Rural teachers recall teaching in 1930s Iowa

by Jeffrey A. Kaufmann

A few years ago, I listened to 15 former teachers recount their experiences in one-room schools in Cedar County, Iowa, during the 1930s. My 15 teachers had taught in 36 different Cedar County schools and had more than 100 years of one-room school teaching experience in Cedar County alone. These oral history interviews formed the core of my dissertation.

Although the 15 interviews, from which the following excerpts were taken, are too small a sample for broad generalizations, they do provide detailed examples of what it was like to teach in a rural school at that time. Common to all the teachers’ experiences were meager resources and the school’s role as a community social center.

The teachers I interviewed had a tremendous amount of freedom in choosing and implementing their teaching practices. I was impressed by the degree to which they took advantage of this freedom to be innovative and creative. Much of the rural teacher’s curriculum was prescribed by a state course of study and the county superintendent, but the emphasis placed on subjects and the quality and the quantity of the instruction were the teacher’s responsibility. The weekly schedules of teachers contained the same basic elements, but even those were adapted to the philosophy of individual teachers. Music and art education varied greatly. So, too, did opening exercises and even recitation (or daily discussion) by small groups with the teacher.

I have donated the oral history interviews in their entirety to the State Historical Society of Iowa so that they are accessible to the public, but I still retain the voices of those 15 rural teachers from the 1930s speaking softly, deep inside me. I invite you to listen to those voices, through the following selected quotations from the interviews.

“Well, it [the school where I taught] looked exactly like it did when my mother went to school there, probably twenty years before. A typical one-room schoolhouse, no vestibule, no entrance room. It had a pot-belly stove in the middle of the room. We did have coal, thank goodness, and of course the coal shed was off to the side. Of course we had no telephone, no light, no water inside. We did have a well outside, and we had a piano, but I couldn’t play the piano. And we had one of those wall maps you pull down for the geography. And we had a set of encyclopedias, and that was our library.” —Louise Kline

“One time I was reading to them, and I realized I’d lost my audience,
The WPA Collections in the State Historical Society of Iowa are the sources of many of the photos in this article. There are some 5,000 photos in the WPA Collection in SHSI’s Iowa City center, and at least 2,000 in the Des Moines center. Organized by county or topic, they portray Work Projects/Works Progress Administration projects and workers in adult education, airports, art projects, bandshells, bridges, cemeteries, courthouses, dams and channel changes, fairgrounds, historical archives, levees and retaining walls, libraries, music projects, parks, public buildings, quarries, schools (including gymnasiums and athletic fields), sewers, standpipes and water towers, the state fair improvements to highways, streets, and farm-to-market roads, swimming pools, theater projects, and water mains. These collections are particularly rich in images of women in public roles; for a sampling, see Louise Rosenfield Noun’s Iowa Women in the WPA (Iowa State University Press, 1999). For specific information on WPA images, contact SHSI Special Collections in Iowa City (319-335-3916) and Des Moines (515-281-3007).
This was a community affair.
and a mouse was coming out from under the desk where I had a dinner pail that tied at the top, and he was sitting up there eating a cookie. After that I kept my dinner pail on my desk. . . . If they were too bad, I would offer a penny to anybody who would set the trap and take care of a mouse. One day I caught thirteen.” —Mildred Carstensen

“You can’t teach any domestic science or anything when all I had was a round-belly stove and no water in the schoolhouse and no drain. . . . The country school that I went to for first through sixth grade, it was practically a brand new building. We had a furnace and we had cloak rooms and we had everything. But I went back to the Dark Ages when I went to this other school.” —Louise Kline

“I carried it [water] in a five-gallon pail when I drove the car. When I rode horseback, when the roads were bad, I couldn’t take water. All the students brought their own in a pint jar.” —Esther Rupe

“You didn’t ask for too much [in supplies] back then because wages weren’t very good. Back in the ’30s things were pretty slow and depressed, and you pretty much made do with what they gave you.” —Evelyn Straub

I was only getting $55 a month [teaching school]. . . . [A school board director] told me because my husband was earning $18 a week [as a mechanic], he could not issue me a contract.” —Kathryn Shilling

“I quit on a Friday and got married on a Saturday. . . . [or] I’d been fired right away. Well, they thought that the married women were to be supported by their husbands and leave these jobs for the unmarried.” —Ruby Streets

