

The Sod School Experience



Collected for pedagogical use by
Susan Fineman for CSAA Annual
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Sod School Memories...

Arta Ethlyn Kochen

Arta Ethlyn Kochen of North Platte taught in a sod school in 1901. She wrote: "The schoolhouse was a long, low sod building with hills on either side. There were two rooms, school-room and another where the children played. I called it the gymnasium. The rough dirt walls had been smeared over with some sort of a sand mixture and then whitewashed. One or both coats had broken off in places, leaving blotches of brown, white or the bare black earth. There were two little crooked windows. One of these we curtained with daisy chains made of bright papers. This, to me, seemed pitiful, but to the children it was a most wonderful creation. In the other we stowed the pail of water. This had been carried a mile over the hill in the open pail and was peppered with sand. Nevertheless, it served to wash down that big lump that came to my throat so often the first week. The door was of rough pine and opened just far enough to allow one person to squeeze in. We propped it open with a sunflower stalk. There was a floor in the schoolroom, but about the third week one of the men of the district helped himself to that of the 'gym.' The schoolroom furniture consisted of a rickety table, a broken rocking chair, two good chairs donated temporarily, two others with broken backs, a cracker box and a soap box. The blackboard was a piece of a man's rubber coat tacked on the rough wall. The roof was of branches covered with sod, but almost anywhere I could look up and see the little white clouds floating by. . . . The second day a snake a yard and a half long entered the schoolroom and was dispatched with an umbrella. One day I entered the schoolroom to find two inches of water on the floor and rain coming from the sod roof almost as hard as it had come from the sky in the night. Our pictures and

paper curtain were a sorry sight. The few books were saturated, and I would have cried had it not been for the reassuring croak of a frog. In such surroundings I taught for two months. Our county superintendent then used her influence to have grain removed from another little house in the district, and the last four months of the term were spent in quarters somewhat more comfortable. A few old desks were given us by the city schools, for which we were very thankful. In spite of such difficulties the interest of 'My Six' never waned. They were all eager to learn; they were used to hardships of all sorts; they did not mind the heat of the sun and never complained when the sand burned or the prickly cactus made their little feet bleed; they would come on the coldest days though they froze their hands and ears. And thus amidst such difficulties and hardships the boys and girls who are to be the very warp and woof of the Great West are being trained for citizenship.



Ellsworth Paine

Ellsworth Paine, who combined farming with teaching school in Gosper County during the early '80's, gives the following description of the school where he taught: The school house was picturesque both inside and out. On approaching it from the southeast it appeared to have bulged up and out of the ground to a height of four or five feet. A rusty stovepipe protruded through the top of a dirt roof. The roof was supported by timbers. From the

adjacent background two partially transparent windows broke the monotony of the low sod wall. The door facing the south was approached by a short trench from the creek bank. This door of undressed boards was especially designed for timid "schoolmarms" who desired to inspect their room before entering. By applying the eye to one of the copious cracks, one was able to command a good view of the interior."



J.B Jones

J.B. Jones, who taught in Custer County in 1887, says his school had been excavated out of the side of a hill. On the top and back of the school house corn for fuel was stored. Wandering pigs often raided the fuel supply by running across the roof of the school.

S.J. Jacoby

According to S. G. Jacoby, who attended school in Sioux County in the 70's, gophers were another nuisance. Mr. Jacoby says they sometimes tunneled their way into the school room through the earth floor.



Mrs. M. A. Springer

Mrs. M. A. Springer, who attended school in Dakota County in the '70's, recalls an afternoon when the entire school had to vacate the building through a window because a large rattlesnake stood guard at the door.

Mrs. Lola Bradbury McComb

Mrs. Lola Bradbury McComb of Wilsonville, Nebraska, remembers the buffalo that, like Mary's fabled lamb, followed the children to school each morning. She says, "He was a tame friendly fellow that spent hours nibbling at the grass in front of our door, but he always seemed to be resting in the doorway when we wanted to go in or out of the door. And he wouldn't move. Many a bare leg scrambled over the shaggy side of our schoolhouse buffalo as we went in and out of the door."



Grant Essex

Grant Essex, of Lincoln, who has lived in the State since 1878, says the school house of pioneer days was never locked because it was often used as a haven during a storm or other emergency. A few sandhill schools were also stocked with food caches for travelers who became lost or caught in severe storms. This custom was dropped when it was found that

travelers used the supplies in fair weather or when there was no real emergency.

**Preceding Sod House Memories from:
History.Nebraska.gov**

Anna Webber

**“Frontier Teachers: Stories of Heroic
Women of the Old West”**

By Chris Enss

Anna Webber was 21 when she began teaching in a sod school in Blue Hills, Kansas in 1881.

