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Mary Carrick

Country School Legacy: Humanities on the Frontier

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Interview Date: December 16, 1980

Interviewer: R.M. - Ruthie Melton

Interviewee: M. - Mary Carrick

Abstract: Mary Carrick talks about her young years going to District 3 country schoolhouse just three miles outside of Chadron, Nebraska. The school was one room and had one teacher that changed almost every year. Mary was the only one in her grade until more joined her in the upper grades. Everyone at the school got along, and built a great community that never got into too much trouble. Mary spends her time in her interview discussing her fond and positive memories of school functions and festivals and wishes for them to be preserved. She recognizes that student with "special problems", like her son, might not have all the resources they need in these schools, but she thinks that country and town schools can work together to make every student reach their potential.

R.M. And I'm here today interviewing Mary Carrick. Mary, maybe you would like to start the interview out by telling us a bit about yourself and where and when you started to go to country school.

M: Okay. My name is Mary Carrick, I live here in Chadron right west of town. I was born February 25th, 1947. My father's name was Richard Marian McHenry, and his date of birth way August 27th, 1921. He was born around Dawes country, somewhere I'm not positive where. My mother's name is Betty McHenry and her maiden name was Betty Burge. She was also born here in Chadron on June 10th, 1927. I have three younger sisters, they are Jeanie Dawkins of Chadron, Barbara Williams of Lawrence, Kansas, and Ruthie Melton of Chadron. I am married to David Carrick and we were married June 5th, 1966 here in Chadron. He was also born in Chadron in April 1943. We have two children, Timmy who is twelve and Davey is 9.

[1:35]

R.M. Uhm, why don't we start with where you went to country school at?

M: Okay, I started first grade at District 3, which is also called [Alba's?] School, about three miles east of Chadron.

R.M. Do you remember much about that first day of school, what it was like? What you thought of the school?

[2:00]

M: I really- I don't remember my first day as well as I remember my cousin's first day when I was in second grade. But I'm sure it was very similar because all the younger children around these- kind of dotted upon by the older kids and it was just like one big family really.

R.M. I see. What do you remember most about your elementary years at country school? What was your impression of the school building and of the teachers?

M: Well I can always remember loving school, I never didn't want to go without. I liked my teachers and it just seemed like we did everything together so much it was- we didn't really were separated by grades it was just all of us together.

R.M. How many rooms did the school have?

[3:00]

M: We had one room at the time; I was in the upper grades.

R.M. I see. What was your school building like? Can you describe it a little bit for us?

M: Our school building was just a frame schoolhouse, it had a basement. All of the children were upstairs in the main room. For the first few years we didn't have indoor plumbing, we had outdoor bathrooms, and that was a major event when we got, you know, indoor bathrooms.

R.M. I bet it was.

M: It was an old building but it was- I guess it was pretty well built and everything. I believe when they built the new school house that they moved it away somewhere.

[3:50]

R.M. Do you remember the names of the teachers that you had through the years?

M: My, uh, first grade teacher was Janelle Grant, and then for second and third grade I had Lila Griffith, and my fourth grade teacher was Mary Daniels. Then I was gone- moved to Idaho for a couple years...and when I came back-

R.M. You would of been what grade by this?

M: When I came back I was in the seventh grade and that's when I had Mary Daniels, for seventh and eighth grade. I was wrong about my fourth grade teacher and I knew- I can't remember right now what her name was.

R.M. Ok, that's alright. Uhm, do you remember much about the inside of the- of the school rooms? What kind of equipment you had, or what the desks were like or just the general surroundings in the room?

M: We had the old- the desks you used to sit in and the seat swiveled and the top lift up. There was little ones and big ones, and we had a drinking fountain in the later years I was gonna say not in the very beginning. Blackboards on all sides, we had windows all along the east side where the teacher was a stage that was up higher than the rest of the room. It just seemed like it was a very cheery place. We always had plants. And I believe we also had a table with a hot plate for those that- it's their luxury there at school.

[5:34]

R.M. What about outside on the playground? What was it like?

M: We had a large playground we all played with the equipment. Slides and swings, I can remember the first day they got the new swing set- it really wasn't a big slide but it looked huge to me and it took several weeks before the bigger kids could talk me into going down on it. We also had a big, kind of a, gully in one part of the schoolyard which is where we all went sleigh riding in the New Year and we played during the nice weather too.

[6:12]

R.M. Do you remember much about the schools that were in your area? What their names were or what their district numbers were? ...Were you that much involved with the other schools?

