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An Oral History of Marie O. Ronen, a One-Room Schoolteacher

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AN ORAL HISTORY OF
MARIE O. RONEN
A ONE-ROOM SCHOOLTEACHER

FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
SUMMER TERM 1989

RESEARCH IN EDUCATION 803
DR. ALAN MILLER

prepared by
MICHAEL K. RONEN

July 6, 1989

CHAPTER II
THE ORAL HISTORY

Mike: Please state your full name including your maiden name.

Marie: Marie Weigh Ronen

Mike: May I ask how old you are?

Marie: Certainly, I am 81.

Mike: Where did you attend grade school?

Marie: I attended grade school in Rice County and specifically Bushton, Kansas.

Mike: And high school?

Marie: Lorraine, Kansas.

Mike: College?

Marie: College? First at McPherson College and then I finished at Emporia State Teachers College.

Mike: Can you remember the years which you were teaching school?

Marie: Yes, I think so. I started in September of 1927 and retired in May of 1973.

There were a few years in there which I did not teach because I was home raising my family.

Mike: Do you remember the schools at which you were employed?

Marie: Ellsworth County Rural School, Rice County Rural School, Syracuse Public Schools, Reno County Rural School, Stafford County Rural School, and St. John Public Schools.

Mike: What subjects were studied in the one-room classroom buildings?

Marie: Well, we had the basic three R's, reading, writing, and arithmetic. We had penmanship, english, geography, history, and I think that is about it.

Mike: What was the length of the school day?

Marie: We started at 9:00 and finished at about 4:00 in about every school in which I taught.

Mike: How long was the school year?

Marie: The length of the school year was eight months, September through April.

Mike: What were the teaching methods used?

Marie: It was standard method at that time where the children were asked to study a lesson and then we would have teacher question/student answer time.

Mike: What teaching aids were available?

Marie: There weren't very many. Most of them were made up by the teacher. There were flash cards, maps, globes, chalkboards, and some of them had slates.

Mike: Were there any special classes offered for special students such as learning disabled?

Marie: No, everyone was in the same classroom doing the same work as everyone else in their grade level.

Mike: Can you describe a typical school day with regard to curriculum?

Marie: We usually started the day with reading because we felt it was the most important and if something had to give we didn't want it to be reading. Reading and math

in the morning and the other subjects would fall in the afternoon.

Mike: When it came time for promotion to another level were the students given any type of test? How did you justify the promotion?

Marie: The decision was the teachers based mainly on their daily work. A few tests maybe, but not for promotion purposes. The eighth graders were an exception. They had to pass a comprehensive test before they were promoted.

Mike: Did the early schools have libraries?

Marie: We had a few books but not libraries as we know them today.

Mike: How did you decide on a textbook?

Marie: They were recommended by the state. The children all bought their own.

Mike: What was the atmosphere or climate of the school. Was it relaxed, etc.

- Marie: Middle of the road. I was known as a strict disciplinarian but I did it without spanking.
- Mike: What were some rules of the schools which may be different from today?
- Marie: There was no dress code.
- Mike: Were there any special observances or activities?
- Marie: We would always have a Christmas program and we would always have a last day of school program with a big dinner.
- Mike: Did you have graduation exercises?
- Marie: The eighth grade students always went through the county seat for their graduation exercises so we had no exercises within our school.
- Mike: Can you describe a typical day of pre-school activities and post-school activities?
- Marie: I was my own custodian so I needed to get the water in from the outside pump. I had to haul in the coal from the coal

house in back of the school. I had to get the building warm for the school day which meant a very early start during the winter.

Mike: How were teachers expected to conduct themselves while in the public eye.

Marie: You had to be pretty straight. Most districts didn't want you to dance, or out running around town. We were to dress decently. In some districts we weren't allowed to date or marry. They got over that pretty quickly.

Mike: Were you in charge of any extra-curricular activities?

Marie: No. I was in charge of everything but there were no extra-curricular activities.

Mike: Was there a problem with teacher turnover?

Marie: No, not really. Usually if a teacher was satisfactory she stayed for awhile.

Mike: Did more than one teacher work in the first school in which you taught?

Marie: No, I was it.

Mike: Was there a principal?

Marie: No, I was it.

Mike: How were you evaluated?

Marie: By the board of education.

Mike: Did they visit your classroom?

Marie: They would come to visit sometimes, but not very often.

Mike: How would you handle discipline problems?

Marie: Mostly just by talking. If it got severe enough I would involve the parents.

Mike: Where did you live while you were teaching?

Marie: In a home in the district. I paid my own room and board.

Mike: How much schooling did you have in order to get your first job?

