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1987

### Interview with Aurelia Coady

Nick Coady

*Fort Hays State University*

Aurelia Little Coady 1921-1994

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#### Recommended Citation

Coady, Nick and Coady, Aurelia Little 1921-1994, "Interview with Aurelia Coady" (1987). *College of Education One-Room Schoolhouse Oral Histories*. 75.

<https://scholars.fhsu.edu/ors/75>

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## CHAPTER II

### ORAL INTERVIEW OF MRS. AURELIA COADY

Nick: When did you start teaching?

Mrs. Coady: 1939.

Nick: Where was this?

Mrs. Coady: In a country school, called Rockridge, three miles east and about three and one-half miles north of Gorham.

Nick: How old were you when you started teaching?

Mrs. Coady: Eighteen.

Nick: What education had you received prior to teaching school?

Mrs. Coady: I had thirty hours at Fort Hays, which entitled me to a three year State Certificate.

Nick: How many years did you teach in a one-room schoolhouse?

Mrs. Coady: One.

Nick: Who was in charge of hiring the teachers?

Mrs. Coady: The school board hired the teachers.

Nick: Was there a principal for the school?

Mrs. Coady: No, we worked under the County Superintendent.

Nick: Did the County Superintendent visit the school?

Mrs. Coady: Yes, he did.

Nick: Where did you live while teaching school?

Mrs. Coady: I lived with my parents.

Nick: How far away from the school was that?

Mrs. Coady: About five miles.

Nick: What was the length of a school day and the school year?

Mrs. Coady: Well, the day was from 9:00 to 4:00, and the school year was eight months.

Nick: Did you start in September?

Mrs. Coady: We started in September, right after Labor Day.

Nick: And when did you finish?

Mrs. Coady: At the end of April.

Nick: What grade levels did you teach?

Mrs. Coady: Well, if I remember right, there were six grade levels. In the country school, you taught from 1 through 8, but I only had six grades. They combined grades like 5th and 6th or 7th and 8th. One year you taught 5th grade subjects and the next year you taught 6th grade, and the same way with 7th and 8th.

Nick: What age level students did you teach?

Mrs. Coady: They were from 6 through 12.

Nick: What was the average number of years a student spent in school?

Mrs. Coady: Eight years.

Nick: What subjects were studied in the school?

Mrs. Coady: Well, reading, writing, math, and I think they were just starting Social Studies at the time I started to teach.

Nick: Was there anything done special for the 8th grade students?

Mrs. Coady: They would usually dismiss school a week earlier for the other students. Then we just worked with the 8th grade students on the old county tests so they would be ready to take the tests.

Nick: If the student failed the test, would they have to come back to the 8th grade?

Mrs. Coady: Yes, they had to go back to the 8th grade.

Nick: Were there 8th grade graduation exercises?

Mrs. Coady: Well, they had a County 8th grade graduation at the end of the year. All students in the County had an 8th grade graduation exercise, and students could go to it if they wanted to.

Nick: Did the Rockridge School have a library?

Mrs. Coady: Well, not very much of one. They had a few story books the kids could read. They didn't have any reference books at the time I was there.

Nick: What were some of the school rules, such as attendance, or were there any?

Mrs. Coady: There weren't any rules. Well, they just had to attend school. It was a state law they had to attend school, but there were no other rules.

Nick: What were some of the special observances of your school? Did you have a Christmas program?

Mrs. Coady: We had a Christmas program and on Mother's Day, we had a program and during the year one night, we had a box supper. That was to make some money so we could buy some equipment for them to play with on the school grounds.

Nick: What type of equipment did you buy?

Mrs. Coady: Well, bats, balls and some gloves. I can't remember what else. Then I bought a few reference books for the library, so they would have a library.

Nick: Was the school a public school?

Mrs. Coady: Yes, it was a public school.

Nick: Was there much involvement in the school by the parents?

Mrs. Coady: No, the parents didn't seem to be too concerned.

Nick: How did the students get to school?

Mrs. Coady: Well, several of them were close enough to walk. I believe most of them walked to school. Part of the time when the weather was too bad their parents would bring them in if any of them lived too far from school.

Nick: What was the furthest one had to walk to school?

Mrs. Coady: Well, I would say about a mile and a half.

Nick: How many students were there in the school?

Mrs. Coady: I think maybe it was eight.

Nick: Were you required by law to go to school?

Mrs. Coady: Yes.

Nick: Until what age?

Mrs. Coady: Until 8th grade or until they were 16.

Nick: What was the approximate length of time devoted to each subject?

Mrs. Coady: Well, we tried to divide it equally through the day.

Nick: Can you describe a typical day in school?

Mrs. Coady: Well, I picked up two little boys on the way to school and we would get the schoolhouse ready for school before the rest of them arrived. We started with the flag salute, then I always had arithmetic the first subject. Then we would have reading, and then we would follow through with the rest of the subjects. We would have a 15 minute recess in the morning, an hour at noon, and a 15 minute recess in the afternoon, and we dismissed at 4:00.

Nick: What did they do during recess?

Mrs. Coady: Most generally, they played ball; sometimes they brought up other games, but ball was mainly what they played.