“The lowest blow I ever had in my life was when he [a school board director] told me the superintendent would not recommend me. I know my mouth dropped open. I had done all these four years of school methods, school management, child psychology, all these things just to be a teacher. I had no typing, no bookkeeping. I couldn’t do anything else because I wanted to be a teacher. So I said, ‘Why?’ ‘Well,’ he said, ‘I’ll tell you one thing, you go to dances.’ She [the county superintendent] didn’t believe in that, and you wore dresses then. You didn’t wear slacks. I had my legs out bare down there to the ankle. That was bad for a spinster county superintendent; that wasn’t lady-like, I guess. ‘But,’ he said, ‘tell you what we’ve decided. We’ve decided to give you a contract for three months, and if you prove satisfactory, we’ll give you a contract for the rest of the year,’ so I took that. I said, ‘I’ll sign that.’ And I did, and I signed that, and I taught there six years.” —Marie Christian

“I was an independent, I guess you might say. They [school directors] never bothered anything I did, never dictated what I was to do or I wasn’t to do. The superintendent never showed up.” —Louise Kline

“You were the teacher of the school, and you did as you thought best. The county superintendent would come along, and she’d stop in. They always loved to sneak in on you, and things like that. . . . You didn’t have to get permission because if you weren’t doing it right, you heard from the directors or something.” —George McCoy

“One father. . . . came to the schoolhouse after school and was objecting to the fact that the children had to do their little chores in the morn-
Early 20th-century educators urged rural teachers to instruct students in citizenship and physical education.

Above: Page County rural students salute the flag and recite the Pledge of Allegiance, which first appeared in Youth’s Companion magazine in 1892.

Left: Teacher Grace B. Herzberg leads “organized play” at Summit School in Page County, 1921.
Right: Pupils at a school west of Centerville enjoy a hot lunch, in December 1941. Two decades earlier, a University of Iowa extension bulletin had reported that 30 percent of Iowa’s rural students were “seriously underweight.” Calling for rural schools to provide a “supplementary hot dish,” cooked and served by the teacher or parents, the bulletin recommended scalloped dishes and creamed soups for their milk content, since milk or milk dishes were difficult for children to carry from home and to keep cold at school. Expected benefits of the hot dishes were children “more nearly physically fit,” decreased education costs, and “fewer failures and fewer children repeating grades.”

Above and left: Most country school students carried the noon meal from home in tin lunch buckets (which were often empty syrup or lard cans). Nutritionists worried, however, that many rural students “have had early breakfasts and have walked or ridden long distances.” “Until the world awakens to a realization that the school should provide a way by which every child may receive a hot lunch,” a 1921 extension bulletin warned, “these children must continue to bring their noon-day meal….cold, often unattractive and not infrequently poorly selected.”
had fifteen minutes per child per subject or something. Of course they got your full attention for that length of time, but you couldn't double up a lot of times. I mean, even then the work was different from grade to grade." —Adria Ralston

“A mother came and helped because I had one of her students that was starting to school the third year and had never gotten through the first grade because he had an impediment in speech, and when he would raise his hand, he would come up if he needed to go outside to the bathroom or if he needed a drink of water or he needed help, and he stuttered, and he would go, ‘May I—I—I’ and he’d hit the highest key there was, and then the kids would all laugh. They did that once. I stopped. I said, ‘I’m sorry. He is your brother, and he is your friend. I don’t want to ever hear this again.’ And they never laughed at him again, and his mother came to school the next day and was just thrilled that I was going to help him, and she was interested in helping him, and he was ready for third grade after one year.” —Kathryn Shilling

“I found out as the years went along that instead of calling up fourth-grade arithmetic, fifth-grade, sixth-grade arithmetic, I had a half hour that everybody did their math. That way I could go around from desk to desk, each one, and help each one individually, rather than have this class up and then have another class up. They all participated in that one subject. Of course you couldn’t do it very well in history and languages and things like that as well as you could with math.” —George McCoy

“If you tried to get everything in in a day, you just would have, maybe, some five-minute classes and you can’t get anything done. So I set up a longer time and called it reading, ... We didn’t always read out of the reading book. If the child was having trouble with their geography or history or something like that, we sometimes used that book as the reading book.” —Marion Gehrls

“You can’t teach reading by itself. You have to have both sight reading, ... [and] context. Because that’s the way adults read. An example: I wrote on the board one time, ‘I put milk in a blank.’ I had the children try to guess what I put in. They guessed, I don’t know how many different ones, and then I put a ‘j’ up there. And of course they had a choice between ‘jar’ and ‘jug,’ so they got that in a minute. And I did that to try to show them that if you knew the first letter, you would have a pretty good chance at getting the word right even if you didn’t know it before.” —Mildred Carstensen

