

RANDOM MEMORIES

Part 3

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A NEVER-FORGOTTEN EXPERIENCE

TEACHING IN A COUNTRY SCHOOL IN KIDDER COUNTY

I was a teacher for forty-three years and all of my teaching experience was in North Dakota schools. I had the unusual opportunity to teach in every grade level as well as high school, college and university classes. I was also a high school administrator and retired as an academic dean of a four-year state college. There is very little in elementary, secondary, or higher education in which I did not come in direct contact. In retrospect, my most memorable experience was the three years that I taught in a one-room country school. Perhaps most memorable because it was my first experience in teaching and also perhaps because all of my first eight grades of school were also in a one-room rural school setting.

The teaching certificate that I received after attending a state teachers college for one year stated that I was qualified to teach in a rural school. However, in my own mind, I was not completely convinced that this was true. Had it not been for my own experience as a student in a country school, I would have been very skeptical, indeed. During my three years of rural teaching, I do not know from what reservoir of knowledge I drew from most; that which I learned at college, or what I recalled from my own earlier experience.

My first application for a teaching position was in 1935 in the midst of the Great Depression. Several schools were in need of teachers but only those who were located in the most remote areas of Kidder County, or so it seemed. I applied to several of the schools and was hired by the North Merkel School District #3 for a salary of forty-five dollars a month, over a seven month period, along with the stipulation that "said teacher keep reasonable hours".

I assumed that this was in reference to my personal life. The warning was somewhat ludicrous since there was no opportunity to spend a "wild night" out unless it was with the jack-rabbits! The nearest town was twelve miles distance, and I did not own an automobile. I discovered later that the district was extremely poor, most of the residents were on welfare of one kind or another, and taxes were left unpaid. There were several instances when at the end of the month I was issued a warrant which could only be cashed at a discounted rate. Banks found this practice to be a lucrative source of income collecting on the full amount of the warrant when it became negotiable as well as the interest on the delayed payment. At the time, I was grasping at straws for a firmer grip on the future and sacrifices of one kind or another seemed to be in order including an income, no matter how small it was. Back in the depression years, no amount of money was "small". In spite of a limited salary, I always paid my bills and had enough money remaining at the end of the year to attend an eight week summer session at a state teachers college.

Fortunately, my rural living expenses were small. I paid nine dollars a month for board and room and had no automobile to maintain. My father came periodically to the school on Friday afternoon and took me home for the weekend, but in general, I stayed in the community, weeks at a time especially after the weather made travel difficult. On occasions, I would catch a ride to one of the neighboring towns on a weekend, but only stayed briefly. When the roads became impassable, I would solicit the help of the mailman who was kind enough to make small purchases and deliveries for me. I recall the winter of 1936 being an exceptionally hard winter plagued with deep snow, extremely cold weather and subsequently, little travel. Even the mail had difficulty

getting through. Delivery was made with a mail sled, comfortably enclosed pulled by two horses. Since the end of the route was some distance from its origin, the mailman had a fresh team waiting for him for the return trip.

Prior to the beginning of the school year, I had made arrangements for room and board at a farm home not far from the school. Before I arrived for my work in my first year, I was informed that there would be a slight delay before I could occupy my room, and that temporary arrangements had been made for me to live with a neighboring family. I arrived at this other place at the appointed time and moved my personal belongings into the room. The farm couple was very gracious and it was evident that considerable preparation had been made for my coming. Most noticeable was a perceptive odor that I sensed when I first entered my room. Later on in the evening, I saw the relationship between the odor and some little guests that also occupied the room. I was made aware of their presence when I lit the kerosene lamp that was on my bedside table. I observed an irregular pattern of spots on the wallpaper that I had not noticed in the daytime. I also observed that the spots rearranged themselves and upon closer observation, surmised that they were bedbugs! The strong medicinal odor that was perceived when I first entered the room came from a bedbug repellent that had been liberally sprinkled about the bed and bedframe. Apparently it worked because I was never bitten by the insect. It was none too soon when I was informed that my permanent quarters were ready for occupancy.

Uppermost in my mind was the beginning of school and my need to make preparation for it. I went through the past year's enrollment in order to determine the number of children I could expect, the number that would be in the var-

ious grades, as well as the specific classes and grades for which I had to prepare. After making this determination, I sorted out the different textbooks that I would need for each of the grades. I soon discovered that textbooks, teaching supplies, and related teaching equipment were at a bare minimum and the district had very little money to make new purchases. Library books for recreational reading were almost non-existent. I recalled my rural school experience and remembered that the teacher had periodically obtained books from the state librarian. I investigated the source and followed the same procedure. Children and adults made generous use of this new source of recreational reading.

The first day of school finally arrived! I awoke early that morning after having spent a restless night in anticipation of what was to come. I ate breakfast while my lunch bucket was being packed, and left for school. While I was walking, I thought of every possible bit of preparation that I may have overlooked. I had memorized the names of the children and tried to picture who they were and what they looked like. When I arrived at the school, I built a fire to take the chill off the classroom, put up the flag, and went over my day's routine. I would frequently gaze out of the window to see if anyone was coming, although it was much too early, and continued with my preparations. Finally, after what seemed to be a long time, I saw a group of youngsters walking towards the school. From their antics, it did not appear that they were very much concerned about the start of school. I also noticed that a large black bird that looked like a crow hovered above the heads of the children, and occasionally perched on the shoulder of one of them. It turned out to be a pet crow and was told that the crow, when a baby, fell out of its nest and one of the children took it home and raised

it. Its most notable trait was a passion for shiny objects. Nuts and bolts that disappeared were later found in an abandoned sparrow's nest. The crow was a regular visitor to the school and spent its time in the school barn until recess. When the children appeared on the school ground, it also joined in the activities. As I recall, it met its demise from the claws of a jealous (perhaps hungry) cat!

