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### The Oral History of Thelma Katrina Nusser Morgan Concerning One-Room Schools From 1890-1980

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THE ORAL HISTORY OF  
THELMA KATRINA NUSSEK MORGAN  
CONCERNING ONE-ROOM SCHOOLS  
FROM 1898 TO 1980

KATRINA RAYLENE WEST  
BS IN ED FROM EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY  
FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY  
SPRING, 1995

## CHAPTER II: ORAL HISTORY OF THELMA NUSSER MORGAN

Thelma's knowledge of education extended beyond her life, with information from her parent's childhood. Her story begins with them. Marie Lewis Nusser began attending school in 1889, at a time when school lasted from one to three months. The building was both a church and a school about one fourth mile from her home. Generally the teachers were men, who had no patience with the squirming of little folks. Marie was left handed, which in those days was unacceptable. The teacher tried to make her learn to write with her right hand and would even tie her left hand behind her back. When these methods failed he made her count corn. He kept a can of corn on his desk that he spilled and made a student count. About the time it was all picked up he would kick it over again. Sometimes he would kick it over several times before he would let the student return to their seat. One time Marie attempted to prevent his kicking it over again. She held the can tightly. His first try did not spill the corn, so he really kicked it on the second try and corn scattered throughout the building. The embarrassment she felt kept her from trying that trick again.

These methods continued for some time until her mother, who was a school board member, went to the school. She insisted that the attempts

to change her daughter's left handedness be stopped immediately. Marie was many years overcoming the nervousness this had created. She hated him for making her count corn, but she gave him credit as an excellent teacher of phonics, for which she was forever in his debt.

After finishing the eight grades, she went on to high school. Her parents were well-to-do, with a hired cook and laundress. They could afford to send her for further education, without needing her help at home with the work. She had room and board with a family in town during her four years of high school. Each week her mother drove the buggy to town on Friday to take her home. Generally, early Monday morning her mother would take her back to school and leave eggs, milk, butter, and other farm products with the family to pay for her stay. While in high school she took a subject every period. When she graduated from high school she received two diplomas, which was unheard of, or very, very rare.

Following high school Marie attended Kansas State Normal School at Emporia, Kansas for two years. She was very fortunate in her day as she received a much better education than most people. With two years of college she was qualified to teach Math and Latin in high school. However, the western part of Kansas had its adventures, so she took a country school teaching job in Reno County.

Her school was like all schools of that period with a blackboard

across the front of the building. There was a raised platform in front of that where the teachers's desk and chair stood. The teacher's desk in this case consisted of a small table with an ordinary kitchen chair to sit on. On the desk was the small hand bell that called the children in from recess. The bell sometimes had to be rung very loudly as some of the boys might be a quarter to half mile away on a rabbit and hound chase. One boy was the rabbit and the others were the hounds. There was also an attendance book and a few papers.

A wood burning heating stove sat in the middle of the room. The desks, holding two students each, were placed in the bare places. Smaller children might sit by an older sister, as there were no small desks that would be more comfortable for little ones. Directly in front of the teacher was a long bench on which the pupils sat when they were called for recitation. The students were not classified as to grade but by what Reader or Math book they were in.

There were about twenty-five students in all eight grades. Most folks sent their children until they had finished the eight grades, and some might be as old as fifteen or twenty. The students would tell the teacher they were ready for a certain book in Math or Reading, as it was their responsibility for their own education. Since the fellows didn't come until the fall work was done they would never be in school for the full session. Marie found some older boys fighting. She couldn't get it

broken up. She finally had to beat them apart with the broom, and they came out of that dog pile in a hurry.

After recess one retired to the well where a pump and a dipper were handy. One person pumped the water and all stood around passing the dipper from hand to hand until everyone was satisfied. Any water not caught by the dipper fell on the well platform and filtered back into the well. If a school had no well two older boys with a water bucket would be sent to the nearest neighbor's well. They would return to carry the bucket up and down the aisle so each could dip the dipper into the bucket and take a drink.

To get rid of a teacher the favorite trick was to lock her in the coal house. This was accomplished by arriving early enough to catch her there gathering coal to resupply the fire. The usual response from the teacher was to holler and threaten. Marie did none of that, but just sat quietly on a bucket of coal. Approximately twenty minutes later they let her out. She went in, set the clock back the twenty minutes to 9:00, and continued school until the usual dismissal time of 4:00.

The parents were maddened by the late arrival home of their children. According to the children she had kept school over the time. As children were needed to help get chores done before dark, it wasn't too long before Marie was questioned about the matter. She explained that after being locked in the coal house she still felt she was

responsible for a full day of school and had set the clock back to give them a full day from nine until four. After the parents got home with the real story there were no more shenanigans pulled. Marie's philosophy was to watch how you reacted to your students then not do the obvious thing.

The Literary was a community event hosted at the school. The Literary would consist of a debate on a trivial topic such as "Which Can Run the Fastest, A Horse or a Dog?", or "If a Melon Vine is Planted on Your Property but the Fruit is on the Neighbor's Property, Who Owns the Melon?" Occasionally a more serious topic such as whether women should have the vote, might be included.

Marie taught for two years, and later when her family was grown she taught four more years. She met and married William (Bill) Nusser. They moved to Copeland where some of his relatives also settled.

