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L. Randy Carter
Fort Hays State University

Lyle Seitter
Fort Hays State University

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THE BLANCHE WARD STORY

L. RANDY CARTER AND LYLE SEITTER

DR. ALLAN MILLER
FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY
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CHAPTER II: INTERVIEW WITH BLANCHE WARD

Blanche Ward's teaching career spanned six decades and was characterized by dedicated service and a genuine concern for her students. Ms. Ward's fifty-year teaching career began in 1931, after she graduated from high school in Beaver, Oklahoma. Blanche became interested in teaching because of the caring shown to her by her high school teachers and because teaching was one of the few career opportunities available to women. After successfully completing the Oklahoma State Teachers' Examination during her junior year of high school, she was then eligible under state law to begin teaching. Ms. Ward obtained her Bachelor of Science degree from Northwestern State College in Alva, Oklahoma, in 1942. She took the majority of her classes during the summer months, while teaching, but she did attend college full-time during the 1936-37 academic year. Blanche continued taking classes and seminars for educational growth throughout her career. She did complete a Masters in Education degree from Northwestern State College in 1969. (Please see degree certificates in Appendix I.) This chapter explains the history of her career by providing a timeline of her teaching positions; an account of teaching in one-room as well as traditional schools; an analysis of education by Ms. Ward, and a look at the special award she received in 1993.

After completing her senior year of high school, Blanche began teaching at the Locust Grove School in 1931. This was a one-room school located in Beaver County with about fifteen students. Ms. Ward made \$70.00 a month in her first position. (Blanche's first teaching contract is included in Appendix I.) Typical of the dependent school, Blanche was responsible for teaching grades

one through eight. Blanche did not teach during the 1932-1933 school year, but she did take a job at Blue Ribbon School in Beaver County for the 1933-34 academic year. Ms. Ward taught at Blue Ribbon for three years before taking the 1936-37 school year off to attend college full-time. Due to the Depression of the 1930's, Blanche took a pay cut down to \$50.00 a month while teaching at Blue Ribbon. After going to Northwestern State College for a year, she returned to a rural school in Beaver County.

Ms. Ward taught at three other dependent schools in Beaver County before eventually moving to an independent school. She taught at Camp Creek School from 1938-40, and at Sand Creek School from 1940-42. According to Ms. Ward, the typical academic term was eight instead of nine months long. The term ran from September to April during the year. Blanche finished her rural school teaching career at Sunny Plains School during the 1942-43 term. She received her lifetime teaching certificate from the State of Oklahoma in 1943, after completing her Bachelor's Degree. (See Appendix I.) Blanche took her first job in an independent or city school in 1943, for \$130.00 per month. She taught third grade at Laverne, Oklahoma, until the spring of 1945. For the 1945-46 academic term, Ms. Ward moved to Beaver City, Oklahoma, to teach third grade. A school board member in Beaver, George Cafky, tried to convince Blanche to leave Laverne a year earlier, but she would not break her contract. Ms. Ward stressed that she does not go back on her word. Blanche taught third grade in Beaver until the spring of 1949, when she began teaching in Kansas.

From the fall of 1949, to the end of her career in 1983, Blanche taught in Liberal, Kansas, which is thirty-six miles north of Beaver. She never anticipated

leaving Beaver because she enjoyed teaching there very much, but a good friend, Herthel Bennett, talked her into applying in Liberal. (A copy of the job application is in Appendix I.) Blanche remembered meeting with the Liberal School Board and being called by the "gruff" superintendent, Mr. Mahuron, the following day. Blanche accepted a position at McDermott School teaching second grade for the 1949-50 term, but she intended to return to Beaver some day. Blanche is still in Liberal today with, as she put it, "no aspirations of going back to Beaver." She taught second grade only one year before moving up to third grade for 1950-51. She was able to teach the same bunch of children for two years in a row. Blanche taught at McDermott School until January of 1955, when she was asked to move to a new school which had been recently constructed. The school was Southlawn, at which she would be until her retirement in 1983. Ten years later, Blanche would be inducted into the Kansas Teachers' Hall of Fame. Ms. Ward spent sixteen years teaching in Oklahoma and another thirty-four years teaching in Kansas. She made a successful transition from the country to the city school.

The typical rural or dependent school was a wooden or rock one-room structure, without electricity, and without indoor restrooms. They were heated with coal or wood-burning pot-bellied stoves. Ms. Ward remembers collecting cow chips (dried cow manure) out of the fields to burn when wood or other fuel was scarce. Blanche was responsible for going early enough to heat the classroom and get it ready for the students. Her first contract required that she take care of the janitorial duties at the school. This was very common, according to Ms. Ward, because in the country school, the teacher was in charge

of all facets of the educational process. No principals were involved in any of the one-room schools at which she worked, so she was expected to do her jobs without supervision. The local school boards hired and placed teachers and were the group to which a teacher would answer or from which help came. According to Blanche, one-room schools were located throughout Beaver County, because at that time state law in Oklahoma required that students should not have to travel more than three miles to attend school. Country schools typically were responsible for educating the children of the rural areas from first through eighth grades.