Much of my concern and worry on this first day of school was groundless. Following a period of getting acquainted, the boys and girls who were my students, in time, also became my little friends. A trusting form of relationship developed; a bond of confidence that remained throughout the years I was their teacher. I was now their "TEACHER" and that is what they called me!

Once I started teaching, my daily routine became established. I would walk to school every morning, a distance of a mile and a quarter diagonally across a section of virgin prairie, arrive in time to build a fire, put up the flag, and make last-minute preparations before classes started. After classes were dismissed for the afternoon, I would sweep the floor, clean the blackboards, take down the flag and have the children dust the erasers. Following this, I would place instructions for the next day's classes on the blackboard, and bring the attendance register up-to-date. When dusk would herald the end of the day, I would pick up my lunch bucket and eat a sandwich if there was one remaining, pick up papers that needed attention, and walk home. In the winter time, walking at times was very difficult. The blowing snow and deep drifts only added to the problem. Frequently, the visibility was poor but fortunately, with the exception of one instance, I never experienced any serious problems. The one instance was getting lost in the early morning darkness when

I was walking from a neighboring farm home to reach my room following Christmas vacation.

After my return to my room, I would spend time correcting papers and make preparations for the next day. After supper, I would listen to the radio which at that time was the ultimate in home entertainment. Time passed quickly and it was not long before I was ready for bed.

My classes were small but still needed my full attention. During scheduled periods throughout the day, I would call each class to the recitation bench located in front of the room and near the blackboard. The children brought their books, seatwork, and related materials with them. I would provide supplementary materials such as maps, globe, use of the blackboard, or whatever other materials would enhance the instruction. The blackboard was especially usefull for spelling or arithmetic exercises because the teacher could detect learning difficulties that might exist among the students.

(In contrast to today's classroom, there were no electronic equipment available, not even a duplicating machine!)

On Friday afternoon, starting at 2:00 p.m., the class routine was changed. Until dismissal time, this period was used by the children to engage in self directed creative experiences.

If a holiday was approaching, it was used to prepare a program for it. Other than that, the children could plan their own projects. These may have included water color painting, the use of construction paper for original designs, and several other projects of one kind or another. Several boys brought coping saws and apple box sides. The boards used were created into a variety

of gifts and toys. Also high on the list was to make relief maps of continents using old newspapers soaked in water over a period of time. After the maps dried, different colors were applied to denote the different elevations.

The school, by tradition, was expected to prepare a Christmas program. Because of the nature of the season, there was no difficulty in getting student participation. The stage that we prepared for the program was a part of the classroom separated from the audience by several bedsheets hung with safety pins on a wire that stretched from one side of the room to the other. The Christmas program centered around Biblical stories and the students portrayed the characters in the different events. The songs, in general, were also of a religious nature. At that time, no one thought that Christmas could be celebrated in any other way. Following the program, gifts were exchanged and everyone in attendance spent the evening in a neighborly conversation over a cup of coffee and lunch provided by each of the families.

The school year seldom passed without some unusual event taking place. This event may have been either in the form of a severe blizzard or other weather elements, or some form of illness among the children. Blizzards were frequent, but the illness that I best remember was a whooping cough epidemic that passed through the school one year. Before it ran its course, every student in the susceptible age group was affected. It took the children a long time to recover and some were left in a weakened condition until spring.

Needless to say, spring never came too soon. Balmy southern winds melted the snow, and roads became once again passable. Because of the compacted snow, the path I walked to and from school was last to melt and remained for



some time as a reminder of my daily walks in sometimes unpleasant weather. Spirits among young and old rose and everyone was looking forward to the end of the school term. However, eighth-graders had one more hurdle to complete before the school year ended for them. In those days, the state required all eighth-graders who wished to graduate from one-room rural schools to successfully complete state examinations in certain subject areas. The tests were prepared by the state department of education and administered by the local teacher. Most rural schools ended their school year several weeks before the scheduled examinations were to be given. Therefore, students had a waiting period during which time they could prepare for the finals. In addition to having textbooks available for review, I would also provide the student with copies of previous tests on the same subjects. Although the exact subject matter was not likely to be duplicated in the new tests found in the old, it did give the student a sense of performance that was helpful when he took the final tests. Students usually "made" it and all was well. In general, the public concept was that children trained in a rural school did as well or better in high school than did their city counterparts.

I taught and lived in this sparsely-settled community for a period of three years; 1935-1938. During the summer months, I would return to college and take classes for my advanced degree. Following my third year of teaching, I decided to terminate my employment with the district and return to college on a full-time basis. I graduated in 1940 with my four year program completed and I was now qualified to teach in a "town" school. Following World War II, I also completed a masters and doctorate degree.

In retrospect, my rural teaching was a character and professional building experience. It provided me with the opportunity to see myself as a teacher and as a person, working and living in close harmony with the community. Under no circumstances would the reality of this relationship have been as evident as in this little country school

What happened to the one-room rural school is the same that happens to all manmade institutions. Once they have served their purpose, they gradually face away. However, they remain as a part of our great heritage!