Of his schooling in Reno County, beginning in 1889, Bill recalled knowing only the German spoken at home and no English when he went to school. The first Reader began with a page of the twenty-six letters of the alphabet. Before learning one word the student must know the names of all the alphabet letters, by sight, from a to z. This was monotonous for the students, and the teacher, who had to listen to six or eight little ones each separately repeating A, a, B, b, through four recitation classes a day. After class the students returned to their desks to stare at the

page of letters. It was frustrating for all beginners, but trying to learn letters in the foreign English made it even more difficult. Many an older brother or sister taught the letters at home until the child could recite them all.

Some time during Bill's sixth or seventh grade year of school he had German Measles. He was very sick at the time, and the disease affected his eyesight, so he was unable to read the books. He finally dropped out of school at the end of the seventh grade. In those days no one had heard of children wearing glasses, and no compulsory education laws required his attendance.

An eighth grade education was considered super in those days, for either men or women. Bill felt he received an adequate one. He remembered a male teacher he highly respected, as the teacher was strict in his requirements both in and out of school.

At recess they were expected to get a lot of exercise so that they would be ready to sit quietly during "books", a term used when school was in session. Their baseball was made of twine very tightly wrapped and sewed all through with needle and thread, so that it wouldn't unravel. The bat was a board that had been shaped to fit the hand. Bill played lots of baseball, usually as a left handed pitcher. He could skate faster than the fastest horse running on the ground. In the Winter they played many snow and ice games, such as ice hockey and skating races.



In 1916 there were a few people in Copeland carrying petitions to see if there was enough interest to start a high school. Marie was definitely in favor of a high school, but Bill was more skeptical. When it came time to send their children to high school this disagreement was renewed. Marie, having come from a long line of teachers, and with a mother who strove to see her own children highly educated, won the day.

Thelma was born November 17, 1916, the oldest of eleven children. As she was rather small they did not send her to school until she was nearly seven. Bill took her on a motorcycle, as the family had no car. When he was sure she knew the way she began walking the two and one-half miles to Colusa School southwest of her house. Legislation had decreed that every school child be within three miles of a school. Thelma lived further away than any of the other students. For one mile of the walk she enjoyed the games and visits of the neighbor children. The rest of the time was spent investigating every new thing to be seen or found along the roads.

When her brothers and sisters began school they would race thistles along the road, to see which would stay on the road the longest. She ruefully remembered that the wind was always out of the southwest in the morning, and the northwest going home. In the Winter she got horribly cold during this walk, as her coats were not heavy enough. She

was also wearing knickers, long underwear, and cotton socks to hide the long underwear. She would go from cold, to warm, to cold, and later learned she was in the process of freezing to death. It would be mid-morning before her feet would get warm.

Some teachers came late to school, after all the students were there. The children would be huddled on the side of the building out of the wind. It would take a long time to get the fire going and the building warm, but a child didn't complain as that was the best that could be. Everyone else was in the same boat, and after all children were to be seen not heard.

Colusa School was large enough to hold twenty-five students with all eight grades. First grade consisted of Primer, Reader, Penmanship, Spelling, and Math books. Thelma's mother thought she was a real dummy as she couldn't learn to count to ten or remember her ABC's. At the bottom of each primer page was a nursery rhyme to be memorized and read page perfect before turning to the next page. Before you could go on you got either a star or a dot. The star signified the whole page had been read perfectly. The dot meant you'd made some mistakes. Thelma felt she could never memorize easily due to the struggles she had her first year of school.

For Valentine's Day her mother helped her make some puffy Valentines with cotton stuffed inside. She wrote so poorly that one

classmate got both Valentines. Her cards were highly popular so she had to straighten out the mess immediately.

Her parents were busy making a living with a half acre garden, chickens and hogs. All the washing was done on a wash board, and There was a new baby every two years. Her parents were also paid to prepare the school for the coming year. Livestock fertilizer created an over-productive strawberry patch that was to provide an unending supply of vitamins in school lunch pails.

Men did not help in the house unless there was no way around it, so there was no time for reading readiness or developmental skills. Thelma began immediately as a first grader to teach her siblings. When she was home from school, or during idle time from weather or quarantine she worked with the younger children.

Families were quarantined for measles, chicken pox, and mumps from one to three weeks. They hated missing school, and so dreaded quarantine when no one could come or go. If they had to miss school for another illness a laxative such as Black Draught or a dose of Castor Oil was taken with orders to stay in bed. If a person was sick enough they would stay home and take medicine, then they were really sick. All the Nusser children were vaccinated for smallpox. After an absence it was the student's duty to catch up, and tune in to where the rest of the class was. There was not as much testing, as today.

When her baby sister died, there was a small funeral held in their living room. Infant mortality was a common occurrence when the nearest doctor was at least 25 miles away. Children were shielded from death, and there was little discussion with adults so they held their tongue and didn't ask too many questions. If a snake bit one of them while the parents were gone, the child stood in Coal Oil until their return.

Storms were the scariest threat. The house was small, but everyone would have to get up in the middle of the night, get the little ones dressed, and lay crowded on a blanket on the floor downstairs, fully clothed. They also had a cave where they could go for shelter.

During her second and third grade years Thelma and her younger sister rode a horse to school. They would each have a gallon syrup bucket containing their lunch. Lunch might consist of an egg sandwich, sausage, or a piece of chicken, along with a jar of fresh strawberries. The richer neighbors had peanut butter in their lunches. Thelma was often able to trade the strawberries for a peanut butter sandwich.

Thelma remembers always having the *Hutchinson Herald* newspaper in her home. Visits with neighbors or relatives were enjoyed with the time off just to play. Her father had taught himself to play the organ and violin, so music abounded. Marie sang tenor, Thelma sang soprano and others of the family filled in harmony. Later on, the family had a radio

and listened to music or the Amos and Andy Show.

