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Berniece Anderson

Country School Legacy: Humanities on the Frontier

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Interview Date: October 16, 1980

Interviewer: E.G. - Ernest Grundy

Interviewee: B.A. - Berniece Anderson

E.G.: College, I'm in Stromsburg, Nebraska today, October the 16th, 1980. In behalf of a project called the Country School Legacy: Humanities on the Frontier. Sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities and also the Mountain Plains Library Association. The purpose of these tapes is pretty much as the title "Legacy" implies, is to capture something of the history of the rural school in Nebraska, while in fact we still have rural schools and we still have people with a great deal of rural school experience. These tapes and other memorabilia, bibliography, and so-on, will be placed in the central depository somewhere. So, I'd like to introduce to you Mrs. Berniece –

B.A.: Anderson.

E.G.: Anderson from Stromsburg. Would you tell us something about your family status?

B.A.: Well, I am what they call an "old maid school teacher." I taught school for 40 years. I went to school in the rural schools all through the first 8 grades.

E.G.: Yes...in Polk County?

B.A.: In Polk County. First I went to a little school called Glendale, I don't know what district it was, for 2 years. And then I moved, so I went to school the remaining 6 years in what we considered one of the best schools in the county, and that was district 50, or the Superior School District. Then I went to high school in Stromsburg, and of course took normal training, and as soon as I graduated I went back to teach in district 50, where I had graduated from the 8th grade only 4 years before. So the children in the upper couple of grades had been in school with me. We had played together as students, and then I went out there very young and played together with the children as student and teacher. And, of course then I had the little children who were old friends of the family, and by the way my father had gone to that same rural school and he had taught the children there who were the parents of the children that I was teaching at that time.

E.G.: You mentioned high school, how about your college training? [2:33]

B.A.: Then, right away I knew that I had to have college training, so I started to go to school at Kearney State Teacher's College. I would go every summer, a term, and then, of course, I would come home, make myself a couple of new dresses, and start teaching country school again. Such I did a term at a time, I went one full year to Kearney as school. One full year. And, after, I can't tell you how many years of teaching school, I graduated from Kearney State Teacher's College in 1968.

E.G.: Didn't a lot of teachers do what you did?

B.A.: We all did. We had our normal training, and started to teach school, and then we went to summer school every summer and finally we graduated, because we usually didn't teach school in the country all those years, we got into town school where these – well, you had to have your degree eventually.

E.G.: But you couldn't afford to quit and go to college throughout the year?

B.A.: Oh, you just didn't. You taught school, most of the girls married somewhere along the way, I didn't. So, I graduated in 1968.

E.G.: I've never ask anyone like you about how you felt when you returned to college as a practicing teacher, and then had to be a student again. [4:07]

B.A.: Well, in the summer we would be mad at the instructors because they gave us such hard lessons, and then we would laugh, we would say "I'm sure the kids in – in the 9 months are just as mad at us for giving them hard lessons, as we are this summer for the teachers giving us hard lessons." We looked at it from both stand-points.

E.G.: I would suspect you made it difficult on those youngsters who were at school in the summertime because of the conscientiousness you brought to your work.

B.A.: You mean that – that there were students in the summer school classes who had never taught?

E.G.: Who were also winter school students.

B.A.: Yeah, there weren't very many.

E.G.: I see.

B.A.: It was mostly the summer school bunch of – of teachers who were –

E.G.: Did you ever have practice teaching – when did you have practice teaching? [5:05]

B.A.: I never had practice teaching until along about the last two summers I realized that I was going to have to finish up all the courses that, somehow or other, hadn't been done. All the required's had to be filled in. And here I was with about 30 years of teaching and no practice teaching. So, they talked to me about that, but it would rather ridiculous for me to have to quit teaching school, stop earning my living, and go back to school and do practice teaching somewhere supervised by a – a teacher who, perhaps, hadn't taught school half as long as I had. So there was a plan, and it was a good plan in those days, a very courteous plan, that we taught in our own room and the supervising teacher came out from Kearney, I'm sorry I can't remember his name, cause he was really fine. He came out form Kearney and – and sat in the back of the room and supervised my teaching. And that's the way I got my practice teaching. I had many a practice teacher teach in – in my classes. After I was through teaching rural school, I taught 17 years in Central City – City Schools. And, there was a college then the – the Central City College that was still putting out rural teachers with a two year certificate. And those girls had to have practice teaching - those students-, and they would come to the Central City Public Schools to get their practice teaching...and, the teacher, the – the practicing teacher worries a little bit about how she's getting along, and the regular teacher worries a little bit about the practice teacher in the room, too. Some of them are still my best friends.

