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Country School Legacy

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Audrey Caskey

Country School Legacy: Humanities on the Frontier

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Interview Date: August 20, 1980

Interviewer: E.G.: – Ernest Grundy (presumed – no signature on consent form)

Interviewee: AC - Audrey Caskey

[0:05]

E.G.: ... county superintendent's office in Bassett, Rock County, Nebraska. The date is August the 20th, 1980. I'm from Kearney State College and I'm out here to interview teachers as a part of a project called the Legacy of the Country School. It's sponsored by the Mountain Plains Library Association of eight states and it's funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The ultimate purpose of this study is to try to ascertain what the past is of the country school experience and record it and place it in a library somewhere for the use of future scholars. And another part is to prepare a film and other kinds of presentations for the summer of 1981.

[0:56]

E.G.: Right now, I'm talking to Audrey Caskey and I'd like to have her state something of her personal background, education, and so on.

[1:13]

AC: I have lived in Rock County all my life and I've lived in the vicinity of where I live now all my life. I graduated from Rock County High School in 1945 and, at that time, you didn't need to go on to college to teach school. So immediately following high school, I taught in a rural school close to home. I had three students.

E.G.: Pardon me. May I ask you what your certificate was? How did you learn to be a teacher?

AC: Well, when I went to high school, you took a two years training course called normal training in high school, so that when I graduated in the year of 1945, one, um, I was able to teach for three years without going on to school. And I thought this was a real good idea because you knew by the time the three years was up whether you were going to enjoy teaching or not or whether it was-- you wanted to find another profession. Well, I did enjoy teaching, but like most young girls, I thought married life might be more interesting, so I got married at the end of two years teaching. And we had moved, my husband and I had moved out to Oregon. Well, I was out there for a winter and I didn't care for it, so we moved back to Nebraska in the vicinity where I was. And I decided I would go back to teaching after being out one year. Well, my three-year certificate had run out, so I did go to summer school at Wayne, Nebraska. And by going one year, I got nine hours credit, if I remember correctly. And, again, it was good for three more years. Well, at the end of my three years, I had a little girl, so I decided I would quit teaching. And then I had, oh, two years later, had another little girl. And I enjoyed being at home with them and we had a great time together. But then things weren't too plentiful, so I decided I needed to go back to teaching school again. Which, at this time, was about nineteen, oh, forty-- can't remember, 1954, I believe. So then I had gone back to school. Had gone again for a summer session. And again, since I had taught, it was still good for three years. And I've been teaching ever since. I would just-- Well, I would go to school every summer and I would pick up, I would pick up as many as 18 hours. And by the time I

got to ninety hours, um, I guess I was fulfilled enough that I wanted to keep going and finally get a degree. Well, um, this I did. But I did quit for one and I went back to college. Probably was the oldest one to graduate, but I did get my degree from Chadron State College in '76. And I've been teaching ever since. So I've taught a total of about 24 years. I still live in the vicinity where I was raised. And the school that I'm going to be teaching this year, which will make the fifth year that I've taught at, uh, is rather ironic because my father started school there. I went to school there. And now I'm teaching there. And I enjoy it very much.

[4:57]

E.G.: What's the name of the school?

AC: It's District 3 and it's always been called the Bule (? Bulle? Bull? Buelle?) School. It is an older school. It was—The first year that it was build, my father went to school there and— so I think it was built in 1904 or '05, I'm not sure which.

E.G.: How modern is it as to appointments and that kind of thing?

AC: They have done very well in keeping it up. It is modernized. We do have restrooms. We have running water. We do not have hot water, however. We have carpet on the floor. Um. We have a drinking fountain, playground equipment, et cetera.

E.G.: Does the water come from a deep well?

AC: Yes. There is a deep well there.

E.G.: Do you have television?

AC: We have television. We have telephone. We have electricity. Um. We have a movie projector. We have slide projectors. We have, um, tape recorders. Um. Almost everything that the larger school has except the more expensive video tape machines and such.

[6:13]

E.G.: Do you have a way of warming up the sandwiches at lunch time?

AC: We have, um— I personally have a hamburger press and a Hotdogger. I have those and if this is what they want to bring, they have their hot lunch. I do have a little electric plate that if they, if their soup has got cold. Course, with thermos bottles, that kind of takes care of that. But if they have something that they didn't bring in a thermos bottle, well, we plug in the electric plate and it is warmed up.

[6:45]

E.G.: What's the lay of the land where your school is located? Timbered? No.

AC: No.

