



Irene Henderson sitting on the grounds of Hillcrest School in Rawlins County, KS. 1909

# **“Miss Henderson, Can you build a fire?”**

**by  
Ruth Kelley Hayden**

Such a question would not be asked by a school board member in the Twenty First Century, but it was the one and only question asked by a man board member when Irene Henderson was being interviewed for a teaching job at the one room Hillside School in Western Rawlins County one hundred years ago.

Irene Henderson had dreamed of being a teacher since her days of herding the family’s cows and talking to Roanie, Baldy, and Spot as if they were in a classroom. For two years she walked across the prairie from their farm home to Rawlins County High School. “While I was enjoying my sophomore year in high school, studying just when I had to, reciting just when called upon, playing hooky on lovely afternoons to walk along the creek, a sudden illness took my mother’s life. Just a few months before this my older sister was married. When spring came we left the farm, moved into town, and my father and older brothers moved to Colorado, where my older sister and her husband lived, leaving me the furniture, two younger sisters (15 and 9) and an 8 year old brother. Yes, my hooky days were over as were my days as a high school pupil. I was seventeen.”

Rawlins County had designated 100 school districts at that time, and Abe Davis was the County Superintendent of schools. Taking courage in hand, Irene went to his office at the courthouse and asked if he thought she could teach in a country school.

He told her that summer normal school would be held the month of August, and if she attended and passed the exams, she might apply to a school. She enrolled in the Normal School and also waited tables at the Fremont Hotel to support her little family. At the end of the course, she received a 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Certificate. With this in hand, she went 8½

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Ruth Kelley Hayden was born in Atwood, Kansas, graduated from Atwood Community High School and then from Cotty Junior College and the University of Kansas with a major in sociology and a minor in history. She began her writing career with a weekly column title, “That’s Livin’” for the Atwood Citizen Patriot newspaper. She went on to complete two volumes of Rawlins County history published through the Colby Community College Heritage Series.

miles west of Atwood to apply for a job. "I was scared speechless, but they were so kind, and the only question one of the men asked me was, 'Miss Henderson can you build a fire?' When I said "yes," they hired me for a 6 month term at \$45.00 per month. That stove was what I had to conquer. Nothing was said about the boys and girls of all ages who made up the school."

The school was named Hillside, but the land it was built on was part of the Bliss homestead that this homesteading family had given for that purpose. To the neighbors it was always The Bliss School.

Irene soon learned she was not only the fire builder but the janitor and disciplinarian as well. Like all country school teachers of that day she had to arrive early and build the fire before the students arrived. At the end of the day, she would tell them all goodbye and then sweep the floor, carry out the ashes, and wash the blackboard, as well as grade papers and bring in firewood for the next day.

She had a room at "Aunt Mary" Mason's home, which was within walking distance. Aunt Mary was born in London, England, and was now a lonesome widow far from her childhood home. She was a wonderful cook and would furnish 2 meals and Miss Henderson's school lunch each day and also do all her washing and ironing for only \$2.00 per week.

Each weekend Miss Henderson needed to be in Atwood with her younger siblings. Any of the neighbors would give her a ride to town and a high school classmate who had a horse and buggy would bring her back early Monday morning.

There were students, thirty in all, for each of the eight grades. Four of the boys and one of the girls were older than their young teacher. The boys were often absent as they were needed to work at home on the farms. One of the boys delighted in seeing if he could trick Miss Henderson.

In order to keep ahead of him she would go to Superintendent Davis's office every Saturday and get his help in making out the lesson plans for the week. She remembered, "With his help I kept ahead of that boy."

Another one of the boys chewed tobacco, and when she would see him open his big geography book and hold it in front of his face, she knew he was having a chew. So she would stand in the aisle nearby, and he would have to swallow the juice. She said, "By Spring he was yellow as saffron."

The school was the center of the farming community and if they had visitors at school, the whole family came. Spelling bees, literary socials, and basket suppers furnished entertainment for all.

One basket supper Irene never forgot. "In our district was a young girl who did not go beyond grade school. She was a good cook and quite artistic. So her younger sister and I provided the boxes, the paper, and all the food. When the boxes were auctioned off, her basket brought the highest bid and was bought by a would-be suitor of her. She had refused to date him. So after we were all seated with our partners, he rose to his feet, stated whose basket he held in his hand, walked to the door, opened it, and whistling to the dogs, threw out the prize basket. The pleasure of the evening was spoiled for us all."

"One of the pleasures we had was taking all the children in lumber wagons and visiting our neighboring schools, such as the Woofter School and the Blakeman School."

When the first month of school was finished, Miss Henderson was eagerly looking forward to getting that \$45.00, but she found the school board was without funds. They gave her a note which the banks would not honor. A local Atwood lawyer honored it for 12% interest.

She had finished 6 months of being a teacher unsure as to how much the students had learned but knowing she had learned plenty. At the end of that first term, the school board asked her to return and would give her a \$5.00 a month raise. She turned down the offer because she could get a school nearer to town so that she could be with her family every night. She continued to teach in one room country schools and later the Atwood Grade School where all her students were in the same grade and all much younger than their teacher.

When she married in 1916, she could no longer teach since married women were not allowed to do that. But she never forgot her memories of the one room country schools where she was the only teacher, janitor, and disciplinarian.