the home situation, but they weren't used to being treated like they were special people and they were just so glad I did

that they fell over backwards. In fact, for years afterwards they would greet me on the street, if they would see me in Cimarron, like I was a special friend. Mennonite children do not cause you behavior problems. In those days they were so completely dominated that they caused none at all.

So the only problem I had my first three years at all was with one little boy who was a little dickens. His dad was on the school board and he was just mischievous. He was a second grader. He was just full of life and he would tease anybody and everything. Lo and behold, if he didn't stick a dead mouse in my desk one day. I just pretended like I didn't even know it was there and you never saw such a disappointed boy in your life. It gave me a little bit of a start. I realized he was watching me and I thought "Cool it, Thelma, cool it."

Researcher: Were parents involved in the discipline?

Mrs. Mitch: Well, I really can't say. I would have to go farther down the line. It wasn't until I went to Colorado that I really had any discipline problems. I really had a wild school that year, which would have been several years later. It would have been about my sixth year of teaching.



I had a couple of kids whose mother was almost fanatic on not being fat. She was fat, but she didn't want to be fat. She wouldn't admit she was fat. So they were looking at a chart one day on how much they should weigh and, innocent-like, this little second grade girl went home and told her mother she was too fat. Of course, the child didn't understand. They were chasing down their parents' heights, ages, and weights. It made her mother so furious that she came to school and told me off. How dare I tell her daughter that she was too fat. So there was a little bit of friction there for awhile.

Researcher: What was the length of the school day?

Mrs. Mitch: Nine to four. It was nine to four, I think, until I came to Ingalls, which would have been nine years later.

Researcher: What was the length of the school year?

Mrs. Mitch: Rural schools were eight months. The year I taught in Springfield, Colorado, was nine months. Of course, when I came to Ingalls it was nine but the rural schools were only eight months.

Researcher: Was there a reason for it to be only eight and the rest of them nine?

Mrs. Mitch: Rural schools nearly always used eight simply because the farmers' kids were always in the fields by the first of May. Town schools wanted all these extra athletics and so forth.

Researcher: Did you have any unusual experiences in the classroom?

Mrs. Mitch: I was teaching in a rural school. I think I had about eight kids that year. We had one little boy whose health wasn't any too good, but he was a star athlete. That was his world. All of a sudden he came to school one day and he was obviously very ill. But he came on to school anyway. His family was extremely poor and they had colds a lot. So I just thought it was some more of the same thing. But he hadn't been there more than about thirty minutes until there was obviously something terribly wrong. He was simply doubled up with pain. I got his older sister to help me and we got him lying down on the table.

His parents weren't at home. We didn't have a phone and my nearest board member was a mile away. So I said to the eighth grader, "Look, I'm turning this classroom over to you. This is not the legal way to do it, but we've got to get help here. A mile is too far

for any of you kids to go afoot. So I'm going to take my car and go, and you are in charge of this classroom. You're big enough to make sure that every one of those kids stays in those seats until I get back. I'll do it just as fast as I can."

So I went down there and the oil line on my car broke as I got to the house. Fortunately, they were at home. They put me in their pickup, brought me back to school to the kids, but they only had the pickup because the man of the house had taken the car to town. She knew she couldn't take this kid because she needed a place for him to lie down. She had to go to a neighbor about another mile and a half away to get a car. She came back. When they got into town his lungs had collapsed. He had yellow jaundice. He was in the hospital then for about a month or six weeks.

Researcher: Describe the exterior of the first school you taught in.

Mrs. Mitch: It was a very small, one-room classroom with the extension out in front and a pump out in the yard where you pumped your water. The rest rooms, of course, were out in the backyard. Your stoves were coal fire and you built the

fire. You were the custodian, the whole works. You did it all.

Researcher: Do you know any of the history of the school?

Mrs. Mitch: Moore's Chapel in Grant County went by the name of Hampton School. Half the people there didn't know what you were talking about if you called it Moore's Chapel. With the exception of the two kids that I taught, everybody else in that school district was related. They were second and third generations of the Hampton family. They all came out from the hills of Tennessee. At one time it had been a school of between twenty and thirty kids.

Whenever you had a school program the entire community came. You could not possibly all get in the schoolhouse. They were on the outside and they had some wild old times, along with a little bootleg liquor and a few other things like that. So it had had quite a reputation about twenty years before I got there. It was only a rural school one year after I left and they consolidated in to Grant. They had so much trouble with one teacher in Ulysses that year that they said, "Never again." They just sent the kids home. I had only intended to teach two years and had already

moved to Ulysses. I told them to get another teacher because I had been teaching my own children and I thought they had gone to me too much. It was time to go to another teacher.