E.G.: To your beginning days of school teaching, you graduated with a normal training certificate, is this correct? [7:11]

B.A.: Two years of normal training in my Junior and Senior year, and they were the most important subjects that we were taking, everyone knew it. They knew that we would go out and be the teachers in the rural schools, and there were rural schools all over in those days. And I took Junior normal training and Senior normal training, and – what did you say? – then I would receive a normal training certificate.

E.G.: You took some state exams.

B.A.: Oh, every subject! And every subject we had to pass the te – the teacher’s exams. Every subject that we would teach as well as things like – oh – organization of the rural school and discipline in the rural school and public relations with the rural people. All of those subjects were taught, and pretty well, I think. And my normal training teacher is still living and lively.

E.G.: They were pretty rigorous courses? [8:23]

B.A.: We worked hard and we were serious because we saw that that was where we were going.

E.G.: Yes...and the examinations were equally – equally rigorous?

B.A.: They were, the meant business, those.

E.G.: What would you say was the level of the mathematics exam...that you had to take? [8:40]

B.A.: 8th grade, because that was the top grade that we were going to need to teach, and so the – the problems that we should work were 8th grade, assuming, wouldn’t you think, that if we could work 8th grade problems, we could work lower grade problems. But then there would be a question or two about how would you organize your math class for lower grades, and what are the –the aims of the math in the various grades.

E.G.: One thing we’re interested in in this study is how a community used the school building, and you have both kinds of experience, student and teacher. Would you care to comment on what did go on there, how the community used the school?

B.A.: Well, I came in very late, you should be able to ask my father about the community use of the rural school because it was really a – a social and educational center in his day. But by the time I came along, some of it was left, some of the very good parts, there was always a – at the end of the year, there was the all-school picnic, and all of the people came and brought all of that delicious food and the ice cream freezers, and we had an all-school picnic, and every grandma and grandpa, and every child and infant were there. Then there was the Christmas program, the box social, and the spell-downs had disappeared, things like that, when I came along. [10:28]

E.G.: What accounted for that disappearance?

B.A.: I don’t know. I don’t know – I think the box social, if I would go into that, had many things to be – to be desired. It was – for example, there would be this young girl who brought her box and nobody would buy it because they said “I sure don’t want anoth – I sure want to avoid get – getting her lunchbox”. Hurt feelings and – there were many things to be desired about that.

E.G.: Yes. But you did mention that your father could talk about the use of the school building as a social center. Something had to have happened in the intervening 20 or 30 years. Was it a loss of population?

B.A.: No, not then. Not then – oh, I think there were – see, by the time I came along there were movies and cars and – and radios. But when my father taught in the rural schools, there was – oh, there were the spell-downs and – or something like that on Friday nights down at the school house. And – you got yourself a date and you went down to the school house and – and did the spell-down and at least you walked the girls home. [11:48]

E.G.: Yes.

B.A.: But that was over by the time – by my time.

E.G.: In the – this predominately Swedish community, you did live in a predominately Swedish area?

B.A.: Oh, yes.

E.G.: Yes.

B.A.: More so than it is now by a long way.

E.G.: Was there any problem of the assimilation of the Swedish people to, say, American culture? Particularly the language?

B.A.: By the time I came – I was – I came along, the language change had been made. The language was comple – there was – it was completely made. There were a few old folks who still spoke with an accent. That's about all.

E.G.: From your experience, knowing your father and possibly your grandfather, did the Swedish people desire to assimilate themselves into the mainstream rapidly? [12:49]

B.A.: With all their might. At least, my father's people, that was their way. They learned to talk English as rapidly as they could. And never talked Swedish in their home with their children as soon as they could talk the English. My father said his older sister, who was – oh, I think, 3 years older than he was – could talk Swedish well. By the time he came along, about 3 years later, he can understand the Swedish – could understand the Swedish, but he talked it poorly. Then he had a little brother, and he couldn't talk Swedish at all. So you see how rapidly they went to work on it. There were a few that said "Oh, we must keep the old language and teach it to our children, but my father's people said "we're living here now."