E.G.: (laughs)

AC: We— It— This is ranching country where it is located and immediately in the surrounding area is all ranches. It's generally rolling, but we have a lot of flat meadowland. Uh. A little farther away. Because I

am six miles from school, which is also ranch country, but it is— much of it is converted into pivot irrigation system now, so we have a lot of corn in the area too.

E.G.: I know that is not a part of my aim out here, but the idea of the pivot systems in the sandhills is a kind of controversial one, is it not?

AC: Yes, it is. Um. We have to diversify quite a bit, I think, to keep it going because if the cattle market isn't good, well, maybe corn is, or if the market isn't good, maybe cattle is. Hopefully.

E.G.: Should the use of the pivot irrigation system become widespread in this general area, would that make a difference on the population of the country school?

AC: Well, um. I really don't know how to answer that because I think the pivot irrigation probably has spread as far as it can spread in our area because much of the land, or most of the land that was used for just pastureland has already gone into pivot irrigation. And, in my end of the county, I don't believe it has made any difference in the school. Maybe, right south of town, out at the eight mile corner, yes, I think, it has made, because, um, more farms or families have come in to operate those.

[8:42]

E.G.: Roughly speaking, how far are you away from Bassett?

AC: I live 29 miles south of Bassett.

E.G.: Your school is about there?

AC: And my school is six miles from my home.

E.G.: I see. And Bassett is the nearest town.

AC: Bassett is the nearest town. Course, we— Our address is Rose, but Rose is nothing except just the post office.

E.G.: Your students, do they come from long distances to school?

AC: Uh, no. My students don't. Unless I have a contracting school. The students in my district, the farthest that any of them come is three miles. Course, I realize in the city, three miles may be a long way, but in our area, three miles doesn't seem long.

E.G.: That isn't a normal thing, is it, for a Sandhills rural school?

AC: No, because we've had a lot of consolidation. District three, where I'm at, have never consolidated, or there hasn't been any schools consolidated with them. But Rose school, which is District 72, have taken in... I don't remember, but I think five or six districts have consolidated with them and I think 16 miles, some of the children come to school.

[10:01]

E.G.: Yes. That's quite a distance. Do you have much of an absentee problem among your students?

AC: I don't have much of an absentee there because most of the students are close enough where they all make it. Unless it's sickness, of course, then you do. But because of roads...

E.G.: I wonder if you could define your average student, or the students in general in your school, as to their personal characteristics, say?

AC: Well, um. I'm very fond of all my students, but, um, most of the students that I have haven't ever been associated very much with city life. Well, socially, they're just all great kids and they all get along good together and just tremendous, I feel, anyway. And they have— They maybe don't have social contact like a lot of the other schools do, but within our group, socially they get along very well. And how they would react if they went into a larger school, I couldn't say, but I feel that they could fit in anywhere with them.

[11:22]

E.G.: Are they conscientious in their work? Do they have an independence of character, say?

AC: Um. I had a student last year that was very conscientious in his work. If he got 95, he wanted to get a 96. If he got a 96, he wanted to go higher. He wanted to do the best. He wanted to try to do a little better every day. But then you'll have students that, uh, don't care that much about it. They, um, want to learn and want to do good, but— Some of them, I'm sure could do better, if they put a little more effort. Sometimes, you'll, I think, always run into those.

E.G.: Senator Carl Curtis once said that the country school he went to was beneficial to him in this respect, that when he was a third grader, he had heard the eighth graders recite. When he got to be a sixth grader, he heard the fourth graders recite and got a review. Would you care to comment on that?

AC: I really agree with him because I had a little first grader last year that, some big word she used to me, and I— it was not a first-grade vocabulary word. And I was real surprised by this word. And I said, "Where did you hear that word?" She sa— Her remark was, "Well, I heard you and Ronny talking about it." She didn't know what it meant, but she knew it was a word that she wanted in her vocabulary. But I do feel like the younger students pick up a lot from the older students. Also, I feel like, if you would have all the grades, they do become more independent and are able to work on their own a little bit more because they realize that you don't have the time to spend with them if there was s— like you would if there was just a few of them. I've had this experience, too, that you don't give them the attention that you would like to give them because of lack of time if you have all eight grades.

[13:30]

E.G.: Time was, I suppose, when the country school was the community center. Have you noticed any change in that? The schools that you have been at, has the building been used as a community center? Would you care to comment on that?