M: The only time that we got together with the other schools was the music festival, which was in the spring. And then the track meet and I really can't remember their district numbers.

R.M. Okay. And you weren't really involved with other schools that much, everything pretty much centered around your own school?

M: Yes.

R.M. I see. [6:55] Uhm, can you tell me a little about your teachers, what they were like? Were they members of the community, or were they, uhm, just, you know, people that were passing through, or can you tell me anything more about them.

M: Okay. My first teacher, Mrs. Grant, was from here and she still lives here. All these teachers, I think, have to be pretty special to be able to have that many grades, that many different phases of children and still teach them as well as they did. And I knew they knew they were very good teachers because I... it's different now that I believe we learned... I don't know [unsure?]

[7:45.6]

R.M. Do you feel like you- you had an advantage in your education over the education your children are receiving now?

M: In some ways I do, in other ways I don't because they have no way of finding out special problems that children have today. And as I am a mother of one that has a special problem, I really appreciate the fact that we do have this opportunity now in our school systems to find out when they have special problems- but we really didn't...have any way of doing that then but it didn't seem like it was needed, maybe it was but-

R.M. So you have pretty positive feelings about the teachers that you did have.

M: Yes. The other teacher, Mrs. Griffith was from here and uh, she died a few years ago but she was also a good teacher. She was very young at the time. And Mrs. Daniels was from Whitney and she still lives there.

R.M. Were the teachers married at the time they were teaching you or single?

M: They were married.

R.M. Oh.

M: Miss. Daniels I should have said. I don't believe she ever has married. And they had very small children at the time.

R.M. Were their children also going to the same school?

[9:05]

M: No, because they were from town. And their children went to town school.

R.M. I see. Do you remember anything about the subjects that you studied?

M: We had the good old fashioned: Reading, Writing and 'Rithmetic, Social Studies, Science, Penmanship was a very big part of our curriculum. I can remember sitting at my desk making our arms go round and round [unsure?]

R.M. What about spelling? Did that play a very big part in your curriculum.

M: Oh, yeah. That's what I left out, that was very important. We had spelling bees all the time. We also had a spelling contest towards the end of the year, and I was lucky enough to go to that twice. And I believed I placed...fifth or sixth in our county. Everybody got involved in the spelling bees in school and even little kids they'd give special words- littler kids could compete too.

R.M. So they really made you feel like you'd done something special with the accomplishments at the spelling bees?

M: Yes.

[10:23.7]

R.M. Do you remember any particular incidents during your school years at [Alba?] that stand out in your mind? Anything special happening?

[audio cuts]

[10:44]

M:...our school house in real nice weather. We would get to go down there during recess and play around the creek bottom. Wintertime, we, as I said sleigh riding...and then also when it was nice weather, we- everybody in the school played baseball. And if we really had a good game going and it was time to go in, when the teacher lost ties with us it was overtime.

R.M. Was everyone involved in those games or just the older children?

M: Well as I remember, everyone was but I could be wrong.

R.M. Were your classes very large?

M: Uhm, I was the only one in my grade, first grade and second grade I had- a girl came and was there for a year. And, in third grade, another girl moved in and a boy so I had three in my grade then. Most of the grades was like three...two and three people in a grade.

[11:51.9]

R.M. Do you remember if the schoolhouse was used for other things by the community, or the surrounding people around the area of the school, or by the parents?

M: I can remember having 4-H meetings there. And I'm sure there must have been other meeting held there, not any that I can remember right after school.

R.M. Being so close to Chadron, do you feel like the schoolhouse was used for anything else by the Chadron community? Since they had their own schools or did it mostly sit around the activities of the schoolchildren and their parents?

M: I believe so, I was mostly just- we were only three miles from town so it mostly got used by the students and their families at the time.

[12:50]

R.M. Do you remember anything about any serious bad weather, any bad storms or tornados or anything, and how the school was equipped to handle that?

M: Uh, as far as tornados, uhm, I can remember a couple times when it was- it looked pretty bad out, we would go down to the basement. And if I remember right, I think we had fire drills too, we would all file outside.

R.M. Was that a state requirement or do you know-

M: No.

R.M. or it was just something the teacher just assumed themselves to do?

[13:26]

M: If it was a requirement I didn't really know. I didn't know if we had to have a certain amount a year or anything like that.

R.M. I see.

M: As for bad weather, if it was bad they would...cancel school but I would, I don't remember school being cancelled as much back then as it is now. It seemed like we could get around...