“Today finishes the seventh week of my school. There are five more yet. It is getting monotonous, not the school, but the surroundings, just the same quietness, seeing the same objects, and going through the same performances day after day with no merriment or changes mixed in. How I dread to see the 4th come. I don’t know whether I’ll get to go home , or have to stay here, or get to go anyplace. I don’t believe it does any good to think of it, things go about as they please in spite of me. Nothing has happened in school today.”

12 weeks after she commenced her classroom she wrote... “I’m not really settled to school teaching yet because I expect more scholars and new furniture. I hope it will come soon, for it seems almost impossible to get along with nothing to write on, or no place to put books.”

Lannie Frost Perrigo

**“Pioneer Women: Voices from the
Kansas Frontier”**

By Joanna L. Stratton

Lannie Frost Perrigo was a teacher in Ellis County, Kansas in the 1880’s. She recalled when her first assignment ended...

“When my first school closed, the school board from an adjoining district asked me to begin a school the next Monday in their district. Because I was young and enthusiastic and anxious to help the children in every way I could, I readily consented. The pupils who had been my pupils for the past six months were to be allowed to attend without tuition. I was a very trusting person and made no inquiry about anything, just consented to begin teaching, signed my contract and on Sunday moved into my new boarding place.



Monday morning, with five children of the family in a lumber wagon, the oldest boy, 14, driving a team of broncos, we drove the FOUR miles to the schoolhouse. When we stopped, I could scarcely believe my eyes. The schoolhouse was the crudest of dugouts. Only one window, no chimney, but a stove pipe lifting its rusty head a few inches above the plain board roof. Even before entering the room, about 12 x18 feet, I realized I had been hasty in not inquiring about some things. Then the pity of it all appealed to me and I threw myself into my work as earnestly as if the equipment was all that could be desired.



To this little dugout schoolhouse came 36 boys and girls. Some from miles away. It was wonderful the eagerness they showed to gain an education, and it was remarkable the earnestness the parents showed. There was no excuse allowed for any of their children to be absent from school, only for sickness and there was very little of that."

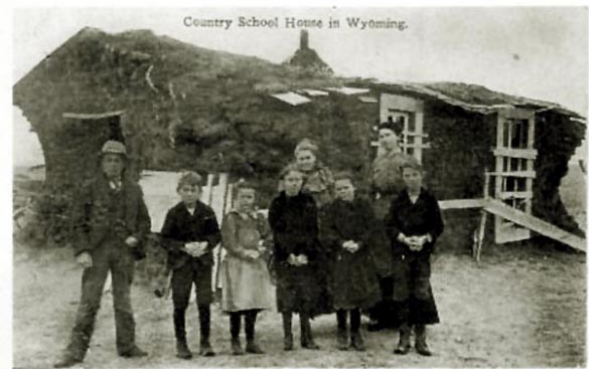
Wyoming Tales and Trails

By G.B.Dobson

(a website of the west...)

Sod school houses were quite common in the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma. Of the 5,937 schoolhouses reported in Nebraska in 1890, 792 were constructed of sod. One county superintendent commented that many districts preferred to build a sod school house that may last three or four years rather than having to issue to bonds. He noted that the two reports of daily attendance in his county were from sod school houses. Another defended sod school house in that "no other kind of building is more comfortable or safe when the blizzard howls and the steady cold of winter has settled down." In 1918 there were still sod school houses in northern and western Nebraska. In 1915 there were still 54 sod school houses in South Dakota and as late as 1928, Wyoming had 8 adobe or sod school houses.

Phebe West, a former teacher in a sod school house in Perkins County, South Dakota, indicated that teaching in a sod school house may give "rather a poor impression, but it is not a schoolhouse to be ashamed of." Hers had a heating system fueled by locally mined lignite coal. The advantages, she noted, were "their cheapness in a country where there is no lumber, their warmth, and the fact that they are not easily wrecked by high wind. The disadvantage is that they fall to pieces so easily." *The Outlook* - August 2, 1922, p. 546.



The Sod Schoolhouse

By Charles Moreau Harger

An earthen mound on the prairie's swell,

The work of new settlers' hands,—
An uncouth temple for learning made,
Its walls of the rudest earth-squares laid,—

The lone sod school-house stands.

Not a tree in sight from the open door,

Not a shrub on the landscape's face,
But a sea of grass fills all the view,—
Its waves are of emerald's sparkling hue,
And above, cloud-shadows race.

I hear the sound of a tinkling bell,

The teacher's signal sweet;
There's a drowsy hum from a score of lips,
There's a smothered laugh at some dullard's slips,

And a noise of restless feet.

Do they think, as they tread the earthen floor,

Those children gathered there,
How near to Nature's true heart they stand,
Their tear-stained cheeks by their light breath fanned,
Their eyes on her features fair?