“Well, we started out with the alphabet, and at first, maybe I’d give them a letter each day. And they would bring pictures that begin with “A” or “B.” We learned that “A” had a sound of “a” ... They could look through magazines and find them. But a lot of times they looked for them at home. And then we made a booklet of them or put them on a poster. So they had a record of them.” —Frances Langley

“Well, they all wrote their poems [on “what they were thankful for that day”] and some of them were a little crude as far as poetry went, and so we would talk it over and say, ‘Well, now how can we make this so it would rhyme?’ and so forth, and we talked about rhyming things. The idea, the thought is the child’s, whatever they wanted to say they were thankful for, that was fine, and we made them, in some cases, rhyme a little better and put them into booklets.” —Marion Gehrls

“I’m afraid I centered on grammar and punctuation more than we should’ve. That kind of cramped their style. If they could’ve told it in their own way without worrying about the correct word and way to spell it and all, I think maybe we’d have got a better response.” —Ruby Streets

“Grammar was real important in those days—punctuation and capitalization and complete sentences, and the climax of a story was important. It couldn’t be haphazard, just a few sentences and given a grade. It had to have something solid in it.” —Clistema Walton

“So they would put down their thoughts, and one thing I did, I told them they could not use a dictionary while they were writing, and if you think you’ve misspelled a word, when you’re through, you may look it up. For instance, at the third-grade level, if they were trying to find ‘dynamite,’ it might take them the whole time they had to write. They’d lose their train of thought and you wouldn’t get anything.” —Marjorie Carstensen

“If it were history what I cared about was whether it had something to do about history, and you didn’t count off for spelling. If that had been a language test, then you would have watched the grammar. ... Often they had wonderful ideas. ... The child wouldn’t be inhibited by thinking about, ‘Well, should I use a comma or a period?’ And they gradually learned. Sometimes you would take what they wrote and carefully correct every error and explain why it was wrong and have them rewrite it, but you didn’t do
that every time. If you did, you wouldn't get anything."
—Mildred Carstensen

“Well, we had history from fourth grade on, I think. And we were kind of like a family; we just discussed whatever happened to be pertinent at that particular time. I think we mixed Iowa history and county history.

—Louise Kline

“Well, we had a little science. . . . Birds and flowers and animals, different things. We generally had them plant seeds, had little paper cups for flower pots and plant marigold seeds. . . . I didn’t do nature walks, but I taught them how to press leaves, and we used them for decorations.”
—Kathryn Shilling

“We never took any field trips because I rode horseback and we didn’t have any way to go, but the kids had a field trip every day they came to school, and if anything on the school ground was interesting, we’d look at it then. A lot of difference between country kids in those days and town kids.” —Louise Kline

“Well, we really didn’t do agriculture except we did plant some flower seeds. I think we planted a few kernels of corn and watched them come up. But beyond that, no. You ran out of time for all these things. They were country kids who saw their fathers doing all these things; they grew up with it.”
—Marion Gehrls

“On Friday afternoons [art lessons were] probably one of the last things we did. Oh, some of it was pretty simple. We made a lot of things to put on the windows and decorate, you know, mostly that type of thing. Wasn’t anything that we got too car-ried away. We didn’t actually teach them how to draw too much. It was mostly copying, I guess, and coloring and construction work. . . . I never liked to teach it because we always had such messes when we got through with the cutting and all this and that.”
—Evelyn Straub

“Well, one of the things we did was we taught children to sew on buttons, and we taught the girls a little bit of embroidery so they could do cross-stitch, and I think some of the boys had what they call little coping saws. They sawed out little figures out of wood, and I know one of the years we made gifts for our mother, and I had the lumber man saw out little breadboards out of a board, and he sawed the corners off. And then they sanded them down for their mothers, and that was a big hit.”
—Clella Walton

“Something that was earth-shaking . . . really caught their attention. Of course, there wasn’t television . . . there would have been a radio and newspapers, and I think particularly with the older children, you know, they sometimes come bouncing in, ‘Do you know what happened?’ and ‘Did you read?’ or ‘Did you hear?’ You know, this sort of thing, and we’d have a little discussion on it. I figured they were learning, whether it was tied to the textbook or not.”
—Adria Ralston

“One time we got up, chose up sides, and they debated on which was more helpful to the housewife: the broom or the dishtowel? Well, you can take the broom and do this, you know, and I would sit and think, ‘Well, that was a good point. I’ll give them a point on this side.’ Well, then I can remember this very distinctly about the dishtowel. ‘Yeah, but you put the dishtowel on top of the broom to get up in the corner for the cobwebs.’ All right, there was a point for the dishtowel. Things like that.