E.G.: Was it economic? Were their economic -

B.A.: The difference...

E.G.: motives for wanting to learn the American language [13:45]

B.A.: No, I just think they thought that this is America, now we want to learn to speak English and speak it well and – and the children will go to school in American schools and we don't want them to have any language disadvantage. Really, I think that's pretty much the way all the people in that neighborhood, except a few that were proud of the old language and wanted the children to know both.

E.G.: Yes.

B.A.: There was no hanging in there to isolate themselves at all.

E.G.: Do you suppose it might have been a pretty good thing had they continued to be bilingual, especially since we're a part of a world community now?

B.A.: When I got to high school, I said, "What a shame that I can't talk the two languages," there's just no need of it. I said, "Dad. I – I would like to have known Swedish." And he said, "Well, when I was your age, the effort was to know the English well and get away from the Swedish." But there was a family a half a mile from us, and he said, "Go down to those people, they were educated Swedish people when

they came, and they can teach you the Swedish.” So down I went with a little book, but you know they were busy, and I was a busy high school pupil, and I – I didn’t get very far, but I made – I made protest that I would have liked to have been bilingual. [15:14]

E.G.: I hear quite a bit, now, Ms. Anderson, about back-to-the-basics. Do you have any feelings on this?

B.A.: Well, you know, I’m 70 years old. And it seems to me that when I started to school a little girl in the first grade, things were basic, and then somewhere along the way we – we had enrichment. Everything was much enrichment, and before I was through teaching school, we heard this cry that there was so much enrichment that we didn’t have the fundamentals. So then – they put the pressure on us as teachers that we should go back to the basics. I thought I always taught the basics – I thought my children always got the alphabet and the phonetics songs of the words, and I certainly tried without falter to teach them the fundamental addition and subtraction and multiplication facts. Whether –

E.G.: Were you – were you teaching, I’m sorry, the new math that was promoted? [16:22]

B.A.: I was teaching when the new math was promoted. And, the book came in and I was very frightened. I thought I won’t – I’ll be working blindly through a new thing, and my – my little third grade book, I’m sorry I can’t remember the company or the author – but my little third grade book was, I thought, just as basic as it had ever been. I think the persons who wrote it thought that, after all, third graders was – would have to learn the multiplication and addition facts, so we worked on them even though the other teachers were worrying about the new math. The fourth grade teachers, then, they worried about it, first and second grade teachers had been worrying and working on the concept – all concept, it was, wasn’t it? But, in third grade, my book was really the same mathematical drills. Oh, a little different, we had sets and we had concepts, but we’d always had concepts, I thought.

E.G.: One – One more phase of back to the basics is an attention to traditional grammar. Do you have any comments on traditional grammar? Did you teach it, did you diagram sentences? [17:39]

B.A.: When I was in the 7th and 8th grade, I had a wonderful teacher who – whether she was supposed to or not – was teaching parts of speech and correct usage – the old fundamental grammar, and I went through that. And I think it saved my life many-a-time through the years. For example, when I went out to Kearney to go to school, I hadn’t had any col – high school Latin, and I got in just at the point in college where I had to have it, and I hadn’t had it, and so I was thrust into one of these quick moving classes to get me into it, and if I hadn’t had that basic English grammar in the 7th and 8th grade, I would have been in trouble. So I have a love for constructive English. I don’t know that I taught it, I tried to teach what was the “in” thing. This teach everything through literature, I went through that at one time. I – I tried to do that when it was the thing to do. What was it we called it? Pr – Pr – Project English! Project English.

E.G.: Came in about 20 years ago. [19:16]

B.A.: Mm-hmm, project English. And everything was teach a fine piece of literature and the children will absorb the constructive English. The people who were writing textbooks at that time, I felt, immediately moved the constructive English into the reading workbooks and into the spelling workbooks, so that we got, in my level of teaching, the singulars and the plurals and the – the objective and the subjective, like “I” and “Me,” it occurred in the reading books and the spelling books and I thought, well, I’ll emphasize that and we’ll get it there.

E.G.: When you went to school, and then again when you taught, and your teaching career is rather extended, did you notice any changes in the kinds of literature that you taught? Textbooks offered? [20:16]

B.A.: When I first started to teach and when I was a student, we had Sears and then Martin Readers, and Martin, you know, was the President at Kearney College at one time. And those readers had all the classic poetry and excerpts from classic prose such as Gray's *Elegy in the Country Churchyard* or – Noah Webster's *Speech*, or Henry Clay's *Oration*. We had those things in our reading books.