Do they hear the notes, forever new,
That the limitless prairies sing?—
'Tis a nobler strain than books have told,
Than choirs have breathed or organs rolled,
Or silver chimes can ring.

They say: "Be pure as our morning dew,
Be firm as our leagues of earth,
Be kind as our breezes that gently blow,
Be bright as our far sunset's glow,
Be gay as our song-bird's mirth.

"Look up to the light like the spears that wave
O'er all our stretching miles;
Let the flowers that dimple our bosom cast
A spell of beauty that shall at last
Tinge all thy years with smiles."

And the peaceful haze at yonder rim,
Just kissing the prairie sea,
Has a soft refrain for the song of life,—
It whispers: "Beyond this earthly strife
Lies the Glorious Rest to be."

Can the youthful ears but catch the hymn,
Can the hearts its lessons glean,
With what wealth of soul to the world they 'll go
From that earth-walled school-room,

cramped and low
On the plains of lustrous green!

**From: Kansas in Literature
(Topeka: Crane & Co. 1900)
Pages 64-65**



Little Old Sod Shanty On My Claim

As performed by Yodeling Slim Clark

I am looking rather seedy now while
holding down my claim
And my victuals are not always served the
best,
And the mice play shyly 'round me as I
nestle down to rest
In my little old sod shanty in the West.
Yet I rather like the novelty of living in
this way
Though my bill of fare is always rather
tame,
But I'm happy as a clam on the land of
Uncle Sam
In my little old sod shanty on my claim.

chorus

The hinges are of leather and the
 windows have no glass
 While the board roof lets the howling
 blizzard in;
 And I hear the hungry ki-yote as he slinks
 up in the grass
 'Round my little old sod shanty on my
 claim.



Oh when I left my eastern home, a
 bachelor so gay
 To try and win my way to wealth and
 fame,
 I little thought that I'd come down to
 burning twisted hay
 In the little old sod shanty on my claim.
 My clothes are plastered o'er with dough,
 I'm looking like a fright
 And everything is scattered 'round the
 room,
 But I wouldn't give the freedom that I
 have out in the West
 For the table of the Eastern man's old
 home.

repeat chorus

And relieve me from the mess that I am
 in,
 The angel, how I'd bless her, if this her
 home she'd make
 In the little old sod shanty on my claim.
 And we would make our fortunes on the
 prairies of the West;
 Just as happy as two lovers we'd remain.
 We'd forget the trials and troubles we
 endured at the first
 In the little old sod shanty on my claim.

repeat chorus

To cheer our hearts with honest pride of
 fame,
 O then we'd be contented for the toil that
 we had spent
 In the little old sod shanty on our claim.
 When time enough had lapsed, and all of
 those little brats
 To noble man- and woman-hood had
 grown,
 It wouldn't seem half so lonely as around
 us we should look
 And see the little old shanty on our claim.
repeat chorus

F.N. Merwin, Furnace County, NE

Reminiscing... "In those days we used to
 go from three to five miles to school, but
 now it seems that we can hardly get
 across the street...An old sod
 (school)house was shingled with buffalo
 sod, a fireplace at one end, windows with
 glass 10 X 12, long slabs 10 to 16 feet long
 with four legs for seats , a sawed
 cottonwood block for a teacher's desk,
 one book for three or four scholars,
 blackboard four feet square and an old
 married woman for a teacher. Good
 enough, the boys were not all after her!

I well remember one day at the Sunday
 school in the fine schoolhouse described
 above that the old lady seemed to have
 been out late the night before and was
 somewhat sleepy. So, she crowded the
 scholars up a little closer together on the
 patent benches and she occupied about
 seven feet of one end and took an old
 fashioned Furnace County nap! While she
 was enjoying her end of the slab, we kids
 had a few games of ball, had a fight or
 two, went down to the creek and had a
 bath, and then decided to go in and get
 our lessons. My brother finally ran up
 against a word in his book that none of us
 knew how to pronounce. He went to the

teacher for instructions. *“Wake up teacher. What is this word? I can’t pronounce it.”* After clawing her eyes awhile, she rolled over on the side, raised a small grunt, and her reply was, *“Oh, call it something and let it go!”* Talk about education! We had nearly all kinds in our little sod schoolhouse in Lincoln precinct!”

Sod Walls

By Roger Welsch

(From Isabel Fodge Cornish in “Pioneer Stories”)



December saw the first new sod schoolhouse ready for its fifteen year-old teacher in short skirts and long braids. The little unpainted, rickety table and equally feeble chair salvaged from the unoccupied sod cabin of my grandmother, Mrs. Martha Mapes; the square wood-burning stove had been lent by Reverend William Elliot; six wooden benches had been made to accommodate not only the six pupils but the people who would come there to attend church or community affairs. At the training school we had been taught how to make a crude blackboard by applying a compound-chiefly of soot or lampblack-to a kind of building paper. When six feet of this had been put in place and a box of chalk purchased, the equipment was complete.