AC: Yes. Before, especially before 1953, in our particular area, we had built a community center, but up to this point, many of the schools were used for community centers, especially for 4-H. Because it was quite popular. When I was a girl going to school, we had our 4-H meetings at the schoolhouse. I can remember this. And we would have a lot of, um, pie socials where everyone would just get together for entertainment or if money needed to be raised for a certain thing, they would have box suppers or pie suppers and auction them off, and, um, raise the money that was needed. But since '53, we have built a community hall and the schools in my area haven't been used as much for a community center.

[14:46]

E.G.: Would that be, do you think, a general estimate of things, that the rural school is no longer the community center that it used to be? Would you say that, in general?

AC: Well, I felt that, uh, it depends on the location where it's at. If they have a community center, a regular building for that, they will use it. But if they don't, I still think that the rural schools are going to be used for a community center.

[15:13]

E.G.: Do you think that television, which keeps people home in their living room at night, has made any difference in the use of school buildings as community centers? Or in the existence of community centers?

AC: Yes, I do. I think television has ruined a lot of social life in the community. Because, um— Well, people were always wanting to get out to be with other people. Now, it seems like television is kind of taking over and they're more interested just sitting and watching rather than, um, being with someone else.

E.G.: Do you use television in your school?

AC: Yes, I do use television in my school. And I think it adds a lot to the school and the children always look forward to what program they will see today.

E.G.: Educational TV?

AC: Yes, it is educational TV. We get it real good because we do have an educational channel at Bassett.

E.G.: Would you care to make a judgment on the effects of television on your students in general?

AC: Well, I think a lot of this depends maybe on the home life. Um. Some of our parents-- the parents that I have, um, are pretty, well they are sure of what their children watch. They don't let them watch all the programs. And yet I have other families that don't care what their children watch. But, I think, the television has a great effect on the-- on what the children think of and the way they behave and the different things that they do.

[16:53]

E.G.: Do you think that it's made a difference in the reading, the literacy level of your students?

AC: I think it does. Especially when children first start to school. In kindergarten, it's real surprising how much they had picked up from the programs that they watch. They- What we used to teach in kindergarten, most of the children know when they come to school, just from watching television.

E.G.: If you had a choice between recommending *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* in a book or *The Adventures of Tow Sawyer* in a TV film, what would your option be?

AC: Well, I would rather that they would read it from the book than watch it on television. They're going to get, I feel, much more out of it. And maybe later on then watch it on television. Maybe that was the way I had seen it first. I'd read it before I had ever seen it. Maybe why I feel this way. But I— It I had the choice of the two, I would rather they would read it rather than see it.

[18:02]

E.G.: We're somewhat in curriculum matters now. We've heard a lot about back-to-the-basics. And, by the way, your teaching career spans how many years? Roughly?

AC: Twenty-four.

E.G.: Twenty-four years. Okay. Do you have any comment on the back-to-the-basics movement?

AC: Well, everybody always talks about back-to-the-basics and I've always talked the ba-- taught the basics, so I don't know when I ever left the basics. Uh. If you're talked about reading, writing, and arithmetic, I assume. I guess when I first started teaching, or when I went to school, those were things that were really, really stressed a lot on. And when I started teaching, we were stressing a lot on it, and I've always stressed a lot on it. The same way with phonics. Some people quit teaching phonics, and I never did quit teaching phonics. So, we're talking about going back to the basics, but I never left the basics, so I don't feel I have to go back.

E.G.: Did you teach the "new math" twenty years ago when it came to you?

AC: I've taught all phases of the math, and, and I really don't think it was new because when they were talking about "new math" in, well, ten, twenty years ago, many things that were teaching was what I had taught when I, when I had first taught school. So it really wasn't new math. New vocabulary, maybe, but not new math.

[19:29]

E.G.: We noticed some of the grammar texts are going back— composition texts are going back to the traditional grammar that I'm sure you're familiar with.

AC: Yes.

E.G.: How do you view that?

AC: Well, I wish that traditional grammar would've never been forgotten. I mean, I think this is why so many students have a lot of trouble with grammar because traditional grammar was forgotten for a period of time, and I, for one, you try to keep up with the basic texts and it just wasn't in there. So I've dug out books that I had when I first started teaching school to get what I wanted because they aren't in the texts now.

[20:16]

E.G.: If writing is one of the basics, and, uh, I think you said it was reading, writing, and arithmetic. What kinds of writing do you have your students do? That is, is it poetry? Or is it expository? We used to call them themes.

AC: We do... I don't do much poetry writing. Um, probably because I'm very poor at poetry myself. But we do write a lot of compositions. And I try to— I start out with my young students, but they're very short, you know, and gradually get longer all the time. I'm not a very good writer myself, but I hope that my students do a better job than I do.