Nick: Who chose the text books that you used?

Mrs. Coady: They were purchased by the County Superintendent, I guess. They were issued text books you had to buy.

Nick: Were competency tests taken for promotional purposes?

Mrs. Coady: Just the 8th grade had to take a final test in order to be promoted. If they didn't pass it, they couldn't go on to high school.

Nick: What was the dress and overall appearance of the students?

Mrs. Coady: The boys most definitely wore overalls, and a lot of the times the little girls also wore overalls, but sometimes, they wore dresses. There were no jeans at that time.

Nick: Did the students of the school come from a particular cultural or heritage background?

Mrs. Coady: Most of them were of German background. The one I had in the first grade couldn't speak English when she started school, and I couldn't speak German, so we had a little trouble, but she learned.

Nick: She learned to speak English?

Mrs. Coady: Yes, she had to speak English; I couldn't speak German.

Nick: How did you accomplish this?

Mrs. Coady: I went to the County Superintendent about that. He told me to start out with things in the home. I mean that he suggested I work on what a chair was, what a bed was, what a table was, and get her to say those things. Her brothers and sisters could talk English, but at home they only talked German. That was kind of interesting.

Nick: Yes, I would imagine.

Mrs. Coady: They picked up the English language pretty quick after they had to learn it.

Nick: Did the other students help?

Mrs. Coady: Well, yes, since she had a sister and brother in school and they could speak English, but they were further along in school. I don't think the teacher before me could speak German either, so they had to speak English.

Nick: What was the cost for the education for the student and the family?

Mrs. Coady: Well, there I have no idea.

Nick: Did most of the students that graduated go on to high school, or did some of them stop at the 8th grade?

Mrs. Coady: Well, I think most of them went on to high school; now their older brothers and sisters hadn't. I believe all the students I had went on to high school. Well, my eighth grader didn't go to high school, but I think her younger brothers and sisters did. Previously, the family hadn't sent anybody to high school.

Nick: Do you know when the school was built?

Mrs. Coady: No, I have no idea. It was a real old school; and, in fact, I had an Aunt who had taught there, and that would have been quite a few years before I taught.

Nick: What materials was the school constructed of?

Mrs. Coady: It was a wood structure with a coal burning stove.

Nick: What type of lighting and toilets were available?

Mrs. Coady: There was no electricity, and the toilets were the outside ones. There was a water well in the yard to pump the water from.



Nick: Was the lighting a problem?

Mrs. Coady: No, not re'ally. In the winter we didn't use any lamps. We did have a lamp but I can't remember it giving us any problems. We had a coal oil lamp.

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

Mrs. Coady: Well, the school board was responsible, but the school teacher had to clean the building and take care of it through the school year and build the fire and things like that.

Nick: Did you have a blackboard in it?

Mrs. Coady: Yes, we had a blackboard.

Nick: Was it your responsibility for cleaning that?

Mrs. Coady: Yes, Oh yes; nobody helped you clean the school house. They cleaned it before the school year started, but it was the school teacher's job to keep everything clean.

Nick: Can you describe the interior of the school?

Mrs. Coady: Well, just a wooden structure with blackboards on the side, the teacher's desk and then other little desks. It was very crude.

Nick: Do you know what happened to the schoolhouse you tuaght in?

Mrs. Coady: I have no idea.

Nick: What type of lunches did the students bring?

Mrs. Coady: Well, they brought it in gallon pails. They would bring sandwiches and whatever their folks fixed.

Nick: Would you just all sit down and eat lunch together?

Mrs. Coady: Yes, we would all sit down and eat lunch together.

Nick: And then you would have recess?

Mrs. Coady: Yes.

Nick: What type of things did the students bring from home to use at school or were most of the supplies furnished by the school?

Mrs. Coady: Mostly, the children had to get their pencils and paper and things like that. They brought their books. I don't believe that the school bought the books although some schools did.

Nick: Were there any district boundaries for the school?

Mrs. Coady: Well, I presume there were, but at that time, there were country schools every few miles. At that time, there was one several miles north of where this school was.

Nick: Was the schoolhouse used for social activities?

Mrs. Coady: No.

Nick: Was there a school board for your school?

Mrs. Coady: Yes.

Nick: Do you remember any of the school board members?

Mrs. Coady: Yes, there was a Nick Brown, Matt Schulte, and Bill Nowak.

Nick: Are any of them living?

Mrs. Coady: No, they are all deceased.

Nick: Who hired and fired the teachers?

Mrs. Coady: The school board.

Nick: Did anyone else have any input?

Mrs. Coady: Not that I know of.

Nick: Did they come to you--how were you hired?

Mrs. Coady: They came and asked me if I was interested in teaching. I had only one semester so I had to get the rest of my hours through the summer term.

Nick: What was your salary when you started teaching?

Mrs. Coady: It was \$65.00 a month.

Nick: How was your salary determined?

Mrs. Coady: Well, the school board fixed the salary.

Nick: Did all the districts pay about the same amount?

Mrs. Coady: Yes, I think so.

Nick: How did you get paid?