The home-made benches varied as three had backs while three had none and the only boy, Ed Cooper, contended that he should occupy one of the most comfortable ones, so a compromise was necessary. As there were no desks, the writing lesson was a protracted one, each child in turn sitting on the teacher’s chair at her table to laboriously write in his or her copybook.

The floor was of dirt and during the cold winter of 1884 the teacher’s feet were frosted. Later a quantity of straw was put on the floor which made it warmer but proved to be a breeding ground for fleas. This was not conducive to quiet study, but did afford the children some bodily activity!

The privations of early pioneer life were fully shared by these early teachers. One young woman, reared in a New York home with its privacy and comfort, went to board in a home where she knew she must occupy a bed with one of the children. This was bad enough, but imagine her dismay when the first night came and she learned that only a curtain separated their side of the room from where the hired man slept!

A Webster County School

By Loulie Ayer Beall, Lincoln

(Winner of the 1940 1st prize...Native Sons and Daughters of Nebraska)

From: history.nebraska.gov

Seman Van Doran, who came to Webster County in 1878 with his family of five children, settled on the south side of the Republican River, near the "Guide Rock" bluff. During the school year of 1878-1879, he kept a private subscription school in his residence. Other settlers to the south and east of his place wished to

cooperate in an opportunity for the education of their children.

The building of a sod schoolhouse was decided upon. The site chosen was behind a bluff that skirted the edge of the "first bottom" of the river. This location was thought to be out of the view of Indians that customarily followed the banks of the river.

Will Pettit would break the sod, for the schoolhouse was to be on his land. Seman Van Doran, John Columbia, Osborn Ayer, Sam Pettit and others lent their aid in hauling the sod by ox team, cutting the sod and laying the walls, felling trees for the ridge- pole and roof supports, and getting out limestone slabs for the chimney and doorsteps. The Columbia sawmill furnished the rough cottonwood lumber from which the door and window casings were made. Willows that skirted the bluffs of the "second bottom" were secured for the foundation layer of the roof, upon which earth and sod were thrown.

It was not until 1880 that School District #81 Webster County received its proper designation from the authorities at Red Cloud. The number of the district and the right to organize were all that it did receive.

"The Big Spring" in Pettit's pasture, only a few rods from the schoolhouse, was a valuable asset to the district. For years it was the only source of supply for the water bucket beloved by the pupils. It was a Mecca for wild animals and migratory water- fowl, especially when streams went dry, or when the rivulet running from it was frozen over. The spring itself would never freeze, but the thin, trickling ice sheet about it would frequently give way under the weight of the copper-toed boots of early childhood memory.

"Teacher, please may Libby and I" (or more frequently "me") "get a bucket of water?" How often I timidly raised my hand and made that request! What motivated the asking for the privilege? Sometimes it was merely for the relief of weariness in my dangling legs which carried me over the two miles from home. Benches were made from sections of cottonwood logs, split into two parts. and supported above the floor by four sticks of the proper length. These benches seemingly were made to fit exactly the



legs of my older brothers and the other boys, but they were exactly misfits for mine. Sometimes we would raise a hand for the privilege of gathering the acid sheep sorrel which might satisfy the pangs of hunger against the time of "dismissal for noon." Perhaps, at times, I sought the privilege of leaving the room just to get ahead of the boys who invariably brought frogs or snakes into the schoolroom, releasing them at the rear of the room where wraps and caps were hung. The bucket of water would he solemnly carried to its place near the teacher's desk.

The big boys - how I used to fear and admire them! There were the Van Dorn boys, Judd and Jean, John Pettit, Will Hardy, my own brothers, and later many others. "Boots" (John) Brooks, Jimmy Phillips, Frank and Joe Wright, Otie (Otis) Battles, and Lon Diehl, are on my memory's page.

Back to the sod schoolhouse. We played "teeter" by placing one log across another. (The logs were destined to be chopped into short lengths to fit the box stove around which we hovered and shivered in the winter time.) The under log was held in place by flat stones. These were sometimes removed by a prankster, that he might see the merry bunch of players thrown to the ground. That "teeter log" was very unstable. The larger girls would sit sidewise from a sense of modesty- such strict observances were prompted by the moral code of the time. Many of the larger girls were considered young ladies and wore hoopskirts, which prevented them from participating in many games.

I recall very well the appearance of these girls, assembling to watch those who were taking part in the various sports. Proudly they carried muffs- some made of beaver skins: for many years the beaver was trapped from the millrace. There were Belle Van Doran, Winona Gates, Ada Hanly, Orpha Fish and Lucy Battles, who never took part in any of the rougher sports. They threw snowballs, played "drop-the-handkerchief" and similar games. How I studied those large girls- their dresses, slender waists, swollen ear lobes in the painful stage of recovery from the piercing! What secret grief I experienced when told that I was not to have my ears pierced !