What effects world events had on the community and family were unknown, as children were not allowed to sit around and listen to adults talk. The Stock Market Crash of 1929 was devastating on some of the land owners. Federal Land Bank allowed the farmer to pay what he could, but another local lender demanded the land when payments were missed. Some of Thelma's relatives lost land to this lender. A local grain elevator went belly up due to embezzlement during this same period.

In order to teach in high school a teacher had to have two years of college. To teach in elementary school for a four or five month duration, a high school education was not even required. The education and preparation for these teachers was lacking. Thelma's teachers often couldn't do the problems in the book, so her mother had to teach her arithmetic. Students were on their honor not to look in the back of the book at the answers. Many times the teacher would have to look at Thelma's paper in order to work the problem.

Recess was a time for active games and exercise. The favorite game was Andy Over, as one ball made a game all could play together. Only a few games were played inside such as, I Spy, and Fruit Basket Upset.

During the middle grades Agriculture, Geography, History, and Physiology were added to the curriculum. A teacher could not possibly hear all these subjects every day, so they would combine several grades

or put classes on an every other day rotation. An eighth grade student took state exams in Arithmetic, English, Reading, History, and Spelling in order to pass grade school and continue to high school. This score must be above a D or 70%. Parents expected students to be ready and to pass these tests. Part of the teacher's responsibility was to prepare these students.

As a seventh grader two of the tests could be taken to ease the burden as an eighth grader. Thelma took Geography and Kansas History. Her teacher taught Kansas History every other year, and this wasn't the year for it. Through encouragement from her mother she had been reading a column on Kansas history containing one chapter each week from the book written by Bliss Isley, and reprinted in the *Hutchinson Herald*. Each week there were questions to answer, mail in, and have graded. Several times Thelma took second or third and even some honorable mentions. Therefore, Marie figured Thelma could pass the Kansas History exam, which she did.

During high school she rode to school with a neighbor boy for two years, who hauled six students in his car. The five cents a mile paid by the school district went to him. Since Marie had managed to get her first child off to high school she was also able to get her transported. The following two years Thelma drove the family car, with a governor on it at 35 miles per hour.

She was scared to death when she arrived at the high school. Thirty students started as freshmen, though only eleven would graduate. The building was so big and she knew very few students, none of whom she had in her classes. (Today she and her classmates send a round robin letter to each other.) She liked Algebra, but hated Geometry, which involved memorizing. She competed at Cimarron in a State Math contest and won first place. Marie heard it from the neighbors, as Thelma hadn't thought to tell her the results. Sports happened for the boys but she lived 12 miles north of town which was too far in the country to stay for those activities.

A few years later her brother was riding home from a sports event with a neighbor during a dust storm. Both had to look out the side windows to stay in the road. They were sideswiped and the driver had to have a pin put in his elbow. Otherwise, the Dirty Thirties rarely caused them to miss school. She participated in Music and Music contests. While in high school Thelma and her sister, Maletta, entered a radio contest in Garden City and were invited back to sing on Saturdays. They sang a cappella.

After high school, Thelma began a nursing program in Garden City. This was a way for her to receive advanced training, since money wasn't available for a college education. She became allergic to the codeine in medicines. Her hands cracked open and as she was working on the

surgical floor, she was not able to continue in nursing. In 1936 and 1937 she worked at the bank in Copeland, living at home and catching a ride to town with her high school aged brothers and sisters.

She received a loan from the local federated club, the Friday Afternoon Club, to enable her to attend college and pursue a two year life teaching certificate. She rode the train to Emporia, Kansas but stayed only one year when finances ran low.

After twelve years of reorganizing the kitchen chairs and benches into a classroom so her younger brothers and sisters could learn, Thelma returned to teaching as a paid employee. She had never tired of the teaching game while growing up, and continued to "teach school" through high school. As each of the younger children entered school they either had home work to do or Thelma assigned projects for them. They kept busy while she did her school work. Her decision to teach was further influenced by the fine example Marie provided in coming up with creative solutions without numerous set rules.

In 1938-1939 Thelma taught a one-room school in Meade County, District 20, called Liberty Union. The County Superintendent had formerly been the Grade School Principal in Copeland, knew the two women seeking teaching positions, and sent for them. School teachers were often difficult to find.

Generally, a friend or relative got a teacher hired, but the applicant



could write to get a job or inquire where to go. Possibly a potential teacher would see only one school board member, and be hired for the following term. The salary would be general for the county, and the teacher was grateful for a job.

The County Superintendent probably felt very lucky to find these two at once. Both Thelma and the other teacher were from Copeland and they were able to share rides home on the weekends. The County Superintendent, Miss Granger, took this into consideration when she changed one of their positions so they would be teaching in adjoining districts nearer each other. The salary was \$65 per month, or \$520 for the 8 months. Her father advised her to buy land with the extra she was saving, and she could easily have bought 80 acres. She wouldn't hear of it, as she never intended to live on a farm again. She saved her money for a car.

There was an unwritten law as to what the teacher could or could not do. No parties or dances were acceptable. And the teacher would have been run out of town if she'd dated the local bachelor. Men had the right to go courting, women could go with an approved, community arranged man. The teacher did all janitor work, with sweeping compound kept in the ante room. She even was responsible for hauling water if the school didn't have a well.

After her childhood experiences of standing in the cold, Thelma had

sworn never to be late and force others through that pain. If the weather was really bad children weren't to start for home. A parent or neighbor would be by and pick up all those going his way. Teachers were on their honor not to waste too much "books" time. Grade cards were sent every month and of course it was expected that the teacher would have the eighth graders prepared for the state exams.