. . . It was just an extra activity. Trying to keep the kids interested. Instead of the same reading and writing and arithmetic; arithmetic, writing, and reading. One day, the same thing over and over. . . . It sure provided a lot of good arguments.”
—George McCoy

“You’re so busy working and everything, it’s just nice to have time to relax and be with them.”
—Frances Langley

“Especially [at recess] at that age, we were one of the children, but we still were there in case there was some problem, somebody got hurt, or they couldn’t decide whether he was out or not. I never interfered. I just did something if they asked me to. Sometimes they played Hide-and-Seek, but there weren’t many places to hide. They invented lots of different things. Once in a while we’d have a teeter totter and a swing, but they soon get tired of that. They played the games we did when we were kids.” —Marjorie Carstensen

“If it rained and we ate inside, we could talk, and they could laugh. It was real close communication. I mean, it isn’t like in the town schools where the kids go out-of-doors, and you don’t see them and you have them in your classrooms, and [then] they go to some other classroom. They were always yours, and I was always theirs.” —Marie Christian

“Well, the girls would talk about the dolls that they had at home, and that was a point of interest, so it was so much fun for them to bring their dolls at noon and recess. . . . I think it taught them to share, let the others play with their dolls, and then also to be careful, give them a little
Sisters Hilda, Aletha, Leanna, and Iris Kirkpatrick sled at noontime outside their rural Guthrie County school in December 1942. The accompanying news story stated that “two thirds of the 106 rural schools now are opening from a half-hour to an hour later than ever before” because of war savings time. For farm children, this meant more time to help with morning chores, and “they don’t have to begin their long walks to school in the dark.”

Students from a Higley school (west of Allerton) ride horseback rather than a school bus on a chilly spring day in 1950. According to the Des Moines Tribune caption, the students “prefer the one-room rural school to consolidated school in town.” The push for consolidation revived after World War II, as rural populations declined and as country roads improved. More reliable country roads weakened one argument against consolidation—transporting children beyond the neighborhood to a distant school.
training. And then the kites, that was a lot of fun for the boys to bring the kites, and we would all get out and see if we couldn’t get one up in the air at least, and maybe we’d get more.” —Wilma Fisher

“Alvie Proctor... came to school one time with a pair of stilts. His was only about that far [two feet] off the ground. [I thought,] Hmm. I believe I could do that. That night I went home and I took 2x4’s, and if you recall how the step is off the schoolhouse up there at Lime City, I had to get up on there to get on mine, and I was about this high off [four feet], and we’d go around there. It’s a terrible thing for a teacher to have done, but we’d kind of have a little tug-of-war. We’d go along, try to knock his stilt out. He’d come along, try to knock my stilt out.” —George McCoy

“Well, all the kids walked to school, and they all walked home and they all had chores, and we had two recesses and noon. How much more exercise do you want?”—Louise Kline

“Well, we had choir songs. Miss McCormick [the county superintendent] would send out, maybe there were ten songs from our songbook that were choir songs, and each one would have to learn that song and sing it with the Victrola. That was their music assignment. They had all year to do it, but each one would have to individually sing it, just so they had learned the song.” —Frances Langley

“In both schools we had these old, antiquated phonographs [with] which we were supposed to teach music. And we had certain songs that we were supposed to learn. This was put out by Charles Fullerton from Cedar Falls, and most of the records were just really bad. I mean they scratch and screech and scratch and screech, and you hardly knew what they were trying to sing. Many of the times we sang without it. I had some music ability. I’m not a soloist or anything, but at least I could carry a tune.” —Melvin Owen

“I answered an ad in the paper... [for a pump organ]. I could read music, and my right hand would work, but my left hand wouldn’t, and so I had my dad, with his truck, pick up that organ. I bought it for $15, and I taught them music, and it wasn’t required, because I thought music was very important... We didn’t have music books, but I would have a copy of the music book, and I would practice that on the piano when I went home on the weekends so I knew what I wanted to do, and lots of times we’d sing one of those songs in the morning, and they would learn the tune from listening to me with my right hand.” —Kathryn Shilling