- Marie: I think I had a high school diploma and one semester of college at McPherson.
- Mike: Was your first school in which you taught a public school?
- Marie: Yes, it was supported by public taxes.
- Mike: What type of heating, lighting, plumbing did the school have?
- Marie: Well, the toilet was an outdoor outhouse, the heating was an old-fashioned pot bellied stove sitting in the middle of the room, and the lighting was just sunlight. If we needed the school building for evening or night someone would bring lamps to use.
- Mike: Can you describe the interior of your school?
- Marie: It was rather small. The west end of the room was a chalkboard, the teachers desk was a small stage maybe six inches above the floor. The children had a long recitation bench sitting beside the teachers desk. It was used for reading. Then the student desks were similar to

what is used today only they were nailed down to the floor.

Mike: What were some of the physical problems the building encountered.

Marie: It was difficult to maintain temperature. Students would get cold so they would sit closer to the stove then they would get hot. The lighting was not too good. We had north and south windows but not enough light could get in.

Mike: What was the usual age at which a student began school?

Marie: It was usually five or sometimes six. They would start in Kindergarten. There were no laws back then requiring attendance at a certain age.

Mike: Did many children move in and out during the school year?

Marie: No, it was pretty much constant throughout the year because they were farmers and farmers just didn't move around.

Mike: How many students would you have?

Marie: There were maybe ten to a dozen with many of them coming from the same family.

Mike: How did they get to school?

Marie: Most of them would walk, some would have their parents bring them in wagons pulled by horses.

Mike: What was the greatest distance a student would have to travel to get to school?

Marie: They kind of went over the hills to cut the distance so I supposed a mile and a half was about the furthest.

Mike: What grade levels did you teach?

Marie: All levels, one through eight. Sometimes we wouldn't have a third grader or something like that.

Mike: Did many of these students go on to college?

Marie: I know of a few who did. One became a teacher, one became a nurse, and the

others were mostly farm children who probably didn't attend college.

Mike: What was the average number of years a child attended school?

Marie: Most of them went the entire eight years but after that I wouldn't know.

Mike: Were there any requirements or laws to make them go eight years?

Marie: I don't think there were any laws until about 1940, I think.

Mike: Did the students have to buy their own books?

Marie: Yes, everybody bought their own books.

Mike: What did students wear to school?

Marie: Just whatever they were lucky enough to have. Many of my early students didn't have nice clothes at all. Boys would wear overalls and girls would wear work clothes, too. Seldom did I see a girl in a dress.

Mike: Did you have any outstanding students or students who became famous?

Marie: No, there were lots of intelligent kids but I don't know of any who became famous.

Mike: Do you know what the boundaries of your district were?

Marie: It was very well mapped out in districts. The law stated at that time for each township to have a school.

Mike: Was the school building used for any social events or community services?

Marie: No.

Mike: Can you think of any traditions which were peculiar to the first school?

Marie: Usually the girls were seated in the front of the class with the boys in the back. I don't think that is done anymore.

Mike: Can you think of any school board members names from your first school?

Marie: I can remember some faces. The only name I can remember is Devon or Darwin Anderson. I can't remember his first name.

Mike: Did you have any parent organizations such as PTA?

Marie: No.

Mike: Where did the funds for the construction of the school come from?

Marie: I wouldn't know.

Mike: Did the students pay an enrollment fee?

Marie: No. They only paid for their books and their supplies.

Mike: Do you remember your first teaching salary?

Marie: Yes, I worked for \$70 per month.

Mike: What was your salary in 1973 when you retired?

Marie: It was \$7800 per year which would be about \$650 per month.

Mike: How was your salary determined?

Marie: The board of education when I was hired decided what they could afford to pay.

Mike: Did you have a say at all with regard to your salary?

Marie: I could accept it or reject it. If I wanted a job I took what they offered.

Mike: How did you receive your paychecks each month?

Marie: They would bring them to me the last day of each month.

Mike: Did you get any supplemental salary for extra duties?

Marie: No. It never crossed my mind to ask for any extra salary. I was paid to do what it took to educate the students. In those days there was no such thing as extra duties. It seems that teachers get paid extra for everything these days. I suppose that is just a changing of the times.

Mike: What positive changes have you seen in the field of education over the past fifty years?

Marie: The most evident thing is the facilities. School buildings are so nice these days while we had so little to work with. I think teachers are doing basically the same job as they did fifty years ago but they have so much more to work with. I guess it is that way in most any profession.

Mike: What negative changes have you seen in the field of education over the past fifty years?

Marie: I don't think the public trusts the teachers as much as they used to. It seems as if the parents have too much say in what goes on in the schools. They should let the teachers do their thing and if they don't like it then they should find someone else to do the job.

Mike: Do you think you could be a successful teacher in the 1990's?

- Marie: Except for the fact that I will be 85 years old I think I could. I don't see where teaching has changed a whole lot.
- Mike: If you started your life all over again would you go into education knowing what you know now?
- Marie: Most definitely and I wouldn't do anything different than I did the first time.
- Mike: Marie, I want to thank you for your time this afternoon. You have been very cooperative and interesting.
- Marie: You are very welcome. It was fun for me too.