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### Fern (Walker) Epler, a One-Room School Teacher: An Oral History

Dan Walker

*Fort Hays State University*

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FERN (WALKER) EPLER  
A ONE-ROOM SCHOOL TEACHER  
AN ORAL HISTORY

FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION  
MASTER'S RESEARCH PROJECT  
SUMMER 1990

DAN WALKER  
BACHELOR OF SCIENCE  
KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

## CHAPTER II

### Remembrances of One-Room Schools

This oral history interview was conducted on July 13th and 17th, 1990. The interview was recorded over the phone with Mrs. Fern (Walker) Epler of Commerce City, Colorado.

Dan: Would you please state your full name?

Fern: Mrs. Fern (Walker) Epler.

Dan: Aunt Fern, What is your present age?

Fern: 74 years old this coming September.

Dan: Fern, would you please tell me the schools that you attended?

Fern: Well, let me think. I went to grade school at McGraw, in Union Township, then I went to Hoixe Rural High School, in Hoxie, and I spent two summers at Fort Hays.

Dan: What years did you teach school, Aunt Fern?

Fern: I taught from 1935 to 1941. I had a contract to teach for 1942 but I didn't teach.

Dan: What schools did you teach at?

Fern: The first was at Square Top, let me see, that was Dist. #49. Then I went to Tasco Dist. #31 for two years. Then Lone Star, or Walden School as I

called it. I was there for one year. Next I went to Bee Hive for two years. It had two district names, because they had to put two together to keep it going. It was known as Dist. #25 and then as Jt. #2. My last year was in Hoxie, but that wasn't a one-room school.

Dan: Now, Aunt Fern, I have all of the records that you sent me. Can you tell me what some of these are?

Fern: Well, first there is the review of my life by Andrea Singwald. It has a lot of the information about my life, that you asked me for the other day. Then you have my Certificate to Teach in the State of Kansas. Then I sent you some pictures of some of the old schools, to go with the ones you found at Hoxie. OH! I also found my High School Diploma and sent a copy of it to you. There is a copy of a letter from Warner Johnson to the State, when they were trying to get me back into teaching. I have also sent copies of my old contracts that I found, along with copies of some of my county certificates so you could see the scores that I got on the tests. We had to score an average of 80% to keep our certificates. and I

always did better than that! Now, does that help fill in some of the things you didn't find at Hoxie?

Dan: Yes, Aunt Fern, this helps quit a bit!

Dan: What subjects did you teach in all the schools?

Fern: I always had Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, Health, and for the 7th and 8th grades I taught Kansas History.

Dan: What was the length of your school year?

Fern: Eight months, and that gave us 120 days of school.

Dan: What was a normal day at school?

Fern: I had to work from 8 A.M. to 4 P.M. The kids only had class from 9 to 4, but I had to get there early to get the fire started and warm up the room. I never got to leave at 4 either, because I had to clean up after school, sweep the floors, take out the trash, and bank the coals in the stove for the next day.

Dan: What was the day like for the students?

Fern: Usually we would start with Arithmetic. I hated to teach it so we got it out of the way first. Then I would have them go to the first recess, and start Social Studies and Reading when we came

back in. I tried to have all of the students do their Writing right before lunch, and then I would have them do Spelling right after so that they didn't get sleepy. Most of the afternoon we spent on English and History. I would spend a lot of time with the older students in the afternoon, because they had to take the state test to get out of grade school, and I wanted them to do good.

Dan: Did you do anything else in a normal day?

Fern: No. Only once in awhile if they had studied real hard I would take them out to play some base ball in the afternoons.

Dan: Did any of the school have a library?

Fern: No. Not that I remember.

Dan: How did you decide on what textbooks to use?

Fern: The state told us which one to use, and we used the ones that they printed.

Dan: Did you have any special observances at any of your schools?

Fern: No. We had a program each Christmas, and we had a day off for Thanksgiving, and a day off on Election Day but that was it. OH! And we did have an All Schools Day in the spring. That was when

two or three schools would get together and have games like baseball, football, three-legged races, spelling bees, and math competitions.

Dan: Did any of the schools have graduation exercises for the students?