E.G.: Did you have Longfellow, the New England school?

B.A.: Oh, we had Longfellow, and we had even Emerson, a little – a little heavier.

E.G.: And, well

B.A.: And then towards the last – the last years that I taught, we would get our new reading books, and so much of it was – stories to give the children a broad view of our different ethnic groups, that's the thing I noticed so much. Each little story was to give them a feeling of understanding of ethnic groups – no poetry from Longfellow, then, it was the story of these little children who played in the back alley and their problems. Things like that.

E.G.: How about moral instruction in your earlier career, or your earlier childhood, as against, say, we're often accused of not teaching morals now. Do you have any thoughts on that? [21:59]

B.A.: I don't think so – I think, you know, I taught – around here, and I think the morals were – I think it was – the family thing, and there wasn't any breakdown of the family's teaching that I could notice. We lived as – in family groups, then the parents were watching out that their little kids were good back when I was little and – and as long as I taught. [long pause] No, I didn't think there was, I hope there still isn't in a great deal of the country. The one's that we hear about are the – the smaller percentage, I hope.

E.G.: Yes. How about art in the rural school. Was there any art instruction – in your school [don't understand last word]? [22:48]

B.A.: Well, of course when I was a little girl in the rural school, the teacher got the normal instructor, which was a – a book that contained poems and projects in – social studies and always some artwork for the month. The teacher was given the material much in those days. There would be, heaven forbid, the word "patterns" that the teacher could take off and give to the children, and they were nice little things like brush your teeth, eat your vegetables, and things like that for the children to color or draw, or posters – suggested poster material. Then, of course, I stayed with it until we had creative art. I never did know just what I was supposed to be doing, except that I was to give the children the materials and let them do what they wanted – what the spirit moved them to do.

E.G.: You were not to instruct them as to the form their art was to take?

B.A.: We were to suggest, I think. Now – ta – take this – these – this paper and – and make a cut out poster showing – what your daddy does in the autumn, if you were a rural child. Or what you would like to do next Saturday if you could – if it would be a nice day and you could be outdoors, we would suggest. But then the child had to go on from there, and sometimes they didn't go on. I felt that instead

of giving them freedom, so many times it was limitation and frustration. I – I'm not one to say that now you children, here's your picture and now you color inside the lines. There was something wrong with that, too.

E.G.: Yes. [long pause] You – you taught music when you were a rural school teacher? [24:57]

B.A.: Oh, yes, and I'm not very musical. But I – I – my mother had seen to it that I took piano lessons and that I had learned to play fairly well and so I could read the notes and play the little tunes, and the children, if they were – if they could sing better than I could, I certainly let them do it. But I could play the little songs, if I couldn't play them, I didn't present them.

E.G.: Yes. In your later career, of course, you were not expected to teach it –

B.A.: No, in my later career, there was always the music teacher. [25:33]

E.G.: And in the rural school you attended, I suppose you had an organ?

B.A.: The first – the first years that I was in school, there was an organ. Later there was the piano.

E.G.: Teachers generally played?

B.A.: Or there was always an 8th grade girl or even an 8th grade boy who played pretty well. And we had those song – those song books that had – all the patriotic songs, there was Always America and Star Spangled Banner, there was songs by Stephen Foster, you know that type of things, and –

E.G.: Golden book of American Songs?

B.A.: Exactly.

E.G.: Something like that.

B.A.: Uh-Huh. And – and, someone played them, the teacher or some student who played well, and we sang away and had a good time.

E.G.: Was there anything called Music Appreciation, like listening to the classics? [26:30]

B.A.: In the late years, there would be a phonograph, and there would be records, and they would be recommended by the county super intendant. The teacher would go up to the county superintendent's office on Saturday and was encouraged to check out records and – materials to – to present to the children, maybe before we played them. It was nice – nice things came out of that county superintendent's office, very nice things.

E.G.: Just what I wanted to ask you.

B.A.: Very nice things.

E.G.: Who all were the county superintendents?