Her first school had eleven students enrolled, one a Downs Syndrome child, named Elvis. He was the age of a fourth grader, but of course couldn't handle the work. At the Halloween program Thelma changed the word Indians to Ghosties in the song 1 Little, 2 Little, 3 Little Indians, and Elvis was the ghost that stood all alone. The play also required a ghost, which Elvis played. Older students would give readings. Elvis's parents beamed with joy that someone had finally included him instead of shuffling him aside.

Since Halloween was after harvest it was a good time to gather the community at the school. If it was known that the teacher had good programs, then people from adjoining school districts would want to also attend. If several schools were having box suppers, some might be postponed until Thanksgiving. A box supper was held to raise money for school supplies of construction paper, a book, and something for Christmas such as red and green crepe paper. The money earned from the supper was given to the teacher and might be anywhere from \$10 to \$50.

Generally the school teacher's box was bought by one of the young bucks in the community. The teacher's box would be run up in price, perhaps to \$3.00, while husbands usually bought their wife's boxes for a quarter. Mrs. Keltner made the food for Thelma's box, but what Mrs. Keltner didn't know was that Thelma had secretly made another box at school. Several boxes got sold higher, trying to find the teacher's box.

The school year ran from after Labor Day to the latter part of April. Since she had no car Thelma boarded where there was room with the Keltner's family, for \$15 a month. She was expected to go home for the weekends. She slept with their sixth grade daughter, who stayed in bed while she was dressing so she could copy Thelma and wear a dress, or skirt and blouse as teacher was doing. Her shoes were oxfords so she could walk or run and play games. During the year a grandmother of two families died. Thelma went to town with the family to cook and care for the children. School was not in session for three or four days due to the number of students affected by this death.

Students came to school with the books they would need, which were state adopted text books and would be used about ten years. The country school used the same books as town. These were purchased new in the local stores or used from a community family. Often families arranged to get their books from certain families with children just older than their own. The students would also have tablet paper and pencils.

Teaching supplies consisted of addition and multiplication flash cards, plus a few reading sight word flash cards. The only workbook might be one related to Social Studies.

It was not possible that every subject be taught each day. Thelma got around that by combining grades. To teach English, for instance, she would assign all students to write something such as a letter to their grandmother, so she could diagnose their word usage. Then some of the children would be working on sentences, or punctuation, or whatever they needed to aid their ability to convey ideas. She found parts of their book that related to the general concept she was already teaching, and didn't have to teach English as a separate subject.

Math and Reading classes were heard everyday for all grades. The slate chalk board was used for demonstrating the student's work. When at the board they were competitive in trying to finish quickly and perfectly.

Some teachers had the big ones teach the younger students but Thelma never did. There was always Penmanship practice to keep the students busy doing push-pulls, circles, and ovals. Another part of her week was spent in pronouncing spelling. She could pronounce three or four class lists at one time.

She resigned from this position to move to Stevens County, for better pay. There she spoke to Mr. Ahrens who hired her immediately

when he learned she was related to Nussers he had known, including her dad, in Reno County. This was District Number 49, also known as Liberty Union. She owned a car, so she boarded in Hugoton, and drove out to the school on the Stevens-Morton County line each day. Her contract for 1939-1940 paid a salary of \$80 per month or \$640 for the eight month term. School started the fourth of September, but her contract wasn't dated and signed by all board members until the twenty-fourth of the month. She agreed in April to teach the following year and was given a \$5 per month raise for 1940-1941.

While at Liberty Union the government provided commodities of beans, prunes, and chocolate for the teacher to cook during school hours. If there were other commodities either her school board did not get them, or that's all rural schools were given. These supplies were distributed to the poorer districts so the teacher could provide one hot dish for the children's noon lunch. This was the only year she had commodities to cook.

Subjects like Physiology, Social Studies, and History were taught every other day. Social Studies was a new subject. No teacher knew how to teach it, all they had were state guidelines combining history, geography, and a few social elements with no resources. This was another case of education placing the cart before the horse. The country school was really limited in available resources, but a company in

Oklahoma was producing a workbook that combined History and Geography. Some of the box supper money went toward trying to obtain items to teach the unknown. Needless to say, most teachers did not like that subject, and with few materials to use, it continued a weak area in the child's education for several years.

Thelma resigned from this position to work for the bank in Sublette where she was offered more money. She rented a small house. Through her landlords, the Demuth's, she met her future husband, Ray Morgan. At the time she didn't hear Orson Well's radio program concerning the end of the world, and the horrible storms that would come. She remembered several in the community were taken in by Wells and remained fearful for quite a while.

Thelma's uncle coaxed her into teaching at East Banner, for the year of 1942-1943 at a salary of \$720. This country school was north of her parent's homeplace, so she would live at home, and drive to the school. During the previous year three teachers had quit, due to the discipline problems. While Thelma never knew of a school board to fire a teacher during the term, they were sometimes not asked back. However, as in this case, sometimes the teacher quit, and it generally was due to problems of classroom control. Many of the teachers were hardly older than their students.

She knew she was facing the possibility of being run-out due to the

situation that had transpired the previous year. She gave herself six weeks to get the students in line. If she hadn't accomplished it by that time, she would quit, though she had no intentions of being in that position. What had always worked was standing her ground when she was challenged and with follow through half the battle was won. She didn't expect that philosophy to fail her in this situation.