I thoroughly enjoyed the noon hour and the recess periods, during which times I took part in almost every game. My brothers, older than I, often reported to our parents that I was "a regular tomboy." But I knew that the long talks with Father when alone were understanding admonitions that I should guard well my conduct.

One of my interests outside of school was the hunting of snakes. A rocky outcrop upon the side of a ravine was the location

of a rattlesnake den. This place I passed twice daily in going to and from school.

The girls usually ran away when the boys killed a snake and followed them with the dangling body held up by the tail. Once in a while I killed a snake myself; but I enjoyed following them as they moved gracefully along, sometimes tickling them with a stick, observing them draw themselves into a coil, and noticing their bright, beady eyes and darting tongues. I hunted and cherished the skins of snakes. These were shed every season.

Many a winter morning I would watch the schoolroom ceiling (if the layer of willows above could be called a ceiling), because a bit of falling earth usually indicated that the warm air had encouraged a snake to limber up. He might crawl downward so that I could see the pale yellow of his belly. He might even thrust his head below the matted twigs and earth. Every youngster knew that if a snake did appear, we were to enjoy a respite, with plenty of excitement. We had only to "tell teacher," and promptly all the boys would arm themselves with sticks. The teacher assumed the distinction of using a pitchfork, kept for the purpose of transferring fuel (modestly called "chips") to the stove. With these weapons Mr. Snake was prodded and pried, and was usually dislodged and pulled clown from his position to be dispatched. Sometimes the hunt would last an hour or more, and if it could be prolonged the boys managed to do it. Girls huddled in groups or stood on benches which were dragged to the farther end of the sod-walled, dirt-floored schoolroom.

One morning early in December a shrill voice sounded a warning. "Oh, teacher, a snake, a snake!" The hunt was on in no time. Back and forth the reptile wound his body among the brush, and in and out went the prodding sticks. Suddenly the

teacher gave an alarm that sent some of the more timid out of doors. "It's a rattler, and a big one," he said. "Keep away, children !" Well he knew the danger; and to us, the boys who dared to face it were heroes. The harsh rattling of the snake spelled danger right there. For a time all lost track of him, which made the situation all the more tense. The teacher, Dean Smith, a fine young man, cautioned us again and again: "It's the hidden enemy that's dangerous!"



I shall never forget the scene that followed. A buzzing sound, a long, thick body flashing downward from the ceiling, and the shrieks of the terrified watchers, combined to intensify the excitement. The rattler had wormed his sinuous way through the brush, had stretched his clumsy length on a log midway between the ridgepole and the wall, and there he lay watching his tormentors.

Perhaps it was half an hour, perhaps two hours that we all sat motionless with mingled uncertainty and terror, for none

could he conscious of the passing of time during this tense situation. As the fury of the reptile reached a climax his body gradually assumed a spiral form, from which the head was raised for the strike. But in the uncanny motion of the instinctive coil he lost completely his unstable equilibrium on the log, so that the "strike" was transformed into a sinuous, writhing plunge that came to an awful termination upon the stove, the top of which had become, since morning, a dull crimson. The alternate, lightning-like expansions and contractions of the body in his last effort to strike the enemy, the warning rattle, the writhings, and finally the searing, smoking body curled into a sizzling mass like a frying bacon-rind in a spider of hot grease, completed this scene, as well as fixing some memorable impressions.

During occasional nights that followed this experience, my dreams were occupied in various attempts to pour cold water upon some animal or person in the throes of intense heat. I had been indoctrinated with the orthodox teaching of the day, namely, that the "wicked" would be consumed in "unquenchable fire;" and so, to this day, any allusion to the biblical story of Lazarus and the rich man brings to my memory the writhing misery of that rattle-snake on the reel-hot stove.

It was customary for the children to ask Teacher to pronounce the "difficult" words. The pupil raised his hand and waited to be recognized. One day I entertained myself by looking at pictures in my primer and reading the simple stories. I ventured to do what I had seen the other children do, so I found a word that I thought looked "difficult" enough to warrant the venture. Up went my hand, and with a feeling of accomplishment I glanced around the room to see who might be looking at me. The teacher

apparently was busy, but noticing my upraised hand, he nodded and said, "In a moment." I had never before heard the word "moment," so I sat and waited, feeling, however, that the word had the implication of time. Through the remainder of the afternoon I kept myself in readiness to spell my word when the "moment" should arrive.

After school I walked soberly and thoughtfully home and to where my father was working, bent upon clearing up in my mind the question which troubled me the most of that afternoon. "Father," I inquired, "how long is a moment'?"