Fern: No. There was an all county graduation in Hoxie for the 8th graders each year.

Dan: How were you expected to conduct yourself when you were a teacher?

Fern: Well I only remember having any rules at Square Top. They told me that I couldn't smoke, drink, date except on Saturdays, and that I couldn't get married during the school year. The rest of the schools never said a word to me that I can remember.

Dan: Was there much of a turnover in teacher back then?

Fern: Yes, there were always people leaving for the cities. Everyone was going where they could make more money!

Dan: Did you have many discipline problems with the students?

Fern: No. I never had a problem in any of the country schools, only when I went to Hoxie did I have students who would not behave.

Dan: Why was that?

Fern: They thought that everyone from the country was stupid and that they could do what they wanted to do.

Dan: Where did you live while you were teaching at each of the schools?

Fern: At Square Top I lived with Tell Corke's. at Tasco I stayed with Harm Getz's the first year. The second year I lived with Harold Campbell's and then when their kids got the mumps, I moved in with Bill Brown's. At Lone Star I lived with the Walden's. And at Bee Hive I lived both years with Cole Morgan's.

Dan: Let's talk about the schools themselves. Was there anything special about Square Top?

Fern: No. Just a square building with a hall where you hung up your coats and stuff. Desks in rows and the teachers desk in the front.

Dan: Is that the school with the flat square on the top?

Fern: Yes. That is how it got it's name. The chimney went right through the center of the roof where it was flat.

Dan: Now at Tasco, the 2nd school you taught at. Didn't you teach in more than one place?



Fern: Yes. I taught in three different places there, and they were all in terrible condition.

Dan: Can you describe them?

Fern: The first one was the "old" schoolhouse. You had to go up a lot of steps and the dirt was all back away from the building.

Dan: Where was the second place?

Fern: The second place was in a regular home. I had enough room for all the kids to be in the same room when they were all studying, but I had to put them in several different room when teaching.

Dan: Why did they have you in a private home?

Fern: Because they were tearing down the old school to build a new one. Then we taught the next year in the basement of the Presbyterian Church.

Dan: Did you get to teach in the new schoolhouse?

Fern: No. I left before it was done. They had two teachers there when it was done, but they never had much school there.

Dan: What was the schoolhouse like at Lone Star?

Fern: Well, it was the same as any one-room schoolhouse with a hall.

Dan: Were all of the schoolhouses built out of wood?

Fern: Yes, but Bee Hive had been stuccoed.

Dan: Are there any of the schools that you remember having any bad problem, like leaking roofs?

Fern: We didn't have any bad leaks or water running down. At Bee Hive we didn't have a good yard so we went over to a pasture to play ball and soccer and things like that.

Dan: Did you have any lights in the schools?

Fern: No. We didn't have no conveniences at all. We just went off of sun light.

Dan: Did all of the schools have out-door toilets?

Fern: Yes, they sure did!! Most of them were just "OK". But then, you see, what you consider real good now, we didn't think anything about it. You were just lucky to have something with a door on it! No one ever complained because a lot of them didn't have that at home.

Dan: Who maintained the building in each district?

Fern: The school board did the things that needed doing. Milton says that he used to have to bring the coal to the school. Then I would have to go out to the coal bin to get it every day. .pa

Dan: Did they ever make any improvements at any of the schools which you taught at?

Fern: No. I don't think so.

Dan: Did you have any problems with the schoolhouses?  
Were they cold in the winter?

Fern: Oh sure! They were so cold that in the winter we would set around the stove to keep warm. These schools were just wooden houses with no insulation.

Dan: Did any of your school have any playground equipment?

Fern: No. Some schools had merry-go-rounds but none that I taught at. They furnished balls and bats, things like that is all.

Dan: Do you know what became of the old school when they closed?

Fern: I think they tore Square Top and Lone Star down. Tasco was given to the Girl Scouts, then was sold and made into a house by the Ewers. Bee Hive was moved into Hoxie by Vernon Mickey as a museum.

Dan: Do you know what they did with the equipment after they closed the schools?