[13:54]

R.M. Do you remember how you were disciplined? What kind of techniques the teachers used to have control over a whole roomful of students?

M: Hmm.... I guess I must have been a good little girl.

[laughs]

M: I don't remember ever getting in trouble. I remember other kids standing in the corner or having to go out in the hall and sit. I don't know... I don't really remember anyone getting a spanking, of course that could have been I just can't-

R.M. Did you feel like your teacher had control over the room? Did everybody feel like, did you feel there was respect for the teacher and that, you know, her word goes? Or what was it like?

M: I feel like they did. Uhm, back then your teacher was someone that you really looked up to and respected. There was only one teacher that I believe that didn't have control and it is the one that I didn't say what her name was. She was an older person and I don't think she was ...she didn't quite have

the control over as many children as she should've had. I would say she was an older person in about her last years of teaching.

[15:20]

R.M. Was your homework, or your lessons during the day- were they based on presentations?

M: Yes, partly they were. Uhm, it seemed like we had to do a lot more memorizing than children do now. Memorizing our multiplication tables was something that everyone did and I jus- you know that's something that stays with you all the way through the years. And there was reading, we would have to read out loud and....

R.M. Did you have to get up in front of the class and recite orally, or do you remember much about that?

[16:00]

M: Book reports we did. But most of the- anything getting up in front of the people was in our own class, our own grade. So that wasn't very bad.

R.M. I see. How do you feel overall about the education you recieved in the country school?

M: I feel that my education was- I had a very good beginning, I really feel fortunate that I was able to go to a country school. I had wished in the years past that my children could have. But maybe they aren't quite like we used to be, it seems like something else.

[16:39]

R.M. You mentioned the subjects that you had- but I was wondering if you had any subject pretaining to the humanities, or philopshy, or arts, or did they basically stick to the reading, writing, 'rhythmic? Did you do much exploring in other areas?

M: Well we had reading. Uhm, it didn't really get into anything about [beyond the literature?] or anything like that. Mostly just stories. Uhm, we also had art. In fact, our art was shown every year at the county fair, I believe it still is, the country school kids are.

[17:27]

R.M. Was that a big event to the kids?

M: Yes. To get - to have your artwork get to go to the country fair was, you know, we felt pretty good about that.

R.M. Were the teachers the ones that decided whose art would go?

M: I think so.

R.M. But, did everyone contribute?

M: Yes.

[17:51]

R.M. Who do you feel like you like best about your school that you went to? Looking back on the memories that you have of those years...

M: You know, it seems like those- the kids that we went to school with they have- they are still the friends that I have now. It just seemed like we have a deeper tie with each other than you do when you come to a bigger school.

R.M. Are you- do you still keep in contact with the people you went to school with?

M: I still see a lot of them every now and then, and one of my closest friends is a girl that I went through country school with. Mostly kids are- Most of them live around here in the communities, some of them don't.

R.M. So those relationships are pretty special to you, and they still have some pretty good memories of those?

M: Yes, I would say that was my- my fondest memories are- is of the days when I went to country school.

[18:54]

R.M. What- Did you have a worst subject at school or how did you feel? You seem pretty positive about school I feel kinda funny asking you what your worst subject was but, was there anything you really hated?

M: I would say the worst subject was probably history and geography I didn't like it.

R.M. I see. Did you have any homework to take home?

M: I don't remember ever having homework.

R.M. Even through school?

M: Even through- in the upper grades, I don't remember having any.

R.M. Why was this?

M: Evidently she would give us work to do and then why she was looking at the other classes, we would have time to get our work done. So that's the only thing I could think of.

R.M. I see. [19:44] If you were to describe your school day from start to finish, how did it happen?

M: Well the first thing that we would do [unsure?] get to play outside for a while and when the teacher was ready for school to be in, she would ring a handbell that she had. And the thing that we did first, and I don't believe they even do it in too many schools anymore is have the flag salute. Everyday, it never failed, and if it was nice we would have it outside and put the flag up at the same time.

R.M. Did the children put up the flag or did the teachers?

M: We took turns, it was usually one-two people assigned each week to put the flag up and take it down at night. Uhm, and then I imagine we started out with our subjects. I- I really don't know how the teacher took care of that many grades and kept it going smoothly. But I guess it must have been

cooperation between everybody. At noon time we, usually all of us brought our lunch and sat there at our desk and ate. And some of the kids, especially if they had two or three kids in the same family, they would- one of the girls would put their dinner right there on the hotplate and mix the chili or something like that. [21:10] And we didn't have gym or anything like that. We got enough exercise at noon hour, and before and after school, and recess we really- I don't think we missed out by not having gym....