"About as long as it will take me to get a kiss," he replied, as he lifted me up and kissed me. In vain I defended my teacher. A "moment" was a long, long time; in fact, it was not over yet. Father had a keen sense of humor. "Oh, I see; you must ask the teacher about it tomorrow." I did.

Of the teachers who taught in that sod schoolhouse I remember but three: Seman Van Doran, more renowned for his ability to play the fiddle for neighborhood dances than for his skill in teaching; Dean Smith, a son of a pioneer doctor; and Emma Hughes. Miss Hughes would take me by the hand during the recess period, lead me over the prairie nearby, point out the wild flowers to me, and teach me their names. She it was who taught me:

*If ever I see on bush or tree,
Young birds in their pretty nest,
I must not in play steal them away,
To grieve their mother's breast.
My mother, I know, would sorrow" so,
Should I be stolen away.*

Unfortunate indeed was the lot of a child who had not learned, somewhere along the way in his education, the full significance of law, order, obedience, and

industry. No doubt there is some foundation for the maxim, "Spare the rod and spoil the child." The experiences of the pupils who, during the pioneer days, attended the school in District # 81, Webster County, are similar to experiences of children of other early schools in Nebraska. Stay in at recess, stay after school, stand on the floor, and sit at the teacher's desk these were the four big S's.



When the district was fully organized, the old "soddy" was replaced by a frame building. The first teacher to preside there had an eighteen-inch hard rubber ruler. He was stern and dictatorial. He frequently counted "three," "five," or "ten," across the palms of offenders. A sickly, undernourished boy left the room without permission. He was asked to go to the desk for punishment, whereupon he grabbed his cap, jumped through a window and made for home. One of the larger boys was asked to overtake the culprit and return him to the "master." But the boy positively refused to obey, saying, "I won't do it!" before assembly of forty pupils.

Quickly the teacher snatched up the long black ruler and stalked to the boy's desk, declaring, "We'll see about that!" A hush pervaded the room; all eyes were turned in the direction of the scene about to be enacted. A calloused hand was outstretched before the teacher-dictator. A moment's hesitation, and then, *whack*,

whack, whack, whack, whack, the strokes numbered five. "Now will you go?"

"Never!" was the only word spoken.



Again the ruler was raised. Not only one, but a dozen boys sprang from their seats as if by signal, seized the uplifted arm, wrested the ruler from the master's hand, and thrust the hated ruler into the stove. An indescribable stench came from the burning rubber. Pupils scrambled to the windows for air. The larger boys caught up the teacher and carried him out of doors, rolled him over and over in the snow, and admonished him to "study his lesson" for the rest of the afternoon. School kept as usual the next day, with no reference to the incident. My parents refused to listen to the remarkable drama of that day, and little comment was made concerning it in the neighborhood.

"Never miss a day or be late for school, except in case of sickness," was the law in our home-as unalterable as the laws of the Medes and Persians. Here I pay tribute to my pioneer father and mother, who not only taught the importance of regularity and punctuality at school, but who made sacrifices unbelievable today. They were unselfish in their efforts to help the needy. The children of our

nearest neighbor, all girls, were piled into our wagon, when the weather was stormy, and taken to school.

One week in January, 1888, I had missed school because I was ill. I think that I regretted my absence from school the more because I was losing ground in my spelling, as I was near the head of the class. All day long I tossed about in bed, wondering if John would get that prize. I kept saying to myself, "I want to go to school; I must go this afternoon." Towards evening my fever abated, and then I felt sure that I would be able to go the next day.

I arose early that morning, summoned all my energies and performed my usual tasks. I prepared the lunch for all four of us with some trepidation, fearing that at the last moment I should be told that I was not well enough to go. I admit that I was somewhat dizzy and a little weak, and that I really was foolish to venture those two and a quarter miles- especially since a light snow was falling.

After washing the breakfast dishes I commenced to change my clothes for school. Mother began her admonitions by asking me why I was changing. I recall the look of indecision that stole across her face. I was pleading a case that must not fail. "Please, please, I must go," I begged. "It means one place nearer the head of the class!"

"You will have to ask your father." Mother spoke gently. I seldom had that chance of appeal to a higher court, but was determined to make the most of it. I dashed out to the straw-stable where Father was working. He heard my plea, looked up to the clouds through the light falling snow and said:

"I guess you may go if you wear a pair of hoots." I pulled on the boots, but carried

my shoes in my satchel so that I would avoid any embarrassment upon entering the schoolroom. My little sister was suffering from a severe cough, so that she remained at home, but her lunch was left intact in the dinner pail. I shall never forget how I must have appeared, bundled up in a coat made from my father's blue army blanket, my head in a red and black hood, hand-quilted with a "nuby" (nubia, or scarf) wound around my neck and those copper-toed hoots on my feet.