The curriculum of the country schools centered around the basic subjects of that era. The grades being taught depended on the number of students in the class. Ms. Ward's class sizes ranged from fifteen students at Locust Grove in 1931, to four students at Camp Creek in 1938. The ages of the children and their grade levels dictated the grades taught. At Camp Creek in 1938, Blanche had four students in four different grades (first, second, fourth, and sixth). Students would be expected to listen to other grade-level lessons or do their own homework during that time. A typical school day would begin with the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance and the Lord's Prayer. The subjects studied included reading, spelling, basic math, grammar, and penmanship. Female students studied domestic science and male students studied agriculture. A teacher's lesson typically lasted thirty minutes on a given subject. Each subject was not covered daily due to the number of grade levels. According to Ms. Ward, art and music were only studied once or twice a week. In the upper grades (seventh and eighth), students were required to study American and Oklahoma History as well

as geography. In order to move on to high school, students were required to pass an eighth grade exit exam covering reading, writing and arithmetic skills. Blanche spent time preparing the older students for the standardized test. The varied curriculum along with her many other duties kept Blanche extremely busy.

Ms. Ward had some very interesting recollections about teaching in the country school. She remembered the support she received from the parents of the rural areas. Blanche said that, basically, she had no discipline problems in her classes because the parents laid down the law to their children. She also recalled that her paychecks during the Depression were not always paid on time. She would often have to get the State's approval before cashing them, so there would be money to back them. Ms. Ward mentioned that she encountered several children who needed extra help to learn. She really believed that there was a need for special education teachers in those times. There was one small boy in particular that she was not able to help much due to her lack of training. The boy had an obvious learning disability, and his mother advised Blanche, "If he won't read, just spank him!" Blanche knew that was not the solution, so she tried to be patient and help the boy. She felt very badly for the child and often wondered what had become of him.

Other very special memories were the annual Christmas programs the classes performed for the parents and community. She also helped to organize plays for pie or box suppers to raise funds. The idea of hot lunches for students also originated around this time. The class would decide what to bring for the following day. The older female students would do the cooking. Blanche mused that she was not much of a cook, and that she would probably "burn boiling

water." Blanche also remembered having to deal with some eighth grade smokers in one class. She held two much older boys after school for smoking at recess and told them that she did not want them to set a bad example for the rest of the children. Blanche allowed them time to go out before recess to take care of their habit, so the younger children would not see. The worst memory of her teaching career in the country school was the day when a school board member convinced her to let school out for a rabbit hunt. The large rabbit population was destroying the crops, so hunters drove them into fenced-in areas and beat them over the head with clubs. The thought of this still makes Blanche sick to her stomach. Her career in the country school came to an end in the fall of 1943.

Blanche taught in four independent schools during her career. Her first city school was in Laverne, Oklahoma. This was the first place she taught that had electricity. Ms. Ward believed teaching only one grade level was much easier than teaching in the country school. She could give more individualized attention to her students. Her third-grade class that year had about twenty students. Blanche also had a principal for the first time in Laverne. She said that this may have been the most difficult transition she had to make in her career. No real teacher evaluation was done, but she did have to get used to having a direct supervisor. Her first principal was a woman who was also a teacher at the school. Blanche liked the fact that she did not have to take care of janitorial duties anymore. The room was ready and warm when she arrived at school. Blanche made a smooth transition to teaching in the independent school.

Ms. Ward moved to Beaver to teach third grade in 1945, and then to Liberal in 1949, to finish her career. Her first year in Beaver, Blanche had

another woman principal, Mrs. Leigh Green, who was very strict. Her fondest memories of Beaver were that she was able to teach the children of many of the people she knew and with whom she grew up. Blanche moved to Liberal in 1949, and taught at McDermott School before being one of the first teachers at the newly constructed Southlawn School in January of 1955. Blanche remembered a very challenging year in 1952-53. She had a class of thirty in a small room at McDermott, so she did not feel as though she did a good job of teaching. She said that the heating system kept their heads hot and left their feet extremely cold. Despite a few problems, Blanche greatly enjoyed her experiences in Liberal.

