

Spring Valley School

by
Elizabeth Black

The one room country school, an institution that has virtually disappeared from the landscape of American culture, was once the anchor of the rural community. At its best, it taught the values of cooperation, resiliency, creativity, and problem solving. To be sure, the quality of the education in a one room country school was dependent on the skills and resourcefulness of the teacher, the support of the community, and the wisdom and supervision of the county superintendent who advocated for these schools. I was fortunate to have the best of all three.

I have fond memories of the one room red brick schoolhouse I attended between 1952 and 1960. Spring Valley Grade School was located 10 miles southwest of Ulysses in Grant County in the far southwest corner of Kansas. It was the center of my universe for eight years. We lived a half-mile from the school—if we crossed the creek and cut across the pasture, but more than a mile and a half if we took the road.

The school had in fact played an instrumental role in my family's beginnings. My mother Lois had come from eastern Kansas to the far western edge of the state to teach at Spring Valley in 1929. There she met my dad, Henry Kliever, a shy young man whose younger siblings attended the school. He had appeared after school one afternoon carrying a wire cage he'd constructed with a curious-looking reptile inside after hearing from the students that Miss Wiebe had never seen a horny toad, had no idea what one was. It was his excuse to meet the pretty, young new teacher.

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On the farmstead established by my grandfather, we lived in a dugout-style home that had sheltered the family through the 1930s Dust Bowl and then saved us from a tornado that ripped through the farm in the same year I started kindergarten. During the Cold War fifties, while other school children in urban areas crawled under their desks in atomic bomb drills, we had tornado drills, regularly sprinting to the culvert that ran under the nearby road. We crawled inside the 30-inch diameter culvert while our teacher barked orders and timed us on a stopwatch. It was such fun. I don't remember ever having to run for the culvert for real.

Ironically, shortly after consolidation came to Grant County and the building sat empty, a tornado demolished the school. When I visited the site some twenty years later, all that remained was the deteriorating shell of the two-room teacher's cottage on the edge of the schoolyard, a crumbling foundation where the school sat, and the hardpan surface of the playground interspersed with hardy outcroppings of weeds. I stepped inside the small rectangle of the foundation—it had seemed so big then—to stand at the approximate place where my desk sat when I was nine years old. When I closed my eyes I could envision every detail: windows along the south side, their wide-slat blinds always dusty, with low shelves underneath to store our books. Out the windows you could see playground equipment—swings, teeter-totter, a merry-go-round, and an amazingly dangerous four-person Ferris wheel-like contraption. We were lucky to have playground equipment. Not every country school did. As you entered the school there were two cloakrooms to either side where you hung coats on hooks and stored your galoshes underneath in winter. A bank of shelves in each cloakroom held our lunch boxes. Then the middle corridor opened up into the one big room. At the far end was the teacher's desk. In back of her, the whole wall was a blackboard—and I do mean black, not the sickly green of later chalkboards. Posted above the blackboard were the letters of the alphabet with the correct cursive form of each letter on a second row underneath. Rows of desks faced the teacher, little ones up front graduating to bigger desks in the back rows. The slanted desktop lifted up to reveal a bin to store pencils, crayons, scissors, and workbooks. Light fixtures that hung from the high ceiling featured large bulbs painted silver on the bottom, and they always seemed to buzz. A gas stove in the back heated the room—inadequately, I might add. Attached to the back of the stove was a square container

that we filled with water to add moisture to the room. We fought over who got to refill it. That chore, as well as all other housekeeping tasks, were shared by the students. We took turns sweeping the floor each day after school was dismissed.

The toilets were outside at the back end of the schoolyard. A boys' facility to the left, a girls' to the right with elaborate blinds in front of each. Behind the boys' blinds we heard they held contests to see who could piss the farthest. We girls were grateful for our blinds. We could run behind the tall wood panels to get away from the disgusting boys and huddle to gossip and share secrets.

I spent eight years on this schoolyard, learning all the things kids are supposed to learn. And I learned them well. When I got to the "large" consolidated county high school with four hundred students in Ulysses, I found that instead of lagging behind the town kids as I'd feared, I was ahead of them—and I'd never even had homework during those eight years. If a teacher had ever assigned any, she'd have been fired. The school board consisted of our parents—all farmers—who needed children to shoulder farm chores when they got home from school. Everyone understood that.

A teacher of a one-room school did not have an easy task. It meant somehow juggling eight different grades, often with only two or three students per grade, keeping everyone engaged in learning tasks. For twenty minutes she might be teaching multiplication to the fourth graders, then switch to reading lessons with first graders, while checking on the science project of the eighth graders—and handling questions from all the other grades in between. When the teacher was busy with another grade, you would likely be left to read from your textbook or fill out workbooks—endless workbooks. And if I hurried through that, I got to read chapter books.

The many simultaneous activities in the schoolroom meant a lot of noise, albeit productive noise, and required complicated multitasking—a word that had not yet entered our vocabulary, though the concept was no stranger to the teacher or schoolchildren. Perhaps the only time the hubbub stopped was after noon recess when we all sat quietly at our desks while the teacher read to us from a book. We heard the entire "*Little House on the Prairie*" series this way, as well as some mystery books and classics such as *Little Women*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Call of*

the Wild. The little ones sometimes put their heads down on the desk and napped during this time and the teacher never admonished them.