There were 33 students in all eight grades. Six were first graders with one who could speak no English. Four were eighth graders who would need extra help to pass the state exams, due to the lack in their schooling the year before. The responsibility of the first graders or eighth graders alone would have been enough to cope with. This was an extremely overloaded schedule with too many students. Her family helped with all the paper grading, though she knew teachers who would hire someone to grade their papers.

Recesses at mid-morning and mid-afternoon lasted 15 minutes each. With so many students in this school she had the little ones play on the South side of the building and the big kids on the North. She would play Drop the Hankie or Ring Around the Rosie one day and the next she would play ball, tag, or Dare Base. If she forgot they would come and get her to play on the right side. She felt mixing in with them helped overcome other discipline problems.

She began the first week with her usual English topic of writing

about summer vacation. Lawrence, a fourth grade boy wouldn't do the assignment. She kept him after school and said they could stay til dark for all she cared (no lights). But he would write something about what he had done, and whining that he'd done nothing would not get the work done. She wrote a note to his parents explaining he was trying to entertain everybody and needed to stay after until he wrote on the topic she'd assigned. As he rode a horse, he never thought to look for a note. While the parents felt he had not been complying they had never been able to get a handle on it. The smuggled note home changed this student's behavior overnight.

She gave the Spelling on Friday at the end of the day, as was usual, graded them that weekend and found out they hadn't even pretended to learn the words. They didn't have the idea they were going to study. She proceeded to have them write the words two or three times apiece and they were to have it in before the day was over. Some did and some of them didn't, so she checked each recess to see who needed to do some more; morning, noon, and afternoon. She kept a few after school to write their words. A Mennonite woman came to inquire whether her children had all the books they needed because in those days you couldn't just go to town and get everything the student had to have. A boy took this opportunity to slip out instead of finishing his work. She was able to step out into the school yard and call him back. While she was out of



the building a girl left and was running hard to the South. About half lived North and half South of the school. She was a long way off so Thelma jumped in her Model A and roared after her. She screeched to a halt, grabbed the girl and sternly scolded her with, "When I tell you to do something that's what you better be doing!" She tossed her in the car, squealed around in the road, and headed back to school. Discipline changed the next week, as she'd convinced several others going in that direction, that she did indeed mean what she said. Thereafter she called Spelling words in the morning and kept students in at recess to write the words they hadn't learned.

Large families of six to nine children were common. A Mennonite family in the area had eighteen children. Instead of convincing 33 students she meant business, the children in individual families changed their behavior, or helped modify their siblings.

Marie encouraged her daughter to use her savings to buy items for her hope chest. In order to shut her mother up on the subject Thelma bought half a dozen of the bigger, best quality and count sheets. Sterling silverware was another purchase, as well as defense bonds. She acquired a number of things in those pre-ration days. One of her brothers, home on furlough from the Navy, advised her to replace all four tires on her car. When World War II rationing began, she was well equipped with tires and sheets; both rationed items.

School programs would last about an hour, with some other entertainment afterwards. Then the parents might stay to visit for another hour. In the Mennonite community there was no box supper. When the Christmas program parts were handed out Thelma convinced the children to learn their parts at school rather than at home. It would then be a surprise to the parents, instead of criticism over what parts they had forgotten.

During Thelma's childhood one of her brothers had memorized a piece to say. A Mennonite objected to it, as they didn't believe in Santa Claus, and her brother was not allowed to say it. Thelma's family had been very upset about the boy's efforts being shuffled aside. She was back in her home community and knew what to expect.

The student's were allowed to choose what they would memorize. A Mennonite girl chose a piece similar to Thelma's brother's from a few years before. When a Mennonite woman came to check about the program she objected to the piece. Thelma defended the girl's right to say it as it was chosen by the child, and she had put the effort into preparing it. It would be given. She also told the woman there would be a Santa Claus after the program, but they should be able to leave before he appeared. To her surprise the Mennonites stayed through to the end.

Thelma felt you made more problems if you didn't ignore some of the situations. The Mennonites in her community were quite modern, and did

finally send their children to high school. They were also allowed to get jobs off the farm. Two of her Mennonite student, Kathy and Carrie Smith, later became her granddaughter Katrina's mother-in-law and aunt.

Thelma resigned this position due to her up-coming marriage to Ray Morgan. After eloping they moved to the farm Southwest of Hugoton. Again she taught at Liberty Union in 1943-1944. This was the last one-room country school position she held, for a salary of \$1,125.

During the rationing in the 40's sugar, coffee, and gasoline were also in short supply. One ration didn't go very far. Marie was able to share her coffee and sugar rations with Thelma. Marie's many children enabled them to have more coffee rations than they needed, and she used very little sugar in her cooking. Gasoline was more readily available; as Ray was farming he received a larger portion. He would drive her the ten miles to school in their car, which had been converted into a pick-up. Then he would work with his brother-in-law at the Demuth farm in the Liberty Union school district. She would come to the farm to wait until he was ready to go home.

School taxes were based on the family property in the district, with no state aid. Some districts were definitely richer, as the closely settled areas created more taxes. Liberty Union had only seven families of school children, and with fewer carrying the financing this was the poorest district of the three schools she taught. Due to the financing

arrangement for schools the teacher did not always get paid every month. After the harvests in late November, the school district would eventually have monies in the budget available for teacher salaries. At Liberty Union Thelma did not receive a November or December check, which was not uncommon. Her husband went to talk to Mr. Christopher to explain the situation. Thelma and Ray were needing money to buy Christmas gifts for both their families, and there were no charge accounts at the time. Mr. Christopher could do nothing with empty school budget coffers and sent Ray to Mr. Ahrens, who wrote a check from his personal account for one month's salary. Otherwise, the teacher didn't even have a warrant signifying she would get paid, especially in a poorer district. By the end of the term the teacher would have been paid any back salary owed.