E.G.: Do you have them write paragraphs or more than one paragraph? (inaudible)

AC: Yes. We start out, of course, with just sentences and then develop our paragraphs. I hope to get them up so they can write a good composition.

E.G.: Do your students like poetry? Do they like the study of poetry?

AC: No. Uh. I can't say that they really do. And I'm probably at fault of that because I really don't care for poetry, either. And I think your students kind of go along with what you do. If I liked poetry better, I'm sure that they would, too.

E.G.: They'd rather have a short story than a poem?

AC: Yes.

[21:44]

E.G.: Would you comment about the music and the art in your school?

AC: Well, music. Um. I'm very poor at music. I can sing and I can play the piano with one hand, but no student likes to sing with one-handed piano player very well. We do a lot of music with records. Uh. We do have, um. Oh, they do a lot of singing games with the records and they enjoy this. We do have a rhythm band and we do just plain sing sometimes. But I don't do it very much with the music because, as I said, I'm not a very good piano player. At Christmastime, or not necessarily at Christmastime, but at some time of the year, usually there are three schools that go together and we put on some kind of a little performance for the parents, which has a lot of music. And they— Which involves other teachers and so they get music that way. And if they were in a city school system, I know that they would get more music than what they would in my school system. Also, they would have the chance for band, which I'm sure some of them would like to have. But I still feel that there's other things more important than music, which they can pick up later on if they care to.

E.G.: Do you teach them any music appreciation? That is, the listening to records?

AC: Yes. Yes. We have music appreciation. And this I can do.

E.G.: What kinds of music do you use for that? Do you use classical music?

AC: Um. Not very much classical.

E.G.: Folk music?

AC: Uh. A lot of folk music that we use for that.

[23:31]

E.G.: Now I'd like to have you also comment on the art that you have in your school.

AC: Well, we have art once a week. Um. Regularly, once a week. Also, we have a North Star (? North Start?) art program that comes to the school. This year, they will be coming just twice a semester. But we can go and take in-service from them and then take it back to our students.

E.G.: Now this comes from the educational service unit.

AC: Yes, this comes from the ESU. And, uh, they give them different things that, or they start them on different things, and then I will finish it up. Or maybe I'll even take them on a little bit farther than what they did. But at one-- One year I tried to have art fifteen minutes every day, but this didn't work very well because you just get your art things out and it's time to put it away and you've got a mess all around. So I take one period a week and have art. And usually I do it the last period on Friday. Some years, I do it the first period on Monday morning, but usually I do it the last period on Friday.

[24:45]

E.G.: You mentioned the Educational Service Unit, the ESU units. Do you mind commenting on the help that they give to you?

AC: Well, the ESU is very beneficial, I believe. We can check out many things from them. We can get film strips. We can get movie, uh, 16-millimeter films. We can get 33-millimeter films. Um. We can get records. The records that the school don't have. I can also check out records from them. So anything that the school, itself, doesn't have. Most of this is available from the ESU, and we can get it for at least one week, and some things we can check out for a two-week period.

[25:36]

E.G.: I didn't get to ask you about the national origins of your students that are living in Rock County in the sandhills. Do you have minority groups?

AC: Well, most of the students in my area are just American English. We don't have, um, a mixture in this area.

E.G.: Have their parents and grandparents, they've been around for 75 to a hundred years, something like that?

AC: Yes. As many years as I've taught. Even my grandparents are from, are strictly Americans.

E.G.: This area was settled 1880 or '90, possibly. And there are people here who've been here that long.

AC: Yes. Before that. In fact, my father, uh, who is 82 years old, was also, has always lived in this area all his life. In fact, he lives on the place that he was born at.

[26:42]

E.G.: How does the community support you where you teach?

AC: Well, I feel like I teach in a very good community and maybe this is why I've taught there so long because I do get good community support. And I just have great children to work with. But it really doesn't make any difference what I do with the children. The community backs me on what I do with. If I need discipline, I give it to them and the community backs me on that because they just feel like they want their children disciplined to the proper aspect. And I-- Well, our-- If I want new supplies for the school, they feel that they just back me on getting those, so whatever I want or, within reason, of course, well, they will back me on getting it.

[27:38]

E.G.: I have a question that I have, maybe, I hardly know how to phrase it. But you live in ranch country.

AC: Yes.

