

Fort Hays State University

FHSU Scholars Repository

College of Education One-Room Schoolhouse
Oral Histories

Archives Online

1994

Interview with John Bearley

Max A. Bearley
Fort Hays State University

John R. Bearley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/ors>

Content Disclaimer

The primary source materials contained in the Fort Hays State University Special Collections and Archives have been placed there for research purposes, preservation of the historical record, and as reflections of a past belonging to all members of society. Because this material reflects the expressions of an ongoing culture, some items in the collections may be sensitive in nature and may not represent the attitudes, beliefs, or ideas of their creators, persons named in the collections, or the position of Fort Hays State University.

Recommended Citation

Bearley, Max A. and Bearley, John R., "Interview with John Bearley" (1994). *College of Education One-Room Schoolhouse Oral Histories*. 176.
<https://scholars.fhsu.edu/ors/176>

This Audio Recording is brought to you for free and open access by the Archives Online at FHSU Scholars Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in College of Education One-Room Schoolhouse Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of FHSU Scholars Repository.

CHAPTER II: INTERVIEW WITH JOHN BEARLEY

One of the greatest satisfactions Mr. Bearley has derived from his teaching career is knowing that he helped pour the foundation of his community. He can walk up and down the streets of Oberlin, KS, and bump into a former student of his anywhere: the mailman, the manager and assistant manager of a grocery store, the owner of a trophy engraving business, or a local pastor. The different pathways of life followed by his students have rewarded him far beyond the boundaries of his career in education.

The beginning of this educational legacy of his has its roots in the rural one-room schoolhouses of the 1930s and 40s in Rawlins County, KS. These schools provided children that lived outside the city limits an opportunity to receive their early education. In the days prior to automobiles and again during the days of the Great depression, it would have been impossible for parents to transport their children to the nearest town school; and, the costs of boarding them in town would have been prohibitive. Besides, they were needed on the farm.

Interestingly enough, Mr. Bearley did not attend a rural school when he was growing up. He was raised on a farm only three miles from a rural school, but his parents decided that it would be best for him if he attended school in the town of Atwood, KS, that was six miles away. His parents felt the opportunities at a town school were much greater than those of a rural school. There were opportunities in music and

sports at the town schools. There were also better library facilities. Rural schools did have libraries, but they were much more limited than the town school libraries—not that there was any scholarly research done in either school system.

When Mr. Bearley graduated from high school in Atwood in 1933, job opportunities were very limited. One could join the military, the Civilian Conservation Corp., or become a teacher. He chose teaching because he enjoyed working with young people and he felt he could make a success of teaching as a career.

Assuming the responsibility as a teacher right out of high school is rather challenging (and something that would never even be considered today). There was a standardized test Mr. Bearley had to pass with an average in all subjects of at least 85 percent. His senior year at Atwood was spent taking “reviews” in all of the core subject areas in preparation for taking the examination. His preparation paid off as he passed the test on the first try. He assumed it could be taken a second time, but he was glad he did not have to find out.

His first teaching position was at the Fairview School, District 48, a one-room schoolhouse in rural Rawlins County. He taught only one year at Fairview, the 1933-34 term. During that year, he lived at his parents’ house and drove four miles to the school.

His contract was for \$35.00 per month, for eight months—if possible. The school board was not certain that it could raise enough

money to pay him for the entire eight-month period. The Great Depression had just begun and tax monies were flowing into the county seat, a portion of which was returned to the school district, in very limited amounts. Thirty-five dollars per month might even force the school to close early. It did not, and Mr. Bearley was able to teach the full eight months.

Mr. Bearley's day would start early. Part of his job as school teacher was to arrive at the school early enough to start the fire and warm the building before the students arrived. This always proved a challenge to Mr. Bearley because he never really knew what he would be using for kindling. The school board tried to have a steady supply of shingles from an old building on hand, but that was not always the case. Sometimes corn cobs were used, and small sticks worked fairly well. Occasionally, Mr. Bearley would have a whole log or even some coal to burn on the fire, but not usually. It was the 1930s and money was scarce, so he used whatever he could get.

The use of any kerosene was absolutely prohibited in Kansas schools because of an incident that happened in another part of the state. One time a student and his brother accidentally were sprayed with kerosene and their clothes caught on fire. Therefore, any flammable liquid was deemed out of the question long before Mr. Bearley even became a teacher.