Ms. Ward formed some very special relationships and had one especially exciting "show-and-tell" while teaching at Southlawn. Blanche had fond memories of the camaraderie the teachers shared. One special friend was Oleta Peters who would eventually nominate Blanche for the Kansas Teachers' Hall of Fame. Three principals were special to Blanche. They were George Loepp, who was very considerate, calm, and quiet; Don Hill, who had excellent relationships with the children; and Milton Hughes, who was a fine man, a good friend, and a good disciplinarian. (See Appendix II for recommendation letters.) Blanche did not have a favorite principal. She said she enjoyed different things about each one. Ms. Ward was afraid Mr. Hughes might come in one day during "show-and-tell" because of a large commotion. One boy who did not ever have much for "show-and-tell" brought a brown paper sack one day, and when he opened it, a mouse jumped out. The mouse caused quite a stir in the room. Blanche was scared of mice, so she sat at her desk with her feet up in the air until

the commotion was over. Blanche was concerned that Mr. Hughes would have gotten pretty "cross" with her if he would have come in during that classtime. Even though there were a few commotions once in a while, Blanche was sincere in her belief that she never disliked any of the students she taught. The students loved Blanche as much as she loved them. Blanche taught in a time when hugging students was seen as okay. She had a genuine love for the students she taught and she was not afraid to show it with a hug once in a while. Blanche saved many letters and pictures from students that they had given her as gifts. One example was a get-well letter sent to her by a student, Janet Beedles, while she was ill in 1962. (See Appendix IV.) Ms. Ward saved many artifacts to remind her of the relationships she formed while teaching.

Blanche incorporated traditional teaching techniques with her love for students in the classroom. Ms. Ward considered herself a traditional teacher with high expectations for her students and a pro-active discipline plan in the classroom. She directed the lessons, allowed students time for directed practice, and also assigned homework to her students. Blanche really had no discipline problems because she kept her students constantly busy throughout the day. She kept students after school for extra work occasionally when a problem did arise. Blanche believes that all children can learn, but that they do not learn at the same rate. She really stressed that there was, and still is, too much pressure on children to progress at the same rate. Ms. Ward's main suggestions for improving education came in this area.

Blanche really believed that school systems should change the current method of giving grades and/or failing students, at least in elementary school. She

really felt badly for students who were failed or held back. Blanche stressed that there must be a way to abolish grade levels and allow students, with the direction of teachers, to work at their own pace. Under an idea proposed by Blanche, a student would be able to work their way through the lessons of a subject (grammar for example) and when they successfully completed that lesson, they would be allowed to move on. As for students who did not perform at standard levels, failing would not be an option; rather, the student would need special instruction in the difficult area until he/she could master it. Ms. Ward put the emphasis on the teacher to make thoughtfully written evaluations of student progress, and so, the idea of giving letter grades would be abandoned. Blanche believes that, unfortunately, teachers are forced to teach to the middle-level students, which slows down the more advanced ones and is too difficult for the slower learners. She is in favor of tracking students according to ability on certain subjects. Mainstreaming could also be helpful in certain subjects as well, according to Blanche. It would simply depend upon student ability. Blanche was and is very much in favor of "gifted" programs for accelerated learners and special education for learners with learning disabilities. She mentioned that special education teachers were needed in the country school because she did not feel she was helping them because of a lack of training. Proper training is one important quality in a good teacher.

Ms. Ward believes that good teachers and administrators possess certain qualities, and that the training given to teachers today is excellent. Educators certainly do not work for the money. (The most Blanche made was in 1983, which was \$2,083.00 monthly gross pay.) They must have an inner drive and

desire to help students. According to Blanche, teachers must love and understand students, care for them, and understand a certain amount of child psychology. Teachers must expect discipline in the classroom and be able to match up teaching methods with student needs. Blanche believes teachers should personally grade their students' work so they can monitor their progress. Effective principals should love children, be well respected, set a good example, and be considerate of others. Blanche believed that principals should support strong discipline in schools and be the main decision-makers for the school. According to Ms. Ward, the teachers must realize that the principal is the one in charge. Each of the principals she worked for had a different method of dealing with people. She really felt that all of the principals were effective. Blanche believes that educational training today provided an excellent base for them to become effective teachers and administrators. Blanche learned much of what she knows about teaching from experienced peers or master teachers. She also updated her skills by earning a Master's degree, by attending seminars, and by reading professional journals. She wished that she had been better trained before beginning her career.

Besides the improvements in teacher training, Blanche observed other important changes in education during her career. The quality of the facilities changed for the better during her career. Blanche had electricity in her room for the first time in 1943. Electricity made it possible for rooms to be well-lighted and eventually evenly heated and cooled. This improved the environment for the students and the teachers. The first change in teaching technology Blanche remembered was the insertion of the nine-millimeter projector into the

classrooms in the late 1950's. Computers, VCR's, and TVs began being popular in the last ten years of her career. Teachers began to be required to construct formal lesson plans during the last ten years as well. Formal evaluations of her teaching ability began under Principal Don Hill in the late sixties. (A copy of a teacher evaluation that Don Hill filled out for Ms. Ward's permanent file at Northwestern is included in Appendix I.) Two other important changes were extremely noticeable to Blanche as she looked back on her career.