B.A.: Well, the county superintendents that I had, I – I was supposed to be afraid of the county superintendent, I thought, when I first started to teach school. "Oh, I'll just die when the superintendent comes into observe," and my county superintendents were not like that at all. They – had materials and they offered – they told you as soon as they had you in their list of teachers, what they had to give you

to help you. Among them were the records, and – art ideas, program ideas, and they came out to visit, they were always very nice, I thought.

E.G.: In the - those earlier days, they were probably full time people, I think.

B.A.: Oh, all the years that I taught rural schools they were full-time people. And the county superintendent was kept busy visiting all the schoo- Schools in her county. She came and she visited a while and she would visit with you afterwards, and always she would ask you, “Is there anything I can help you with? Do you have any problems to talk over with someone?” they were fine.

E.G.: Had she been a teacher? [28:23]

B.A.: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

E.G.: Was her job considered to be a step-up over that of the ordinary rural school teacher?

B.A.: I don’t know.

E.G.: Did it pay more, I guess I’m asking, also.

B.A.: I don’t know if it paid more, it was, of course, more permanent. She didn’t have to sign a contract every year, but she had to be elected, didn’t she? It was usually an older woman who had – or an older man – and it seems to me that once they got in, they – they stayed as long as they wanted to.

E.G.: Could I ask you how the community looked upon you as a rural school teacher? How you felt they looked upon you. Were you restricted? Were you their property?

B.A.: It wasn’t as bad as some of these jokes that you see, those – these write-ups that say the teacher was not allowed to – be out of their – be out of the house after suppertime, none of that. And – she wasn’t allowed to have a date or any of those things, there was none of that. But I always thought that – well, of course she – she should be above criticism, and I – I still think she should. I don’t think the school teacher should be doing things to be questioned.

E.G.: How were your relationships with your school board? How did you look upon the school board? Autocratic? Helpful? [29:55]

B.A.: Uh...

E.G.: You had several school boards?

B.A.: Yes. They – the moderator or the treasurer was the person who gave me my paycheck, and he was always just as pleasant as he could be. I think he made up a smile and a few pleasant words what I didn’t have on the paycheck. I taught school, by the way, for 40 dollars a month during the Depression. They would come down and they would ask if they could do something to help me, and I would say, “Well, the – the stove smokes, I can’t get the sto- fire started in the morning.” And he’d say, “I’ll be down this evening and clean out the stove pipes,” or, “I’ll be over Saturday to see what I can do.” Pleasant, friendly people, in my case they were kind of friends – friends of the families – neighborhood families, neighborhood folks.

E.G.: You found it a bit more complicated when you moved into the city school?

B.A.: Different.

E.G.: Yes.

B.A.: Very Different – not more difficult, just different. I was in my early 20s, about 22 when I moved into a rural – a city school. There were other – three other young teachers who were also about 22, we taught down by Omaha and one of us had a car, and we had a real good time. And we didn't do anything a school teacher shouldn't do, either, I don't think [chuckles] And there were two churches in the town and whenever they had ladies aid, they always invited the teachers, and we always wore our best dress that day and went over. And had lunch and met the people and talked to the mamas, had a very good time. I'm glad I was that young, because if there was a ballgame, a base – basketball game, and the local boys were going to play in the neighboring town, somebody always called – [tape ends at 32:08]

Start 2nd side of tape

E.G.: On what you think the role of the rural school has been and might possibly be at this time?

B.A.: Well, I think the rural school was a - was just great. I can remember – everyone in our neighborhood – of course, there were people in the country, in those days. There were farms on every quarter section and every – it was almost like family. The people in your school district were almost like family, sometimes they actually were cousins and like that. But whether or not, it was just that pl- when you said “neighbor,” it meant almost the same as brother, or uncle. I – I'd like to say this, that when I was a little child in the first row in country school, I remember learning things from the 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th graders sitting up in front, talking to the teacher about, say, history. I got my liking for history right there. The teacher liked history, and she taught it, and if I had a later teacher who didn't like history, I still did. And when I was up in the upper grades, we had a system and it was always used, the teacher would send those little 1st graders back to the big 8th grade - 7th and 8th grade girls to read their little lesson, or go over their little flashcards. And – it was friendly, it was helpful, and it was good. The whole system was good, although I know when I taught school I was most un-mercifully tired at the end of the day. It was – it was a big, full day. That's it, I guess.

E.G.: Okay, well thanks very much to you for the interview.

B.A.: I didn't plan on – on something like this. [Ends at 34:17]