It was in Stevens County where Thelma became acquainted with Lyceums. A woman in the community organized these. Lyceums also were held at the neighboring Ever Green school. The Lyceum would involve a talent, such as a guitar player strumming early day Cowboy music. It would close with a Spelling match or Ciphering match. Ray was quick in Math so he would work the problems to find the answer, while Thelma called the problems. He was the last one who came up to the board and he was the winner. The community wanted him to Cipher the teacher. The winner bowed to the contender by working their choice

of problem. Thelma called for division of fractions hoping he would forget to upset them, which he did. This created a laugh for those involved.

The school day would begin with the Pledge of Allegiance, Lord's Prayer and a song. All of Thelma's schools had a piano which she couldn't play, so they sang a cappella. This would be followed by news or current events. The *Capper's Weekly* was filled with national and international tidbits so the news might be quite widespread throughout the world. This allowed the students to locate the country or area on a globe or map to reinforce knowledge of their world.

Other events happening during the school year were sports outings. Thelma would load 10 or 11 students in her Model A with its rumble seat to go play volleyball against a neighboring school, such as Good Luck. Maybe the country schools on the West side of the county would have a joint track meet. There was also a countywide track meet near the end of the school year, and a Spelling bee to which all the eligible students were invited.

Art projects tended to relate to decorating the room for Halloween and Christmas, even though there wasn't money available for the supplies. Thelma would use the last quarter of the day on Fridays for matches, in Spelling, Geography, or Math. The students always enjoyed the competitive aspect of matches.

Thelma resigned this position to stay home and raise a family. She was pregnant, and if she had been showing would probably have been asked to resign. Unbeknownst to her, she would reenter the teaching profession in thirteen years.

Around 1960 Marie again taught a one-room country school, Fariview, located at Woods in Stevens County. Her salary would have been comparable to that received by teachers in town schools, \$4 - \$5,000. Thelma believes her mother needed to earn some money to increase her retirement benefits, so she agreed to teach for two years.

The school had been modernized with natural gas heating and indoor plumbing. The horse barn, out houses, and coal shed had long since been torn down. Many facets of the school day, however, remained true to the one-room country school of the past. The school itself was located along highway 51, East of Hugoton.

Early in the fall a total stranger, dressed in a uniform, burst through the door. His first questions were what could he do to help and what did she need. Marie sputtered and stammered that she didn't need anything. Once the man calmed down enough to take in the situation he realized he was not needed. "Mam, your flag is hanging upside down. That's a distress signal we stop for!" he reported. He turned on his heel, marched out to the flag pole, righted the flag, and sped away. If the older

students had hung the flag that way intentionally, it was never done again.

School began at 9:00 and let out at 4:00. Marie had about 20 students in all eight grades. The term lasted for eight months with Halloween and Christmas programs. The students worked together to produce a good program. The Woods School had curtains to use during the programs. This made the productions even more professional. Due to state aid Marie didn't need to have box suppers to raise money.

Recesses consisted of the mid-morning, mid-afternoon, and hour long lunch. She was surprised that none of the students began to eat until they'd looked at everyone else's lunch to see if they wanted to trade. Some children might bring canned pork and beans to warm up on the heating stove. A hot plate was available to warm other foods, and occasionally she fixed something for all of them. She was always a snacker, and probably had some saltine crackers throughout the day. If a student had been able to graduate from a sack to a lunch pail with a thermos, he or she was well pleased. Of course some of these same students would be needing the lunch pail through the Summer when they were gone all day running the tractor.

Horses were rarely used any longer for transportation. Some drove, others walked, and many rode bicycles. If the family dog followed the child to school she sent the student to take it home. It could be quite a

ways to pedal home and back again, which convinced the children to leave the pets at home.

The school had a library, though it was fairly limited. The community use of the building was becoming more frequent. 4-H meetings and evening adult meetings would be held there. Cars made travel more accessible, so these students were oftentimes better acquainted with both Liberal and Hugoton than the town student. They had access to the libraries in both towns.

A strength of one-room school education was that everyone helped each other with skills and lessons. But children weren't allowed in the cloak room to give any additional 'lessons' in the privacy to be found there. With state aid more supplies were available for the country school. Marie oversaw the building of wood projects. Saws, wood, paint, and other necessary items were brought from home to supplement the school supplies. Children were trusted to take responsibility. The older ones would help the younger ones do their projects safely, and might handle some of the harder parts for them.

Children played together. Some of their favorite games were Beckon, Red Rover, 2 Deep, and Softball. During the Spring the older ones would teach softball skills to the younger ones. They would play catch and teach a child to hit or throw so the younger ones were improving each year. There were two Softball games with Bethel and Prairieola,



other country schools in the neighborhood. In preparation for the county track meet the children trained by running a mile every recess. Due to the all for one attitude, these activities did not have to be directed by Marie.

During the Winter they built a large snow fort, 8' x 10". Building together was the fun part and it was hardly used as a protection from snowballs. There wasn't anyone for the other team, as the snow fort belonged to all. The children would come in sopping wet, so Marie strung lines to drape the outer wear, and had a rack located near the stove for gloves, mittens, and scarves. Before school was out the overboots were brought in to get warm.