No record is left on memory's page of that day's event until the hour of 2 p. m. Then a blast of indescribable fury struck the north and west walls of that schoolhouse, rattling the window panes, forcing bits of snow through every crevice, and sifting wet particles throughout the room. So thick was the driven snow that objects outside the building were completely obliterated. Our teacher, Frank Cooper, emptied the contents of the coal scuttle into that round-bellied stove.

Without any formal dismissal, recess was declared by a general movement towards the source of heat. As I recall, there were thirty pupils in school that afternoon. Mr. Cooper organized a hand-to-hand line of the larger boys to bring coal from the coal-house, which stood only a few feet from the door. There were six or eight steps from the ground to the threshold, which materially increased the difficulty of the task; but a large pile of coal was deposited upon the schoolhouse floor.

Then the first conscription of this kind that I ever knew about was ordered. The food of each dinner pail was given up to form a general store and to be used in case of a long siege. The extra supply that in our bucket was left to eat on the way home. In the supply was an apple, strange as it may seem—a rare delicacy at that time, but everything had to be given up

for the common good.

The girls' privy, which stood at the extreme northwest corner of the "school acre," went tumbling past the schoolhouse, in consequence of which there was a distressing situation. An improvised "rest room" was quickly arranged by tying the sleeves of garments together to form a very satisfactory screen across a corner of the schoolroom.

Suddenly a pounding aroused the attention of all within, and when the door (inward swing) was opened, a man appeared so coated with snow and ice that his features could not be recognized. He soon proved to be Sam Pettit, a neighbor already mentioned, who had fought his way from home, desperately making his way along a wire fence! His hands were bare and torn by the diamond barbs of the wire, and blood from the deep wounds was frozen between his fingers. Upon his back he had strapped a bundle of wraps for his three children, Fanny, Ada, and John, (the last my adversary in the spelling class). Mr. Pettit had heavy eyebrows and beard, black as coal. These were encrusted in a sheet of ice from his frozen breath. Fortunately he encountered the line of boys engaged at their task of bringing in coal, and Herbert Ayr succeeded in guiding him to the door. In a short time he started out with his three children, but it was only by heroic efforts that he was able to reach home in safety. Then the two daughters of William Pettit, my younger brother and I, started out in a storm of the severity of which we had but faint realization. The struggle was almost too heartrending for description. We got lost in a pasture; and it was apparently by the merest chance that we came upon William Pettit, who also was lost in his attempt to reach the schoolhouse. Had it not been for the ample supply of blankets and robes which

Mr. Pettit had in his sled, and the unerring instinct of his horses, it is very unlikely that we could have reached home. Mr. Cooper with twelve pupils stayed overnight in the schoolhouse, as the distance they would have to go, as well as the direction, made it extremely dangerous for them to venture forth. It was most remarkable that out of about thirty pupils in school that day, not one perished in the Great Blizzard of 1888.



School life proceeded through the years in that box-like schoolhouse.

There were good teachers and poor ones. The one who taught singing was Hattie Bradd; the one who stressed total abstinence was Mary Macintyre; the one who slept through the school hours is not named here; and the one who had the unusual privilege of riding a pony was Gladys Harris. It was she who suggested a teacher's career for me; for while she staked her pony, Fly, she let me hear the reading lessons of the younger pupils, and thereby the spark of ambition was kindled.

Advanced education was difficult to achieve for the greater number of farm girls. Two years of high school in Superior, Nebraska, and two years at the old Peru State Normal enabled me to get my first certificate. Later, the flourishing Lincoln Normal, of happy memory, and Fairfield College, of perhaps still happier

memory, and then Cotner College, from which institution I was graduated, encouraged me upon my modest educational career of some forty years.

But the dream nurtured at that box schoolhouse of District No. 81, Webster County, never dimmed; and my years of teaching service constitute my return for the sacrifices of those heroic pioneers to make possible the education of Nebraska boys and girls.

Bunker Hill School in 1880

By Anzonetta Mills (August 31, 1931)

From: history.nebraska.gov

My first school, a summer term, began in June 1880, in a sod school house at Bunker Hill district number ten, Antelope County, Nebraska.. I was sixteen years of age, holding my first teachers certificate, granted by County Superintendent of Schools, D. F. Merritt, at a public teachers' examination held in Oakdale in April of that year. These summer schools were held even in districts where they were able to hold winter sessions, since the younger pupils and those who lived far from the school could not attend regularly in winter. School had been held in district number ten earlier than this, but the building used for the purpose had been loaned by a homesteader. The sod house had been very recently completed when I arrived, the sod still damp, the grass in the crevices of the walls still green. There was not a tree on the hill, no plant larger than the lovely wild roses growing on the slope, no house nearer than a half mile, and the nearest ones were of the sod and dug-out styles. There was one small outbuilding of sod. As yet there was no coal shed, no shelter for the ponies the children might ride or drive. One family of boys often rode a large old mule from their farm house. He was tied near the

house with a lariat and it was a happy moment for them when he lifted his head and gave a long loud bray.