One of the amazing features of the one room school was the way in which we all shared in one another's education. Older students helped younger ones. The teacher might ask a fifth grader to sit with a first grader to listen to him read. I loved it when I was assigned to teach younger children to read. Years later, during my first teaching job in Chicago, I unconsciously fell back on that model. With no training, I had been thrust into teaching language arts to EMH (Educable Mentally Handicapped) high school students. The problem: my classroom of 15-year-olds included students whose reading levels varied from 2nd to 6th grade. Solution: divide students into groups (like grades) and supervise different activities for the various levels, and ask better performing students to work with others of lower reading skills. My classroom was regularly criticized for being "too noisy"—but I was not deterred. I was highly amused when an Illinois state teacher's college began sending in graduate students to observe my classroom methods. Apparently, word had gotten out that I was successfully raising student reading levels by several grades in a semester's time. How did I do it? I simply fell back on my experiences in the one-room country school system.

Another advantage on the one-room school was the home-like sense of emotional security it offered. Most younger children had older siblings in the room. There was always someone to hug you when you skinned your knee on the playground or felt homesick.

Outlets for creativity were abundant in Spring Valley School. We were always decorating the schoolroom, drawing pictures, making things, repairing other things, coming up with spectacular "science projects" which often involved some outdoor activity such as planting corn and measuring its weekly growth, or—if the weather was bad—an indoor project such as making a paper mache relief map of the Rocky Mountain states. We usually thought up our own projects.

I personally found many outlets for my love of writing and performing. Every year, we put on programs for our parents on Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Valentine's Day, performing songs, poems, and plays for each occasion. Such performances were elaborate and required the participation of every single student. I eventually became the main "playwright"—which meant I also got to

direct. I produced creepy Halloween skits that scared the daylight out of everybody, inspiring Christmas tales of poor children who got magical Christmas gifts from mysterious strangers, and mushy, romantic tales for Valentine's Day that nobody wanted to act in.

My best play, based on a short story in our sixth grade reader, was about an old lady who went to the moon in a rocket ship. She found it just sitting out in her pasture and was curious so she climbed in, and boom, it took off. We constructed a huge rocket ship covered with aluminum foil. It had all sorts of dials that lit up—we used Christmas tree lights. We even dressed somebody up as a black and white cow and he mooed loudly when the rocket ship took off with a gigantic explosion. We couldn't actually make it "take off," but we dropped the rollup curtain down hard at the appropriate time and the audience got the idea. While we students saw these endeavors simply as "fun," I now realize it taught us about collaboration, responsibility, creativity, problem solving, and self-confidence. I went from the worst case of stage fright any 6-year-old fairy princess in blue taffeta has ever experienced, to enjoying performing (and the applause of a room full of beaming parents).

The Christmas program would always end with several fathers coming down the aisle and handing out brown paper sacks (back East, they called them bags) filled with treats to everyone in the audience. In each sack was an orange, an apple, several walnuts, peanuts, and other nuts still in their shells, a red and white striped candy cane, some foil-wrapped Hershey's kisses, and a few hard candies wrapped in colorful paper. That was it—the very same contents each year. We looked forward to those Christmas sacks all year round.

As all schoolchildren everywhere, we loved anything that broke up the monotony of regular class work. We especially loved visits from the county superintendent, a kind, grandmotherly sort of woman who sometimes came on scheduled visits and sometimes showed up unannounced. She often brought a film with her in one of those round steel containers with a woven belt-like fastener. This meant the next day would be movie time! The films were educational fare—science, history, current events with flickering black and white images and scratchy sound. We loved them, even the boring ones. If we knew the superintendent was coming, the teacher had us making serious-looking posters and artwork to put up. It was like getting a vacation the day

before her visit and the day after. Plus, she spent long hours working with the teacher, poring over lesson plans or whatever else they did, and we were dismissed to play outside for very long recesses. During those recesses we knew better than to get into any disputes that might call attention to our unexpected freedom.

The school year was interspersed with events that brought all of Grant County's one room country schools together: track meets, special game days, spelling contests, picnics. There were about seven or eight one-room rural schools in the county, and getting acquainted with other country students would eventually ease our adjustment to high school. To be thrown into classrooms of twenty or thirty peers, have a different teacher every hour, find our way down long corridors to classrooms—all of it was incredibly scary. To recognize the faces of a few other frightened country kids was some relief.

Every year we were given soil conservation workbooks with pictures to color showing such things as contour plowing and crop rotation. Each year all the school children, including the town kids, entered the Soil Conservation District essay contest. The winner got a ballpoint pen with his or her name on it and read the essay to a farm banquet in the 4-H building. With our superior knowledge of farming, we country kids usually won out over the town kids. I won first place when I was 12, read it to the assembled group not telling my parents that I was burning up with fever. I ended up being admitted to the hospital with pneumonia later that night. But I had earned my share of applause and the coveted ballpoint pen. It was worth it all.