“The eighth graders... had to take the county test, which meant that you spent the major part of eighth grade getting that youngster ready for the test... I can see maybe some point to it, it was a way to see whether all of the youngsters had an equal amount of background, but you spent so much time reviewing for that stuff, you really couldn’t take them very far forward in eighth-grade work because you had to go back over all this... Well, you had to work it in somewhere because the poor kid had to pass that stuff [to enter high school].” —Adria Ralston

“Well, there were booklets put out by [a publisher in] Minden, Nebraska... They were on every subject, and we would take extra time and go through those and ask the questions, and they would give the answers and so forth. We did push
WPA rural school projects ranged from digging basements to painting interiors to building additions or new buildings. Above: WPA workers at this school near Collins, Story County, tuck-pointed brick, painted, grubbed out old trees, and planted new ones.

Left: Called “practically a rebuilt job,” Ankeny School in Adams County was photographed March 20, 1934, during WPA work on the building. U.S. Highway #34 is on the right.

Below: Pupils perch on a fence outside a Polk County school with a new WPA addition, by Oralabor, in December 1939.
for those. I have always felt that I would like to see the town kids take those [eighth grade] tests. They thought that the country children were not as well educated, and consequently [that] they had to take those tests to 'get into high school.' I went to school in town all my life, and they figured that if the teacher taught you, why that was good enough.” —Marion Gehrls

“We didn’t address it [morality] as a formal study, you know. They were to be honest, truthful, and compassionate, help the underdog, and be responsible.” —Ruby Streets

“I always read a Bible thought to them that I had saved on paper. Then we would say the Lord’s Prayer, which you can’t do now. But the kids enjoyed that. . . . Later one of the girls told me that she wanted me to know how much she appreciated that because she never had a chance to get to Sunday school or church and that helped build her up.” —Esther Rupe

“One of the fathers came down, I don’t know if he was an atheist or what. He did not want his kids talking the Lord’s Prayer, the first thing in the morning or any other time. So I dropped it.” —Louise Kline

“How you learned to divide, how you learned to respect and all of that. As far as the country school, I think it was the foundation of all our learning because you were taught there more togetherness, how to share and live with one another as a school, so that later on in life, you learned to live with your neighbor and all of the good things, that we can’t live by ourselves alone, we need everybody else.” —George McCoy

When you lived with them from nine to four in the afternoon and
played all the games with them, why, whenever a subject came up of any morality or anything, we hashed it over. But not just as a subject in class.

—Louise Kline

“The directors and the people in the community decided to put a basement underneath [the schoolhouse]. So one summer the whole community got together, digging the basement out practically by hand. There were people underneath throwing the dirt out; people outside with pickups or different things, hauling it away. This was a community affair that everyone chipped in and did their bit. I knew I was going to teach there next year so I wanted to participate as much as anything. Then that was our recreation area in inclement weather, the basement, and it was a nice place.”

—George McCoy

“We called it the Sugar Creek Gang, and everybody got together, and well, maybe the first month there would be two or three people, and they put on the program. It could be anything that they wanted to do—little skits, musical, anything that would make up a good program, and that went over pretty good. At Christmas, I furnished a duck, I forget anymore what it was, and it was a raffle . . . And money at the end went to something for the school. Maybe we needed a new map, or we might have needed something else, and it was all to be given to the school. To give you an idea, they would plow snow, they would plow mud and everything to get there. And it was up there on a hill, and if you got stuck, everybody pushed.”

—George McCoy

“I had a program, which was expected, and I hated them. A community thing of some kind where you had, well, I didn’t have many chil-

Proud parents squeeze into desks, and a piano stool doubles as a pint-sized table on October 27, 1941, dedication night for two rural schools rebuilt by the WPA in Sherman Township, Monona County. The host schoolhouse for the community event, four miles southwest of Blencoe, is decorated with black cats and streamers. Social events and holiday programs often filled one-room schools with parents and neighbors eager to socialize.
We had a PTA [at Linn Grove], and I think it met about four times a year. It was a community affair. I mean all the officers were people around there, and they were always there. Knowing farm folk, they brought plenty of food. Welcoming people to roasts it just reeked with perspiration. It was poor, thought. Oh, it rained and you know the ventilation was poor. I thought, Oh, it rained. And I can remember distinctly the Christmas program. I think it was about 90 scrunched in that little bit of a building, and you know the ventilation was poor, thought. Oh, it rained and you know the ventilation was poor. It reeked with perspiration.

"Everybody showed up. They brought the baby and everybody else, and even though they had no children in school, they were there. And they brought food. It was marvelous."

—Marion Gehrls

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