Mrs. Coady: Well, by check. Sometimes, one of them would bring the check he had signed, and I would have to take it around and get the other two to sign it.

Nick: Could you describe a typical day before and after school?

Mrs. Coady: I picked up two little boys who rode with me. Then we would get the water in, get the fire started, and then the rest of the students would come. We always

started the day with the flag salute, and we would get on with our subjects that we were going to work with during the day. In the evening, I would clean up the schoolhouse and clean the boards.

Nick: How were the teachers expected to conduct themselves in the community? Were there any restrictions?

Mrs. Coady: Well, there weren't any restrictions, but you knew you had to be kind of careful with what you did.

Nick: Were the students eager to learn?

Mrs. Coady: Yes, they were pretty eager to learn--they were good students.

Nick: Was there anything else about the Rockridge Schoolhouse you would like to add that we didn't cover in this interview?

Mrs. Coady: Well, I really don't know. One morning we came up to the school and there was a hobo sleeping in the outside room at the schoolhouse. He knew when we opened the door that we were around, but we didn't stay. The boys and I went down and got one of the school board members that lived three-fourths mile south of the school and got him to come with us. He hadn't done any harm. He evidently just wanted a place to sleep out of the weather.

Nick: Do you recall any other interesting experiences that took place while you were teaching at Rockridge?

Mrs. Coady: Well, I forgot to mention when you asked about the County Superintendent, Mr. Hobart Jackson. He visited without giving any notice. At first I was kind of nervous over his visiting, since this was my first year of teaching. He did not reprimand me for any of my teaching. He did mention that he noticed the first grader went up and sat in the waste basket. Now, I don't know why she did it that day, but she did. He didn't think that was very good, which I agree. That was the only eventful part of his visit. Another thing that I did at Rockridge was that I would fix soup at home and bring it to school. At that time there was no such thing as a hot lunch program. We would keep it hot by putting it on top of the heating stove. I furnished it all. The kids didn't seem to know how to bring anything and do anything so I just brought it. That way we did have a hot lunch. I think many teachers did the same as I did, fixed soup and took it to school. Schools weren't heated too well and they were pretty drafty.

Nick: Did the students seem to enjoy the soup?

Mrs. Coady: Yes, they seemed to enjoy it. I think they preferred it to the lunches in their syrup pails.

Nick: You taught one year at Rockridge. Was there any particular reason that you quit?

Mrs. Coady: Well, I just didn't think I wanted to keep on teaching. Then after I quit, the Parochial School in Gorham needed another teacher. The enrollment was larger than they had anticipated. So the pastor came down and asked if I would teach there. As I had no job in mind I went ahead and taught. That worked out fine for my folks as I had two sisters in school. We all went together. It was nicer teaching in town. I didn't have any playground duties and I didn't have any lunch duties. That was a lot nicer. They arranged it so I wouldn't have my sisters in school. The pastor didn't think I should teach my own sisters and, of course, I had just graduated from that school two years before. I think I taught the fourth and fifth grade if I remember.

Nick: Why didn't you have any playground or lunch duties?

Mrs. Coady: There were four nuns besides myself teaching up there and they said they could handle the lunch room and playground activities. So that's why I didn't have to have it.

Nick: Was the pay the same?

Mrs. Coady: Yes. The pastor thought I had gotten along with eight months' pay the year before, so he thought I could get along with eight months' pay this year even though I taught nine months.

Nick: You indicated earlier that when asked to teach at Rockridge you had only one semester of college. Can you explain a little about this?

Mrs. Coady: Yes. I had gone the fall semester then I dropped out of the spring semester and went to work at the post office. Then when I was offered the chance to teach at Rockridge I had to get 15 more hours. I took six of them by correspondence and nine residence hours that summer.

Nick: All of this at Fort Hays?

Mrs. Coady: Yes, all of it at Fort Hays.

Nick: You indicated earlier that there were quite a few one-room schoolhouses. Can you remember in Russell County how many districts there were or might have been?

Mrs. Coady: Well, I really don't, but I think there was close to 100.

Nick: If you were out of school in April at Rockridge, how did you have a Mother's Day Program? Was this on Mother's Day?

Mrs. Coady: No, it was just a program they expected you to have and invite the mothers. It was probably closer to Easter. All the school board members' wives were expected to be invited to any program you had. I guess they were observing me. None of them had children in school. I don't know why they were interested except the school board kind of ran things. One school board

member lived about 1/2 mile from school and he assumed I would stay at his place. I just lived five miles from school so I just stayed there. That didn't make him very happy.

Nick: Was he expecting any rent if you would have stayed?

Mrs. Coady: Oh yes, oh yes. I think he charged \$30 a month. I think they were kind of unhappy about that. Another thing you mentioned was the cleaning of the school. One of the school board member's family was paid to clean it. When I lit the fire the first time the room filled full of smoke. I wasn't used to building a fire, let alone having it smoke, so I went down to tell them. The one daughter came to the door and I told her what I wanted. She said to go back and stick your head in the chimney and if you see daylight you'll know it's clean. I just left the keys and said I hoped things would work better Monday. I didn't want to go stick my head in the chimney.