We moved to Sublette where my husband was working. I hadn't gotten another school. I really hadn't tried very hard because I really wasn't sure where we were going to after he had finished the job in Sublette. In August, they came down and begged me to come back. I said, "All right, I'll go back one more year. But this is it. You've got to get another teacher, and don't wait until August because I'm not coming back. My kids have got to go to somebody besides me." My son had already gone to me for four years, and I decided that's enough of this.

But the next teacher they got wasn't satisfactory. It was real interesting to have one of the senior boys come back after I came to Scott City and tap me on the shoulder and say, "Hi, Shortstuff." It was the very boy whose lungs had collapsed years before, and he was now several inches taller than I. He was playing on the high school basketball team.

Researcher: Describe the interior of the school.

Mrs. Mitch: Nothing but a teacher's desk, the students'

desks, and a few books. There were blackboards. When I was in Grant County, the county superintendent there was on the reading book list that the state always puts out of people to choose the books on that list. She used to get boxes of books, so my students had all kinds of books to read. She would let me have the books. She knew she could get them all back, and she really liked to have the kids' evaluation of the books as well as her own. So we read three fourths of those books every year. She would put them in the rural schools, but she didn't want them in the town schools because she said they couldn't keep up with them. So we used to have plenty of books in our room in Grant County because we had the books that she was checking for the reading list for the state.

Researcher: What type of heating and lighting were available?

Mrs. Mitch: We had gas lamps that you put gasoline in and pumped up. Of course, in the daytime, we didn't use any. You simply went by whatever the good old sun threw out. If you had a program at night, you used gas lamps.

It was such a luxury when I moved to Grant County because that would have been my seventh,

eighth, and ninth years. That was right after oil and gas. Natural gas had been found in Grant County. If you had oil wells on your property, then you could pipe that into your house and your oil was free. What was piped off to the wells got paid for. The land that the school actually belonged on had a well, so gas was piped in to my school.

I had a natural gas stove. Consequently, in the fall, they always started a little stove because otherwise they would condense and freeze up. That would shut down your gas lines and stove. The first time they blew the wells, we happened to be out on the playground. When I saw that steam shooting up, I thought, "My word, the gas well's exploded!" I turned to one of the kids and asked, "What are they doing?" He said, "Blowing the well." They weren't even excited. I asked, "What's blowing the well?" They explained that they have to let the gas off every so often in the wintertime because it condenses and causes too much trouble at the top.

Researcher: Were there any improvements made to the school during the years you taught?

Mrs. Mitch: The only real major improvement that I can

think of would be in the rural schools I taught. In my second year at Grant, they knew I played the piano and they bought one so I could teach the kids music.

Researcher: Were there any points of interest in the school building?

Mrs. Mitch: Not particularly. They were just plain and simple. There were school bells on the outside that you rang, and the kids took turns being the bell ringer.

Researcher: Who was in charge of the upkeep of the building?

Mrs. Mitch: At Grant, the kids thought it was fun to get ready for a program because we had a very nice hardwood floor. When you have nothing but mud on the playground, that floor doesn't stay nice and shiny. When we got ready for a program, the older girls helped me mop it. The middle age kids would spread wax on the floor. Then they would tie old rags on their feet and go skating. That's the way they polished the floor.

Researcher: Do you know if any of the one-room schoolhouses you taught in is still in use?

Mrs. Mitch: None of them are. None of them in Grant County would still be in use because they consolidated with Ulysses. Baca County closed just two or



three years after I left because those people all moved out. It's large ranch country now.

Researcher: What was your salary your first year of teaching?

Mrs. Mitch: Sixty-five dollars a month for eight months.

Researcher: What was your salary your last year of teaching?

Mrs. Mitch: \$17,285.

Researcher: How was your salary determined and by whom?

Mrs. Mitch: Strictly your school board members. They told you what you got and that was it. There was no argument.

Researcher: That answers my question. Did you have a voice in the salary decision?

Mrs. Mitch: Absolutely none! If they made a decision about what you did, you did it or else got out. You didn't have a choice.

Researcher: How did you get your paycheck and how often?