The necessary school books were bought at the County Superintendent's office. These were the same as those used in town. Big Chief tablets were used by all the students for their assignments, with wide lined for the younger and narrow lined for the older. This was a small example of the 'age has its privileges' theory in practice. The older students knew the younger ones needed protecting, and were careful of them. The younger ones looked up to the older ones to set the example, and the fact that they got other privileges not allowed themselves seemed right and just. Younger children knew they would eventually be old enough. Sequential change was built in.

If Marie allowed one first grader to begin writing words before

another, it was accepted, "They wrote their letters neater. I couldn't write mine good enough." Then, they personally accepted the challenge of correcting themselves. The child could see the progression of the curriculum realizing today's lesson is leading onward and upward. The younger ones liked listening when she conducted reading with the older students. They themselves could hardly read, however with perseverance they would be able to. Obviously everyone from second grade on up could read; some just read better than others. As a child progressed through the grades reteaching was a cinch. Since most students had half an ear trained on what she was teaching the others they also picked up bits and pieces they'd missed at that grade level. A student had the potential of hearing first through eighth grade lessons for eight years. The readiness of the child was met at some given point, and Marie felt this was the greatest side benefit of the one-room school.

Katrina and Weskeal started school in Alamota, population six, after moving to the farm from Great Bend. Katrina began the fifth grade with 17 fifth through eighth graders in the big room. Weskeal began as a first grader in the little room with 11 first through fourth graders.

Katrina's class consisted of four and in some years five students. She felt this allowed good individual instruction time so you always understood the basics and concepts.

Math classes met for 15 minutes. That time was spent learning new concepts and getting homework assignments. Since the class set the pace they might cover two day's lesson in one day. This was an excellent situation. Her teacher, Mickey Wasinger pushed Katrina as an eighth grader. She took her aside and taught her some Algebra.

Social Studies met Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. English met on Tuesdays and Thursdays. These subjects were very self directed using independent learning, though all the classes were combined to memorize the Presidents of the United States. Spelling was done independently.

Science was taught to all grades combined. Mickey had gotten a weather packet with overhead transparencies. During a study of nature's laws they climbed on the school roof and dropped off the five and eight pound shots.

Reading was totally centered around utilizing the library. The library was adequate with old fashioned, older books. If Katrina found an author she liked she'd read everything written by them, maybe two or three books. Being an avid reader she would finish two or three books a week. She also checked books out of the county library and ordered through a book order. The variety of books available from these three sources allowed her to read as much as she wanted. The disadvantages of this method for the poorer reader were obvious when Mickey tried to get one boy to read one book that year. Katrina missed the discussion

inherent in reading assigned stories. She had not read or analyzed any classics by the time she graduated eighth grade, and felt this was a lack in her education. She also thought the classics took too long to get something said, so she must have read some of them. Katrina missed class a few times due to having her nose in a book. The other students were admonished to let her get a poor grade by not telling her the assignment. Someone always told her.

There were some workbooks, but no films. Mickey had tons of overhead packets, mostly used in Science. There were no computers in their school, but there weren't in town either. Occasionally they would have a guest speaker. Mary Alice Bosley came to talk about fossils and arrowheads. She also substituted at Alamota. Katrina didn't realize any lack in teaching materials compared to what she'd seen used in Great Bend. There were many more hands on experiences at Alamota.

The music teacher, Ivalee Munsinger, came once a week from Dighton, as did the band teacher, Dennis Ball. Ivalee was responsible for the Christmas program. Katrina remembers costumes and plays that involved everybody, as well as singing solos or duets with Weskeal. Everyone worked together to pull it off. Then the pitiful band had to play a couple of Christmas carols. There would be about six instruments with kids who had met about 12 times trying to get through only two songs. Katrina was glad she was pursuing music independently through private

piano lessons, as this would have been an inadequate amount of music otherwise.

The lunches prepared by Alice Borell were very delicious. Alice was also the janitor and helped out in many ways. The big classroom made craft projects downstairs in the library. Alice might help while Mickey had class with the other students. They made velvet string art pictures, with Katrina commenting that they got to pound the nails themselves. Another project involved ordering a clock kit and poster. The students built a frame, stained it, drilled, and did the other necessary steps to create a clock.

A league of small schools was formed with Alamota, Amy, Healy, Shallow Water, Shields, and Utica. Tournaments were held in volleyball and basketball. Volleyball and softball teams involved the interaction with the guys, as these were coed teams. Track, of course, was entirely independent, and basketball was divided into boys and girls teams. While she was at Alamota there were enough big kids to complete the teams from that room. When a school didn't have enough older students the younger kids become part of the team. Katrina felt you learned these sports skills sooner. Typically it wasn't until seventh grade that town students could be involved in all these sports. Playing in the summer softball league as a left fielder gave Katrina further contact with her peers in Dighton. She did feel there was more of an adjustment problem

if a child had no contact with other students from Dighton when they began attending school in town.

Each year Mickey made arrangements to take the big room on an over-nighter to a Kansas City Royal's game. Parents would provide transportation. Everyone took their mitts, and a ball in order to get it signed during the autographing time. While this trip was a nice extra, it wasn't necessary as a means of acquainting these kids with the outer world. Travel and vacations were commonplace, and these students were at home in their world and for the most part, in their community.

There were many responsibilities given. At lunch two kids set up, washed off, and put away the tables for lunch. Another was responsible for ringing the bell when recess was over. Students would be sent into the gym to arrange chairs for seating on the stage during a game, or to set up the volleyball net. The older boys were sent down to fill the bus with gasoline and drive it about one block up to the school from the garage, before school was out. It was a little bus, but still they were given and expected to handle responsibility.