I now realize how smart it was to drill soil conservation technique into us at an early age. It was, after all, only twenty years after the end of the Dust Bowl. Actually, we were in another one. A terrible drought that began in 1951 lasted until rains returned in 1957, and southwest Kansas was ground zero in this lesser known dust bowl. Many days the dust storms rolled in, purple and brown on the horizon, driven by winds of 70 mph or more. Parents rushed to pick us up and get us home before the duster would hit. This was possible because all of us lived within a three- or four-mile radius of the school. February 19th, 1954 we didn't see the sun all day. It was black as the darkest midnight and we huddled inside our houses and tied handkerchiefs dipped in water over our noses and mouths just to be able to breathe.

During the dust storm fifties, brisk, gritty wind was our daily fare. Kids can adjust to anything. Whether a grimy street in Dublin, an alleyway on the South Side of Chicago or a western Kansas country schoolyard in the middle of a dust storm, there is always a way to rise above it. On windy days, we hunted buffalo on our schoolyard, and loathed the moment the school bell rang to bring us in from the hunt. The idea occurred when one of us watched a huge, lopsided tumbleweed blow across the yard and noticed that the loping shape of its journey down the length of the schoolyard looked exactly like a running buffalo.

We each searched the barbed wire fence that ran along the south side of the schoolyard for a perfect tumbleweed buffalo. It needed to be oblong so it kind of lunged as it rolled, yet round enough that it would tumble as fast as we could run. Then you had to create a spear, a fairly straight branch from a willow tree would do, and whittle the end to a sharp point. Then on the windiest days—which in 1955 tended to be every day—we would retrieve our buffaloes from the fence where we had stored them, then standing together holding our tumbleweed tightly we would line up at the south fence, spaced about ten feet apart. There was a gentle slope down to the northern boundary of the schoolyard. When the oldest boy shouted ‘Go,’ we’d release our tumbleweed buffaloes, count to ten to give them a decent head start, then chase after them, spear in hand. Then, if we could keep up, we’d throw the spear into the tumbleweed, pinning it to the ground, or at least wounding the beast so its run was slowed by the spear sticking in it, impeding its tumble down the slope.

On really windy days, buffalo hunting was a challenge, and we lost many a good buffalo, because there was no fence down at the lower north end of the schoolyard, only a gravel road. So if it got away from you, it was pretty much gone forever. We agreed on one rule for the hunt: once the buffalo got to the road, we weren’t allowed to run across and retrieve it. I imagine that may have been a teacher-imposed rule, since it would not do to have children darting across the road pursuing tumbleweeds and be hit by a truck.

At the end of recess, our teacher would stand on the porch impatiently ringing the hand-held bell. We’d stash our prize tumbleweeds on the barbed wire fence and reluctantly file back into the schoolhouse. Dirty and sweaty, we’d stand in line at the water fountain to rinse out our

mouths, which were gritty with sand. Our eyes would be bloodshot, dust sticking to our eyelashes, our hair tangled and matted with dust. We didn't care. All we could think about was the next recess and hope the wind gusts would get even stronger so the hunt would be more exciting.

On days when the wind was lighter, we'd opt for annie-over, a game where we tossed a ball over the school roof with opposing teams on either side—I don't remember the point of the game. Or kick the can, a country kid variation on the game of tag with an old tin can on a home base. The person unfortunate enough to be "it" roamed around looking for the others who were hiding. If he saw you, he called your name and ran for the can. If he put his foot on the top of the can and called out your name again, you were "out" which meant you were "it." But if you could get to the can first, you would kick it as far as you could, and while "it" went to retrieve the can and put it back on base, you could run off and hide again. With such a variation of ages playing—from first graders to fourteen year olds, it was necessary to construct elaborate extra rules to make the game fair for the little kids. Actually, we had to do that for all games. Much of our recess time would be spent debating and negotiating rule adaptations. In that sense, the country schoolyard prepared us for living in the world as much as the classroom did.

Sometimes our teacher convinced us to play the more universal game of softball. One day our game was interrupted by a huge rattlesnake coiled and ready to strike between first and second base. Lester hit a home run, cleared first, and saw it just in time. We ran for our teacher, who was eating lunch on the shady side of the schoolhouse. She screamed for us to stand back, ran to her little two-room cottage on the edge of the schoolyard and emerged with a leather gun belt strapped to her hips. She was a formidable sight. I'll never forget her stance, feet wide apart, sideways, stretching, her gun arm out straight—like a real pro from a Cowboy movie—as she aimed her pistol and shot the snake right through the head. One shot. Only one shot. Even the big boys were impressed. The snake writhed wickedly and was soon dead. When it stopped moving, the teacher let the eighth grade boys cut off the rattle for a souvenir and we tacked it to the bulletin board.

There were numerous other close calls with rattlesnakes, black widow spiders, lurking funnel clouds, dust storms, and blizzards. Many afternoons, staring out the south windows, we saw an out-of-

control world—blackout dust storms, whiteout blizzards. And yet, we always felt safe and secure—both physically and emotionally—inside our red brick schoolhouse. It stood strong right up until the last day before consolidation. And then when it was no longer needed the winds took it.