Fern: I know they sold some of it, but I don't know what happened to the rest. Some people who wanted a desk or something gave a dollar or two, but most didn't. Some of the schoolhouses like McGraw and Bee Hive they kept as voting places.

Dan: How did they decide the school districts?

Fern: I don't know.

Dan: Were any of the schoolhouses used for community activities during the school year?

Fern: No. Just school and elections.

Dan: Can you remember anything about any of the school board members at the schools you taught at?

Fern: Well, I think Tell Corke and Harve Getz were the worst school board members I ever had. Harve tried to get the big boys to give me trouble, but they didn't pay any attention to him. He didn't want me to have the school the second year, so he tried to get rid of me. Tell Corke got mad at me during the school year because I wouldn't baby his little Lena, and I wouldn't go with the guys he wanted me to go with. He would go through my stuff if I brought anything home, so I had to do all of my work at school so he couldn't find out what I was doing.

Dan: Were there any school board members that you got along with well?

Fern: Yes. Harvey Richards at Square Top. I got along real good with Eplers at Bee Hive, and with Charley Simons.

Dan: Did the school boards do the hiring and the firing?

Fern: The school board did it. If you wanted a job you would talk to three school board members. Two of them could hire you.

Dan: Did the school board have to check with anyone before they hired you?

Fern: No. They didn't have to, they might of, but they didn't have to.

Dan: Did you have any controversies or community unrest at any of the schools?

Fern: Yes. The district had a big fight at Tasco, when they built the new schoolhouse. Taxpayers against the non-taxpayers, parents against the ones that didn't have kids in school. Harve Getz pushed the new school hard, because they wanted to make a second district in Sheridan County for high school, but it never got done.

Dan: Didn't you say , that at one of the schools there was a fight over religion?

Fern: Yes. That was at Square Top. The Baptist were against the Christians. Dan: Did that make it hard to teach at Square Top?

Fern: Yes, because you couldn't please both of them.

Dan: Did the kids bring the fight to school?

Fern: No. The kids never mentioned it.

Dan: Is that the reason you left Square Top after one year?

Fern: Yes. I did what I wanted to, so I didn't please a lot of them.

Dan: What closed down the schools that you taught in?

Fern: Mostly it was the loss of students. But they could hire teachers as long as the district wanted to. I remember Imogene Cooper had a school where she taught for a year and didn't have a pupil.

Dan: Did all of the schools unify with Hoxie?

Fern: Yes, as far as I know.

Dan: Was the land for the schools donated to the district or was it bought?

Fern: I think the state set aside so much land in each township for schools.

Dan: How did the school districts raise their money?

Fern: Property taxes. If you didn't own property, you didn't pay. This only caused problems when you tried to build a new school or something like that.

Dan: Did you have to charge any fees to the students when they enrolled in school?

Fern: No. They had to buy their own books, that was all.

Dan: Where did they buy their books?

Fern: Usually at the drug store in Hoxie, or from some one who already had a book from the year before.

Dan: Did you require students to buy any special materials for school?

Fern: No. Just paper tablets to write on.

Dan: Do you remember what your starting salary was?

Fern: Yes. It was \$40 a month and the highest was \$65 a month in a county school. I got paid \$90 a month when I went to Hoxie.

Dan: Was this a good wage?

Fern: Yes. You know, when I taught at Square Top I got \$40 a month and I only had to pay \$9 a month for room and board including lunches to take to school.

Dan: Where you able to save any money?

Fern: Oh yes! There were no taxes, no social security, and no teacher union dues. That came in just as I quite teaching.

Dan: Who decided how much you got paid? Did you negotiate with any of the schools?

Fern: Sometimes you did. I was pretty well satisfied with what they gave me.

Dan: How did you get paid?

Fern: I don't remember! They probably gave me a check. I never even thought about that, but I know they gave me a check.

Dan: How did you get the check cashed? Did you get to go into town?

Fern: We went into town once or twice a month. We only got paid once a month.

Dan: Did you put your money in the bank or did you keep the cash?

Fern: I put it in the bank, then I would write checks. By 1935 people had faith in the banks again.

Dan: Did you go shopping much in town?