Another part of Mr. Bearley's job at Fairview was to act as a

custodian for the school. He was expected to sweep out the building, do the dusting, and clean the toilets in the two outhouses. One of the outhouses was for girls, and one was for boys. He was paid an extra \$1.50 per month at Fairview to haul five gallons of water each day for sanitation and drinking purposes.

All the rural one-room schoolhouses had students in the first through eighth grades. The Fairview School had 17 students: three first graders, one second grader, two third graders, two fourth graders, three fifth graders, two sixth graders, one seventh grader, and three eighth graders. Most of them walked to school. Mr. Bearley drove one of the students every day since the student's home was on his way to the schoolhouse. The student's father offered to keep Mr. Bearley's Model T Ford, a 1925 Coupe, running in exchange for hauling his daughter to class.

Classes at Fairview ran from 9 a.m. to noon and from 1 to 4 p.m. There was a one-hour lunch period between the two sessions which included a recess. Students were also given two 15-minute recess periods during the day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Activities available to the students during recess included jumping rope, ball games, and any number of other games they could come up with.

Each student was assigned an individual desk, as was the teacher. There was a recitation bench at the front of the classroom where the teacher could work with students of one grade level on an assignment,

asking questions and solving problems. Students in the other grades would work on their own assignments, awaiting their turn to be called to the bench. One aspect of life in the one-room schoolhouses that impressed Mr. Bearley was the support students gave each other. He said when a younger student was struggling with a particular word, reading, or a math problem, one of the older students was always willing to help. The environment of the one-room schoolhouse created a family atmosphere among the students. This style of learning falls into the same category we call "cooperative learning" today. So, there are similarities between present day schools and schools of yesterday.

Students were also expected to provide their own lunches as the school did not have any lunch program. Neither did the school provide textbooks for the students. The parents were expected to purchase all the books needed during the school year. They could go to the county seat and purchase textbooks that the state had selected for use in the schools. Even in 1934 a used textbook system was in place, according to Mr. Bearley. Once the student had successfully completed a grade level, he or she would sell the books at a discount to the new students at that level. If a family had several children in the school, the books could be handed down at no additional cost.

The Fairview School was not equipped with a telephone, so if a student became ill, the only thing Mr. Bearley could do was try to get the student through the day as best he could. He said sometimes he

would heat some water for them to drink. However, most of the students did not like the taste of warm water, so they would just pretend to feel better after drinking only a little bit. The only other choice was to leave one of the older students in charge while he took the sick student home. He did do that one time when one of his female students had a tooth knocked out. She could not stand the sight of her own blood and was disrupting class. He said the student he left in charge did a good job at keeping order in the school and keeping students working on their assignments.

Discipline was left solely up to the teacher. Mr. Bearley said he never consulted the school board or the parents before dealing out discipline. He did visit parents of students who caused trouble after the punishment had been dealt out, but the parents were usually very cooperative. Ordinarily, a student knew that he or she would be punished twice for any trouble caused at school: once at school and again at home. This, according to Mr. Bearley, kept the problems from occurring.

When Mr. Bearley got home after a day at school, he had to spend the evenings preparing his lessons for the next day. He had to prepare different lessons for each grade level, so he rarely had any time to himself in the beginning. He also had assignments to grade and a monthly report on student attendance and achievement to fill out. There was never time to fill these out at school.

All the hard work paid off for Mr. Bearley when all of his students were able to pass on to the next grade level. He took great pride in the success of his students. Achievement at the first through sixth grade levels was based on assessments of the teacher, but the seventh and eighth graders had to pass standardized achievement tests in order to continue up the grade levels. These tests were given at various locations in the county, but not at Fairview, so the students had to travel to one of the town schools in the county to take them. His pride truly swelled when his upper level students passed these tests because they were graded by strangers and compared with tests taken by students outside the district. He credits all of his students moving up to the cooperation the students gave each other during the year.

Promotional exercises for the eighth graders were held at the end of the year. All of the town and rural schools in Rawlins County were put together for one big ceremony. The students would dress up for the occasion and would present a program. Some would recite poems, others would play the piano, and some would sing songs. Students making outstanding grades were recognized at the ceremony. The County Superintendent then said a few words and handed out the eighth grade diplomas.

Due to the success of his students, Mr. Bearley asked for \$50 per month raise for the following year, the amount the school teacher prior to Mr. Bearley had been paid the year before. However, the school

board told him that his salary would have to remain at \$35 per month. Mr. Bearley decided then to look for another school.