Ms. Ward believes that the students have changed over the years in some ways, and she has concern for how the level of parental support has changed during her career. Due to some social factors, the type of student in the classroom today is much different than the ones from the country school. Students from the country school had a stronger work ethic, according to Blanche. They had a certain amount of work or chores they had to do on the farm, so working hard to achieve at school was nothing new for them. Rural students were always busy, but today's children believe that they must always have something to entertain them (i.e. TV). Most students today have no idea how to work hard because so many things are just given to them. Blanche believes this hurts their efforts in the classroom. The amount of parental support given to children has also changed over the years, but this has not been a change for the better, says Ms. Ward. Parents of the dependent school children made sure their children's homework was done and that they behaved. Today's parents are often both working or are not making time to help their children. Blanche stressed that parents need to realize how much their support is needed for student success. Blanche always welcomed parents to talk to her at any time.

She said that parental support was much better even in her last year than it is now. Blanche does not feel that some of the mischievous things that children do have changed much over the years. She thinks it is funny now to see children acting silly because another teacher has to deal with it. The last major change in Blanche's educational career happened when she retired at the age of seventy.

Ten years after her retirement in 1983, Blanche was inducted into the Kansas Teachers' Hall of Fame. Her induction in 1993, was one of the proudest moments of Blanche's career. Blanche was extremely qualified and deserving of the award. According to Mary Lou Doris, a member of the Board of Directors of the Hall of Fame, the qualifications for induction are a minimum of twenty-five years of teaching in Kansas; a nomination by an individual or organization along with three reference letters; and the determination by an appointed committee that the nominee made an outstanding contribution to education in Kansas. Blanche taught thirty-four years in Kansas, and her dedication to her students was truly outstanding. There are currently over 280 members of the Hall of Fame, according to Ms. Doris. Blanche joined Larry Ling, a Liberal, Kansas, science instructor inducted in 1980, and Horace Malin, a principal from Liberal High School, inducted in 1984, as the only three members from Liberal. Before acceptance, nominees must be screened by three committees associated with the Hall of Fame. The first committee verifies the information on the nomination forms as accurate; the second cuts the number of nominees down to about thirty-five; and the third makes the actual selection. Nominees are selected from twelve Kansas districts. Members of the selection committees are chosen from

different districts as prescribed by an official format. Two long-time associates nominated Blanche for the honor.

Colleagues and students alike spoke highly of Blanche in recommendation letters for the Kansas Teachers' Hall of Fame. The actual nomination came from Jonice Oblander, who taught with Blanche at Southlawn from 1967 until 1983, and Oleta Peters, who served with Blanche for many years in the Liberal National Education Association. Jonice made the following statement about Blanche in her recommendation letter: "Blanche's concern for education and her personal desire to be the best she could be is contagious to those around her, whether child or adult. I am a better person for having known her." (See sample nomination letters in Appendix II.) Ms. Ward's former principal, Milton Hughes, said of Blanche that, "she was always very understanding, cooperative, and had an appreciation for all with whom she worked or knew." One very special letter of recommendation was written by a former student from 1945-47. Herbert Bridgewater was classified as dumb and given failing grades by teachers before his two third grade years with Blanche Ward. (He was retained to help him improve.) Mr. Bridgewater wrote in his recommendation letter that Blanche rebuilt his self-esteem and helped him achieve. He stated that, "Instead of belittling me, she complimented the work I could do... I loved Miss Ward in third grade. I love her today... Besides my wife and parents, Miss Ward has had the greatest influence on my life." The tremendous student love and co-worker respect for Blanche became obvious while studying the nomination letters. Many lives were touched by Blanche Ward. Blanche was very humble about receiving the award, but she was and still is very proud. Blanche said she did not

necessarily consider herself a master teacher, but she did say she would have been disappointed if she would not have won. The award was an exclamation point to a fine teaching career.

After fifty years in teaching, Blanche has stayed active and enjoyed her retirement. She remains active in several organizations including the Parent Teacher Association, the Liberal Retired Teachers' Association, and Delta Kappa Gamma (a teaching sorority). Blanche loves to return to Southlawn to see former colleagues and look at student work. Observing student progress and growth continues to be one of her greatest pleasures. Blanche's concern and love for students have never gone away. Ironically, Blanche lives right across the street from another elementary school in Liberal (Lincoln Elementary). She can watch the playground from her picture window. Blanche truly believes that, despite all the criticisms, our educational system works and that teacher training is excellent. Blanche would recommend that new teachers observe other teacher's methods; update their skills regularly by reading and attending seminars; use different methods of instruction in the classroom because all students do not learn the same way; and show a love and concern for their students. Blanche stressed that when a teacher's patience for the students is gone, it is time to do something else. Blanche is a special person who had an extremely special and dedicated career.