Katrina felt the responsibility, individualized help, and self direction necessary to accomplish the task were the greatest attributes of the country school education. "If something caught your interest you could run with it," she stated. This education was very strong on the basics, and she felt well prepared for high school.

Weskeal continued through her four years at Alamota as the only student in her class. She remembers very little teaching because the teacher explained what to do and she asked questions as necessary. She learned on her own or was paired with others. Due to the fact that Weskeal could read before she began first grade, she was always reading out of books she hadn't seen before. She realizes now, that they must have been old edition readers so they could advance her as fast as she was capable. Being an excellent speller, she was given the Kansas Spelling List to study. She wrote the definitions for a set of words each week.

Weskeal studied Social Studies with Diane, from the class ahead of her. They found the answers in the back of the book, so rarely even looked at the questions. They cheated their way through, which came back to haunt Weskeal when she went to town school and had to point out a country on the map. She wasn't even too sure about the continents. Geography continues to be a weakness in her education and she blames no one but herself.

On their own the little class also made use of the library everyday. She didn't recall anyone being assigned to read a certain amount, but the poor reader ahead of her might have been. She spent time reading with the two ahead of her. They would sit in an entryway reading library

books to each other. Since Weskeal and Diane could read equally well they would put the boy between them and keep his attention on the task.

There were Math flash cards and probably many other teacher aids that she doesn't recall. She does remember a flash machine to speed your reading. She teases that she was in front of it all the time. It would light up parts of the sentence to train your eyes to move faster. Afterwards she had to answer some questions. If she could answer the questions it was adjusted to go faster, or highlight in a different pattern. Weskeal obviously needed more subject matter than first or second grade provided. The teacher found additional ways to keep her challenged without moving her into the next grade materials.

One teacher sent the students home if they had even a slight temperature. The students would complain after recess, when they would be hotter. Weskeal played sick a couple of times, and just felt scandalous that she was getting away with it. She knew she wouldn't have to make up work, but she enjoyed her classmates too much to want to be home.

Weskeal also thought Alice was a great cook. Sometimes when she went to the bathroom she would swing past the kitchen. Alice usually had a cookie or snack for her and any of the other kids who asked. The best thing was to go ask Alice for a piece of waxed paper to make the slide slicker. She always gave it to them.



During recess the little kids played up the hill and the big kids played on the softball diamond. Once in a while some big kids would come push the merry go round. Weskeal recalled, "They'd push fast, so fast we could hardly hang on. Our arms would just ache with hanging on so tight, and eventually our feet would slide off and we'd be flying!" They played catch and kiss with the little boys, but the girls were either faster or the boys didn't really want to play the game, because they never got caught.

During third grade the four older girls Weskeal always played with, started calling her Pig. They wouldn't let her play with them for a while. She had to go play with the younger girls and she hated doing that. (Years later when she asked some of them what that had all been about, they didn't even recall having done it.) She was glad it didn't last too long. When the skateboard craze was on, everybody was on the sidewalks together. Some games she recalls playing with the entire school were Red Rover, Kick the Can, Kickball, and Softball.

Indoor recess with the big kids was ok when they played ring toss volleyball, or could catch and throw the volleyball over the net. They didn't like to play Dodge Ball because the big kids didn't throw easier at the little kids. All the little ones would be huddled over in a corner in an alcove. The red balls stung and she learned to move quick, but the volleyballs really hurt. Even Katrina commented, "You had to learn to

take it, and give as good as you got or they'd paste you (meaning big room kids) to the wall too." Katrina got stung a few times especially when she was new, but she wasn't about to let them know, so avoided getting picked on.

Weskeal must have expressed an interest in Band, as she was allowed to start on the Clarinet when she was just a third grader. She recalls playing Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, one of the Christmas program plays for the little room. Another time she played a younger sister in the big kids play. She and Katrina were Dutch girls and wore wooden shoes and Dutch caps. She also remembers square dancing. The tallest eighth grade boy was her partner, down on his knees swinging her around. She was surprised when she got to school in town and they'd never square danced.

For the competitions against other schools, she and the girls from the little room were cheerleaders in their small blue outfits. When she began school in town she didn't recall seeing kids from the other country schools who she was now going to school with. The little kids didn't always go to the games at other schools.

She did her schoolwork on the bus home. If she got it done too quickly it seemed like a long ride. Weskeal recalls that you were responsible. Nobody checked up on you, compared to how it was once she went to town for school. There were no discipline problems. When

several younger boys started to school they sometimes really mixed it up at recess. There was no sassing or talking back. She didn't think anyone knew about the option of being bad. She felt personally challenged; something she missed when she attended school in town.

Alamota Grade School closed in 1980. Shields and Amy were closed about the same time. There was pressure brought to bear on the communities of these schools. Alamota would have had 10 children enrolled the following year. The numbers were decreasing and there weren't enough small children in the area to foresee the school ever again attaining the number of students that had recently attended.

The schools mentioned in this study have all closed and their delivery system has, for the most part, disappeared into memory. These participants all give credit to the country school for developing personal responsibility. It is the hope of this writer that this strength can make a comeback in the rural and urban schools across the nation. Our children desperately need our help in this regard.

The Montessori philosophy shares many of the characteristics of the country school. Children of mixed ages, who are able to work more in depth on a learning activity are two of the similarities. Attention is oriented toward each student. Using the learning centers and teaching

aids help direct the responsibility for learning back on the individual. Katrina's son, Isaiah, is presently enrolled in this system. A public school in Omaha opened a Montessori section for the 1994-1995 school year, and they have been inundated with application requests. It will be interesting to follow the developments.