He had no trouble in finding a new school at which he could teach, but not at his price. The County Superintendent told Mr. Bearley of a school in the county that was budgeted for \$50 per month. It was the Achilles School, District 14 (another rural one-room school); however, when he went to interview, he was offered \$40 per month by the school board. When he insisted on \$50, the offer was raised to \$45. About 1 a.m., Mr. Bearley decided to settle for \$47.50 per month because it had begun to rain and it was 20 miles back to his house. The process of negotiating for salary until one side gives in, for whatever reason, still goes on in schools today.

At the interview, Mr. Bearley was asked if he smoked, drank, or danced. He answered that he did not drink or smoke but did like to go to dances. However, they obviously did not hold that against him as they not only hired him, but kept him on as the school's teacher for four years.

While Mr. Bearley was on his way to the interview, he saw a young lady coming out of a garden. He thought she was extremely attractive and intercepted her before she could make her way back to the house. Her name was Nora Hurst and she was looking for her father. Mr. Bearley took time out of his busy schedule to help her locate him. As it turned out, her father was a member of the Achilles school board and

was the man who was scheduled to interview Mr. Bearley for the job of school teacher. After this encounter with Nora Hurst, he went home, awakened his mother, and informed her that he had just met his future wife.

The Achilles School was actually located in an inland town in the southeast corner of Rawlins County. There was a post office, hardware store, grocery store, and a few residential houses. But since there was no railroad through the town, it did not have the population to need a larger school. There were 27 students in the eight different grades when the school year began. During that first year, a school west of Achilles closed and the eight students were transferred to Achilles.

Mr. Bearley's duties in Achilles were similar to those he had at Fairview. He was expected to arrive early and start the fire; and, he was also expected to keep the schoolhouse and the outdoor toilets clean. The building also had no telephone, just like Fairview, so if any student became sick, they had to remain in school.

The building was exceptionally cold. Someone had convinced the school board to install a large room heater. A big hole had been cut into the wall behind the heater for ventilation which was not needed since there were enough windows in the building. As a result, the building was always too cold, even with the heater turned on.

Each student had his own desk and there was a piano that was used

for opening exercises. As in Fairview, there was a class recitation bench for grade level discussions. Maps, a globe, and a modest library completed the setting.

Again, students brought their own lunches to school. Sometimes Mr. Bearley would put a pan on the fire for soup the children would bring or just a pan of hot water for tea. This constituted the hot lunch program of yesterday.

One of his fondest memories of his years at Achilles was the day he asked the question "What animals live underground?" One of the first graders answered that a cat lived underground. Mr. Bearley said he nearly came unglued when the student said he had seen a cat dig a hole in the ground and then try to back into it. The student actually thought cats lived underground, so he did not laugh out loud. However, some of his memories of Achilles were not so pleasant.

The dust storms were so bad during the Great Depression that sometimes the schoolhouse would become completely dark with dust. Rekindling the fire was not possible because the dust kept extinguishing it. On such days, the students had to remain at the school until the storm was over. One time, Mr. Bearley lost his way walking home from school and only made it by locating a fence that ran all the way from the school to the boarding house where he lived. He said he never let a student walk home in a storm.

One of the things that neither the county superintendent nor the

school board at Achilles had mentioned to him was that the last teacher there had quit because she could not control some of the students. Mr. Bearley did have a run-in early on with some of the bigger students in the school. These students decided that they did not want to learn anything that day and decided to put Mr. Bearley outside the schoolhouse. Compared to these students, Mr. Bearley was small, being only five feet six inches tall and weighing 145 pounds. But he was not about to let the students take over. Determined to teach school, he braced himself in front of the door and told the students to sit down. The students laughed at him, but when they tried to grab him, Mr. Bearley threw them to the floor. He had been a wrestler in high school and was thankful he could defend himself. None of the students told their parents what had happened, and Mr. Bearley said they never gave him any trouble after that. In fact, he said, some of those students are very good friends of his today.

This incident led him to introduce the game of basketball to the Achilles School. Since some of the students were fairly good-sized and obviously had a lot of excess energy, he realized that unless this energy was channeled in a positive direction, there might be more trouble. People in the community built backboards and went to the creek and cut support poles from the cottonwoods. A local blacksmith, A. J. Hurst, even fashioned two rims for the school free of charge. He later became Mr. Bearley's father-in-law.