E.G.: I think most people, not knowing ranchers, would say that they are probably are a very practical, pragmatic people. You know and I know that a lot of the things that we teach, English, for example, or maybe music and art, are not practical subjects. They will not put food on the table next week, or tomorrow night. If you wanted to institute something new, say in art that might cost you a little bit of money, that might cost the district, and you were convinced that they should have it, would they go along with you? Would the practicality get in the way?

AC: Um, well, I don't know. Again, it's going to depend on certain individuals, but, as you said, we're very practical people, but I feel that they felt if it was going to help their children, they would want it, even if was something that they hadn't had before. Going back to practicality, one thing I might throw in here. I find that we're talking about English and, although I like English and I enjoy teaching English, probably the biggest problem, or one of the largest problems I've ever had, I find an eighth grade boy, especially if they intend to be ranchers, always wonder, "what good is this English going to help me in raising my herd of cattle?" And this is a pretty hard question for me to answer to that.

E.G.: Yes.

[29:34]

E.G.: How do you look upon your role as a teacher?

AC: Well, I guess I'll want to say that I'm very proud to be a teacher. This is why, after, even as old as I was, I wanted to go ahead and satisfy myself and get my degree and go ahead and keep teaching. Although I could have kept teaching even though I didn't have a degree. But it just does something for you to know that you have helped other students get along and make them s-- show their way out into the world. I'm just-- If I had my profession to choose all over again, I'm sure it would still be a teacher.

E.G.: Would you still teach in a rural school?

AC: I like the rural school. Um. The first year-- Of course, after I graduated, I said I wasn't going to teach anymore, although I had taught a number of years, and I sat home for one year, and I couldn't hardly take that. And towards the end of the year, I was, um, called to finish out a school in town where I taught the third grade. And I did teach for two months and could've gone back there the next year. And although I enjoyed, I enjoyed the third grade and I really like it, I still felt that I wanted to go back to the rural school. And this is what I did.

[31:01]

E.G.: What do you think the future of the rural school in Nebraska is? Do you see any trends?

AC: Well, I think probably we will still have more consolidation...

[side one audio ends 31:16]

[side two]

[0:10]

E.G.: Can you recall your first day of school?

AC: Yes, I can recall my first day of school. I wasn't very old. I was only sixteen years old because I had just graduated from high school in the spring. I had (inaudible, tape recording distorted) with my father in the (inaudible) all summer and I was as dumb(?) as an Indian(?). But I went to school and I did this probably more scared than (inaudible) because after all this was a completely new experience for me. I had gone to (inaudible) school all my life, but this was still different. You're on the other side of the side when you're teaching than when you're a student. But I did only have three students. They were very nice. But I did have fifth grade and I did have seventh grade and, if I remember right, the other grade was the third grade. As I have said, I was scared to death, but I had three nice little boys. They got along great. And after a couple of days (inaudible) really relaxed and had a good year.

[1:17]

E.G.: Do you have any particularly memorable, a memorable experience you'd like to recount(?) for us by way of closing?

AC: Well, I've had a lot of memorable experiences. Um. Do you mean something that happened at school or...?

E.G.: Yes. (inaudible)

AC: I can remember the very first year, I had this little fifth grade boy. I had, um-- He had been drawing a picture and it was a picture of a baby. He was supposed to draw a picture of a baby. And all he had drawn was this, uh, elliptical shape with two little dots. (inaudible) I said, "Billy, does that look like a baby to you?" And he looked up with innocent (phone ringing) innocent-looking eyes and said-- (Continuing after interruption) We were interrupted, so this may be a little repeat for a little ways. I'd asked Billy to draw this picture for me, but when I looked down at it, I see this elliptical shape with two little dots and I said, "Billy, does that look like a baby to you?" And he looked up at me with these innocent eyes. He had a serious expression on his face, and he said, "It's wrapped up in a blanket." So what could I say. But I've had a lot of, uh, things that really stand out in my mind. Another experience, another thing that had happened. (inaudible) when I think about it. I was teaching a science unit and it was on the weather. And this happened to be a fourth-grade boy, I believe. And, uh, we were studying the lightning and the thunder and the electrical charges and (inaudible). This boy said, "(inaudible) or did he have to worry about lightning?" And I said, "Why, (inaudible, may be boy's name)?" And he said, "Well, electricity hadn't been discovered when they (inaudible)." So, a lot of things like those that really make you stop and think a little bit. So in concluding this (inaudible) I just hope that this will help someone out. If you want to take on a job that's really challenging, just go to a rural school. You'll get laughs and cries and sympathy and everything else. It's all wrapped up together and plus(?) a lot of enjoyment.

[Side two audio ends at 3:58]