Mrs. Mitch: At the end of each month a member of the school board just came and brought it to you. Probably came and picked up his kids most of the time. I used to take Johnny Coss home. I went right past their home. He was a first grader, so I quite often just dropped him off. If it was time for the check, someone came out and gave it to me.

Researcher: Did the district have any fund raising

activities?

Mrs. Mitch: I don't think we ever had any at all. It just wasn't customary. You were expected to give a Christmas program. Beyond that it was simply free.

Researcher: What were some of the rules the teacher had to follow?

Mrs. Mitch: I don't remember being given any. You were just supposed to follow the ways of the community. It was sort of understood that you would dress like the community did and this type of thing. But it wasn't that different from the way I'd always lived, so I really never thought anything about it.

Researcher: Were you allowed to be married?

Mrs. Mitch: It was never said to me, but I do know that it was sort of understood that when you got married you would quit teaching. I just did, it was never actually said to me.

Researcher: What was the greatest distance traveled by any student to reach school?

Mrs. Mitch: In the largest rural schools, I think six miles was about the farthest.

Researcher: How did most of the students travel to school?

Mrs. Mitch: It depended on the district. The first year I taught, those kids walked a mile or a mile and

a half. We had a snowstorm coming up one day and I was afraid for them to go home. I decided it was time to turn out early because I was born and raised in western Kansas and I'm afraid of blizzards. I took them home and then turned around and backtracked the mile and a half and took this one other little boy home. I then had trouble getting home myself because the snow was so bad. I had to drive about seven or eight miles. I was simply driving by the ditch because we didn't even have the yellow lines to drive by in those days. We had the white line down the center, so I was driving by the ditch. There were times I simply couldn't see the ditch. I just hoped nobody hit me from behind because I would have to stop. I also came home one time like that in a dust storm because I couldn't see the road part of the time.

Researcher: Was there a principal for the school?

Mrs. Mitch: No, the only person you had was your county superintendent. All of my superintendents were women. Now there were some areas who had men, but I never had anything but a woman.

Researcher: Was there a school board? If so, how involved were they in the daily running of the school?

Mrs. Mitch: Yes, there was. Absolutely none in either one

of the rural schools I taught in. I'll have to admit that I never had any trouble with a school board member. I really had almost no trouble with rural schools. That's the reason I was so leery about coming into public schools. I heard people talk about them, and I didn't have any trouble with rural schools.

Researcher: What evaluation method was used for the teacher?

Mrs. Mitch: None, just if you got along with the people in the district you were all right. If you didn't, you were gone.

Researcher: How was the community involved with the school?

Mrs. Mitch: Well, about the only activity was a last day of school picnic. They would come and take you wherever you wanted to go on the picnic. They would help you with the picnic. They always came to your Christmas program.

When I was teaching in Grant, we also had some athletic programs. The parents would always furnish the cars for the kids. You had no trouble. They attended all the meets. Your parents were always very supportive. There just weren't many activities. You just went to school in a rural school. That was basically what you did.

Researcher: What were some of the special observances?

Mrs. Mitch: With the exception of Christmas, there weren't any. Now I always had something special at school for Valentine's Day and all the holidays. But it was simply my doing.

Researcher: Were there any special contests?

Mrs. Mitch: We never had any spelling contests. I was never involved in any spelling contests until after I went to Cimarron. I don't remember any contests outside of athletics.

Researcher: What about graduation exercises?

Mrs. Mitch: They were county wide. In Gray County, I think you just went out of the eighth grade and got an eighth grade certificate. In Grant County, we had graduation exercises because I played the graduation march.

One year my husband was in South Dakota where we were moving. We went up to visit him for two weeks, then turned around and came back because I had to play for the graduation exercises. I had three kids graduating from the eighth grade and I had to play for them because they had to sing.

Researcher: Where did you live when you began teaching?

Mrs. Mitch: In the homes of the parents of some of the students.

Researcher: How did your teaching styles change through the years?

Mrs. Mitch: Well, they were about as different as day and night. The last few years I taught had nothing to do with what I did the first ten years. I had attended so many teaching workshops. The last few years I taught, I was convinced that practically all elementary school curriculum should be based around reading. Not that the kids were to know that it was reading, but that you yourself were supposed to be teaching reading constantly. It made no difference whether it was science, social studies, or math. The child's ability to read, to understand what he's read, and to follow the directions meant whether he was a success or a failure. Consequently, my entire school program was technically based on trying to get kids to read well and understand what they were doing, regardless of what I was teaching. I was firmly convinced that reading is the key as far as kids are concerned.