That year, the basketball team from Achilles defeated teams from Herndon and Atwood to win a tournament in Rawlins County. The next year, they lost only one game to Oberlin and took second place in the league. The trophies were presented to Mr. Bearley when he resigned from Achilles in 1938, and he has treasured them to this day.

One student Mr. Bearley recalls while teaching at Achilles was a young man named Don Hurst. Although he was barely five years old, Don wanted to go to school. The board decided to accept him the year that Mr. Bearley started teaching at Achilles. He was a good student, but developed an illness during the year that forced him to repeat the first grade. Mr. Bearley had him as a student for four years. Later Don Hurst became the Assistant Superintendent of Schools in Hays, KS.

During the summer months at Achilles, Mr. Bearley worked at a grain elevator in Atwood. One summer, after the manager was injured in an accident, Mr. Bearley had to keep the books. This experience proved beneficial when he was hired as the manager of an elevator in Ruleton, KS, that was reopening after having been put out of business by the dust storms and poor harvests. He worked as manager of the elevator during the summers of 1938 and 1939.

In 1939, Mr. Bearley enrolled at Fort Hays Kansas State College. He attended Fort Hays until 1942 when he was drafted into military service. Just before he left, he became engaged to Nora Hurst, the girl he had met on his way to his interview at Achilles back in 1934.

Mr. Bearley spent 31 months in the service. When he returned in 1945, he married Miss Hurst, who had become the school teacher at Achilles. She left Achilles when she and Mr. Bearley were married. By the beginning of the next term, a school teacher had not been found, and Mr. Bearley agreed to teach there one more year. During that year at Achilles, a son, Robert Leon, was born to the Bearleys. It was to be his final year of teaching in the rural one-room setting.

Mr. Bearley said that one of the greatest advantages of the rural one-room school system was the involvement and interest the community exhibited in education. The community would willingly sponsor anything that the school wanted to try. State funds primarily went for the teacher's salary, library books, and recreational equipment; and, the community would usually come up with the money for plays, picnics, and special programs. There were typically three plays in a year: one at Halloween, one at Christmas, and one in the spring.

Mr. Bearley said one of the favorite social gatherings in the community was the box supper. For this supper, each of the ladies in the community would bring a prepared lunch in a decorated box. In turn, each box would then be auctioned off to the highest bidder. It created a lot of fun because the younger ladies would always have two or three young men engaged in a bidding war over their boxes. The younger ladies' wares always went for the higher prices. All the money raised went to the school.

He said the community also helped sponsor and attended cipher-downs, spell-downs, and geography contests every Friday afternoon. The competitions were held at different schools around the county.

He also said he felt the education that one received in the rural schools, especially at the lower grade levels, was at least comparable, if not better than, that received in the town schools.

If there was any real disadvantage to attending a rural school, it would be that any one teacher had his or her limitations. No one could be expected to do everything well, so there may have been areas in which the education received was lacking.

In the fall of 1947, Mr. Bearley re-enrolled at Fort Hays Kansas State College. Under the G. I. Bill of Rights, he was entitled to receive financial aid for one month of education for every month of service he had given his country. During his last year in undergraduate school at Hays, he fathered another son, Max Aubra. At that time, employment was plentiful because the war had left many jobs vacant. After he graduated in 1948 with a bachelors degree in history and a minor in English, he accepted a position as an elementary teacher in the Oberlin Consolidated System.

After his daughter, Sandra Lee, was born in the latter part of 1949, Mr. Bearley decided to pursue his education at the University of Wyoming. He spent four summers in Wyoming and graduated in 1954 with his masters degree in administration. By that time, his fourth

child, Montine Sue, had been born. In 1955, still a teacher in Oberlin, his fifth and last child, Larry John, was born.

When Mr. Bearley graduated from the University of Wyoming, he was named assistant principal, but remained a teacher as well, in the Oberlin Consolidated system until 1961 when he was promoted to elementary school principal in that district. He served as the principal there until his retirement in 1979. He had given 37 years of his life to education, and has never regretted a single moment in all that time.

Mr. Bearley enjoys reminiscing about his years at Fairview, Achilles, and Oberlin and still keeps in touch with many of his former students. He sees the sum of all his years in the field of education every day on the streets and in the businesses of the community where he resides. His one wish is that every teacher could enjoy his or her work as much as he has enjoyed his over the years.