R.M. What kind of games did you play during recess time, do you remember? Are they the same kinds that your kids play today?

M: I don't think my kids would even know what I was talkin' about. When I said "Pop the Bully, Pig in the Pen, Friskado" and those are some of those I can think of right now. And, to tell you the truth, I don't remember how exactly they all went.

[laughs]

[21:52.8]

R.M. Do you feel that it's made a difference in your life? That you went to a country school? Do you feel it's made a difference in your upbringing?

M: Well I do. I don't really just know how to explain that but, I don't know I think we had closer- maybe closer family ties I don't know. If it was just because of the time that we grew up but...

R.M. Were their outside activities? Did- like there are now that took you away from school or kept you at school after hours or- was school pretty much over at 3:30?

M: School was usually over at 3:30 or 4 when we got out. I don't really remember having to come back, the only thing was the Christmas programs was- something that everybody worked on for a month or a month and a half before the program. And I remember especially when there was- when I was in the fourth grade, we had like five or six plays for the program. And it was all memorized, and they were old fashioned plays, family plays like someone was a mother and someone was a father and it was- they just don't do that anymore. The Christmas program I think was probably about the time I didn't go home the whole school year.

R.M. Were there any other special programs during the year?

[23:30]

M: I think I mentioned the music festival and that was something we always worked hard for. And we were judged, the different schools were judged and placed in that musical festival and that was always fun. And the track meet, we were also- we received ribbons for that. I think we went over to Fort Robinson for our track meets and that was a big day. I can't remember any special days right off of my hand.

R.M. Okay.[24:03] Uhm, getting back a little bit to your school house. Do you remember how it was heated?

M: Evidently it was heated with propane gas because I can remember us climbing in the tank.

R.M. [laughs] Okay, you didn't have a wood stove?

M: No, I didn't.

R.M. I see. It just seems like you have some really good memories and good feelings about your early school days and they haven't changed much over the years. Do you feel that country schools today are the same or, do you think they've changed in anyway?

M: I do think they've changed. Uhm, when I was in the upper grades we did divide into upper and lower I suppose because we had more kids. But it just doesn't seem- it seems like they're...well it would have to change because everything changes.

[25:09]

R.M. Maybe, what I was getting at: Do you feel that country schools should be preserved or should they be abolished and have kids from the country come into town, or do you think it's something that we should preserve?

M: I think it's something we- it should be preserved. Uhm, I really think country schools are great and they got- there are a lot of them still. I think it's- they're probably still basically the same. But-

R.M. Do you feel that they can compare and compete with the programs that the town schools have? Do you think we should make that a priority in our state funding for education programs that country schools should be able to have the same quality of education as town schools?

M: Well you're not going to get- you know, the special things that the town schools are equipped with. But if it's something that- a problem with the child or something, they can probably be helped from the town schools and I don't know- I would hate to see there not be any country schools.

[26.29]

R.M. I have one other question before we close. I was wondering if there were any children in the school that were of another ethnic background, or that could not speak English.

M: We didn't have any that couldn't speak English. We did have some Indian children, but they were accepted just as one of us there didn't seem to be any difference that I could remember anyway.

R.M. So you didn't feel like they were stigmatized or that they were a minority group or-

M: No.

R.M. -anything like that?

M: I sure didn't. [27:02]

I was gonna mention something else. Uhm, [unsure?] -special days. Always a special day in the country school was when our county superintendent would come around and that was Mr. Castick. And when he would come around, everybody would just, you know, get excited because we knew he was bringing a film.

R.M. Oh! What kinda films did he bring?

M: Oh- oh they was mostly like science or geographic, it really wasn't, it just seemed the idea that he was coming and he was bringing us a film and it was a really exciting part of the school year when he came.

R.M. Was that the only time you were able to have films? Did you have your own projector at the school?

M: No, I don't believe so. I believe it was only when he came around. I imagine as the years went by that they got their own- right at the time he would bring it in his car and he would go- all the boys would help him carry it out and set it up and everything because he only had one arm.

[28:05]

R.M. Well I really enjoyed talking to you Mary, about your memories at country school. And it sounds like you had some really good ones and some really positive ones. And we're just real glad for your contribution to the country school legacy program. Thank you.

M: Thank you for having me.