Fern: No. If I wanted something, I would order it from the Sears or Montgomery Ward catalog.

Dan: Did they deliver or did you have to go pick it up in town?

Fern: No. They delivered it.

Dan: What was the usual age for a student to start school?



Fern: About six.

Dan: Did you have any that started early?

Fern: Yes. Veda Getz started a five.

Dan: Any special reason she started at five?

Fern: I think her parents wanted to get rid of her, and it was close to school. She had been coming with her brother a lot, so we just started her.

Dan: How did she do?

Fern: She didn't do real good the first year because she wasn't ready for it. She couldn't do good all day, she was just a little to young.

Dan: Did you have any students move in or out of the district while you were teaching?

Fern: Yes, at Tasco. I had some kids move in and out. Usually you didn't have any changes. I had the Neap kids, the moved in at Tasco, and Floyed, I can't remember his name. He came from another district because Lela (Walker) was teaching over there and he didn't want to go to school with her. So he came an extra two miles to go to school with me.

Dan: How did most of the kids get to school?

Fern: They walked, some rode horses. At Tasco was the only place where I had any that rode horses. They

would tie them up outside, and would feed them at lunch.

Dan: What was the greatest distance the students had to travel to school?

Fern: Well, the Campbells had to come a long way, about three miles to Square Top. Now that was an unusual distance, most only had to come about a mile. And the Browns, they lived in a pasture, in a dugout. They came about two miles.

Dan: How many students did you have each year?

Fern: Oh, I would say about 10 or 12.

Dan: Did you have some students in every grade?

Fern: No. Sometimes I would have four in one grade, and none in the next grade, then two or three in the next.

Dan: You had to change classes each year then?

Fern: Yes. But that gave you a lot of time to spend with the kids.

Dan: Do you know what occupations any of your students went into?

Fern: Quite a few of them stayed on the farm. Some went into town.

Dan: Were any of your students outstanding?

Fern: No. Two of them went to college, but I don't know what they did after that. Both are dead now.

Dan: At any of the four school, did you have any ethnic communities, like Germans or Poles?

Fern: No. Not where I taught. There were some up at McGraw, and down at St. Peter there were the Russians, and at Dresden there were Bohemians. But everywhere I taught they were just Americans.

Dan: How long did your students stay in school?

Fern: Most got out in eight years.

Dan: How long did they have to go to school?

Fern: Until they were 16. Most went until 16 or graduated before that.

Dan: What kind of clothing did most of the students wear?

Fern: Girls were required to wear dresses, the boys wore over-alls. That's about all they had. The girls had to wear dresses or they would have been in a lot of trouble. In the winter we would wear longjohns under our dresses and pull our socks up over the longjohns, but you could still see them.

Dan: As the teacher, you had to wear a dress all of the time?

Fern: Oh yes! Oh yes!

Dan: What kind of dress did you have to wear?

Fern: There were no real stipulations on what length, but they were about mid-calf. We didn't wear the real long ones. They were real loose fitting, and they always looked like you bought something that was too big for you.

Dan: After Bee Hive you taught at Hoxie Grade School. When you left there, you quit teaching. Was there a special reason why you quit teaching?

Fern: There were new opportunities that opened up during the war. I could learn something different. I had heard all the people talking about the good jobs in the cities, and I had learned about as much as I was going to learn, without spending a lot of my time and money in the summers, going to college.

Dan: Did you ever miss teaching after you left?

Fern: No!

Dan: When you think back on your years of teaching, is there anything that still sticks in your mind as being a lot of fun?

Fern: Oh! I had a lot of fun with the kids, and their families. I still go back and visit some of them and spend the night. The job of teaching had run its course. I had had all of the job I wanted

and I was ready to go on to something else. There was nothing to do out in the country, no schools to go to (college), and no guys to date.

Dan: Aunt Fern is there anything else that you would like to say about your time as a teacher in one-room schools?

Fern: NO. I think I told you everything I can remember. I will probably think of something tomorrow, but not now.

Dan: Thank you Aunt Fern. You have been a great help and it has been a real pleasure to talk to you.

Fern: Good-by Dan.