The pupils brought lunches in tin pails or paper packages, and drinking water was carried from a farm a half mile away, where it was drawn from an open well with two heavy pails, a rope and a pulley.

Superintendent Merritt visited my school once. He was a peculiar man, old fashioned for his time. He walked from one school to another and asked the farmers to entertain him. He asked me to take him to dinner at my boarding place, and the price of his meal was added to my bill. However he had received his education in a New York College.

It was but three weeks after school was opened when a young man from an adjoining district organized a Sunday School in Bunker Hill School House. He drove a team to a two-seated carriage which was loaded with his relatives who were interested in religious work. An invitation was given me to teach a class and to lead the singing, but I could not sing. There was no musical instrument. The people did not seem familiar even with old hymns. Many of them had not attended religious services for many years, so the music was not so good. Books for the classes were a difficult problem, as Nebraska had not then enacted the law that provided liberally for the purchase of books for the pupils from public funds. Some families bought a few new books at a drug store at the county seat, some bought odd copies of old books that their parents or friends had used in their own school days. These were the work of various authors in various states compiled at various dates. Many complained bitterly of the cost of new books. Being acquainted with these conditions in the pioneering country, I had taken my own small store of text books with me and these I lent to my pupils. Among them was a new geography

which had cost me two dollars, as I well remembered. It contained some full page maps of the world, of the two hemispheres and one of each continent. Having neither globe, wall maps nor geographies, except of the primary type, I removed these maps from my book and fastened them on the rough sod wall. Then I prepared a list of questions and answers and gave a daily drill to the whole school, being much pleased with the interest that the pupils showed and the progress that they made in one short term.



The men of the school board and a 6x4 blackboard from rough lumber, smoothed and painted it, provided a box of white crayons and one of colored crayons for maps, and two erasers. It was in constant use. There was no desk, no chair for the teacher. A small cupboard was made for the teacher's books from a store box, with doors and a small padlock. Hats and sunbonnets were hung on nails driven into a narrow board back of the door, and in the vacant space below this, the dinner pails and water pail and the one drinking cup were placed. Near the center of the room was a small box stove and a small supply of wood was cut ready for the occasional chilly days of wind and rain.

The room was about sixteen by twenty feet in size. There were forty pupils enrolled but attendance was very irregular, and the full number was never present at one time. The patrons of the school were very, friendly, inviting the

new teacher to visit their homes, saying it was the custom for the teacher to spend one night each week with one of the families. She was entertained pleasantly and a lunch was prepared for the teacher to eat with the hostess's children the next day at school. The teacher's duties included the janitor work and there was an old shovel to use as a dust pan and there was a broom with which to clean the floor, which was that portion of the surface of Old Mother Earth that was sheltered by the well remembered dirt school house.

The families of the community were of so many types that it would be impossible to classify them, either as to nationality, religion or mental ability. Some were native Americans, and the others, whether they came from Germany, Holland or neighboring countries, were all called "Dutch" by the Americans. The family with whom I boarded, and their various relatives, came from the shores of Lake Michigan. Another family was from the Ozark Mountains, the wife and mother so homesick that her only topic of conversation was, "I want to go back to Missouri." Finally the husband abandoned his homestead and took her home.

One couple whose daughter was a teacher in an adjoining district, had kept a drug store in the city of Boston. The district was a typical melting pot in which the melting was in progress.

Some of my patrons were subscribers to papers, chiefly the local paper from "back home." The Chicago Inter-Ocean, the leading weekly of that time, I found in one home.

Aside from the regular routine of the school, there were many puzzling problems. There was a young man several years older than his teacher who came

only part time. He had to take a place in the second reader class and was no way worried when he failed there. He was unruly and planned only to tease the "little teacher" as he expressed his reason for coming.

Reaching the school house early one morning, I found on the doorstep two small, fat, black-eyed girls, who appeared to be twins. They seemed utterly unable to talk. I could not decide whether they could talk. I led them in, gave them welcome in the language of signs, and when the school was called to order, asked if anyone knew them or could speak their language. One German boy who could speak English said that they were German, that their parents lived in a sod house a mile away and went to work early every day for his father. They were five and six years of age, brought their lunch and spent the long day. It soon became my pleasure to teach them, with the older boy acting as interpreter, until they learned what was expected of them.

There was a sort of neighborhood feud among a few families of the district which caused some disagreement among the pupils. The director of the district came to visit the school, advised the children that my rules were law and gave me a stout switch cut from an elm tree, telling me to make good use of it. I used it as a pointer for the blackboard.

