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Country School Legacy

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Country School Legacy: Humanities on the Frontier

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Interview Date: October 24, 1980

William Christy Recording

Sidney, Nebraska

Christy: I am William Christy of Sidney, Nebraska, making a recording for Ernest Grundy of Kearney State College. The date is October the 24th. He is involved in collecting information on country schools. This is a part of an eight-state project, which aims to discover and then perpetuate the history of the rural school schools. The project is sponsored by the Mountain Plains Library Association and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The project will deposit these tapes and other information collected in a central location for the use of future researchers. It will also set up meetings in such organizations as public libraries and historical museums using the film and other materials gained in the project.

[1:03]

I was born in the farm home of my maternal grandparents at the River Glade farm on the Middle Loup River near Milburn, Nebraska in 1932. This was the social and political center of the area. My Grandfather Daily managed to raise a family of nine children in relative comfort for those times. Relatives, friends, and strangers were always welcome there and several of my cousins were also born there.

[1:37]

My father rented a farm on the other side of the river and my first five years were spent in this region near the town of Milburn, which had two general stores, a rural consolidated elementary and high school, a community building, and a blacksmith's shop. When I was about five, we moved to the Christy farm, which my great-grandfather had homesteaded near Anselmo. My great-uncle Jim was operating the farm but was in failing health and wanted my father to take over, which he did.

[2:15]

Our farm was in the Cooperville School District. However, it was closed then, so I began school at Windy Point District 221, a typical one-room school of those times. There were thirteen students and all grades from first through eighth were represented. Our teacher was Opal Loomis and she taught there for two or three years. I'm sure she couldn't have been twenty years old at the time. It was no difficult to get accustomed to the school as there was a rather rigid schedule which had to be followed to get all the classes in. For the first fifteen minutes, we had opening exercises. First, the flag salute, then we sang songs from thin, well-used books. I don't believe anyone ever taught us the words to the Pledge of Allegiance or the songs. The younger students just followed along as best they could. Their mistakes and omissions were drowned by the voices of the older students.

[3:30]

Our first reading book was Elson Gray's Primer containing the familiar saga of Dick, Jane, Father, Mother, baby, their dog Spot, and their cat Puff. The teacher had homemade flashcards of all the words and, as there happened to be four of us in class, competition was developed. As she flashed a card, we

would shout the word as quickly and loudly as we could, and she would reward the winner by letting him retain the card. When the cards were gone, we would count our stacks and the winner would be declared.

[4:12]

She worked diligently to teach us the alphabet and the usual sounds of the letters. If she held up the letter B, we all shouted, "Buh." Then she'd root the letters phonetically, so we learned suffixes and prefixes. Then spelling was introduced soon after that.

[4:36]

The school was run in a very business-like and rather serious manner. Everyone knew what was expected, when it was expected, and the standard was arbitrarily set at 100 percent. While lower grades were the norm, everyone assumed that anything lower than 100, indicated some personal deficiency. It seemed that there was no idle time. Everyone was either reading, writing, reciting, or working at the blackboard. While it was interesting to listen to other classes, we were encouraged get our own work done as we would be required to recite soon. Nevertheless, we all paid some attention to the other classes.

[5:25]

As we became more adept at reading, the teacher had us read orally. Her directions for this preparation were simple. We were to read the story silently at our seats until we could read every word correctly. Then, during recitation, we read orally and were held responsible for reading every word correctly. As we advanced through the grades and through the readers, the material was not entirely new. For example, when the seventh grade read "Man Without a Country" or "A Christmas Carol," many of us quit reading our Dick and Jane book and listened silently. I'm sure that such diversions kept us from getting bored.

[6:14]

For many years, it was traditional that Friday, from 2:45 to four o'clock was art day. During this time, we followed the directions of cutting, pasting, coloring, drawing, or soap-carving diligently, but were given a certain amount of latitude. That is, we could talk quietly and move about to see what others were doing. Everyone enjoyed art because of the relaxed atmosphere and the work was displayed on the walls, in the windows, and around the blackboard which made the drab building rather cheerful.

[6:55]

While I remember no lessons in writing which dealt with form, style, or technique, we were sometimes given a writing assignment. The assignment went something like this: I want everyone in the room to write a story and be ready to read it tomorrow. I remember there were no shy authors. The stories often contained episodes which to us were frightening. Being chased by wild bull. Being thrown into a pen of savage pigs. Being sent to the cellar for a jar of food after dark. Finding a snake in a chicken's nest. Walking alone at night and hearing coyotes call. I don't recall any monster stories, but I'm sure they would've been relished. Sometimes we elaborated on movies we had seen during the summer or radio programs we had heard.

[7:56]

Paul Van Est (Van Nest?) had a hardware store in Anselmo, and one side faced a vacant lot, so the businessmen had a project to encourage trade. Thursday evenings, the stores remained opened until after dark. Then a free movie was shown outside against the wall of the hardware store. We talked about these movies often through the year and I don't remember anyone ever mentioning that the quality of the movies might have left something to be desired. Another exposure we had to stories was through radio. By rushing home after school, we could listen to fifteen-minute segments of such favorites as "Jack Armstrong, All-American Boy," "Sky King," and "Lone Ranger." We were all cautioned by our parents not to leave the radio on too long, or we would run the battery down and miss the best shows on Tuesday night. It was then, after chores, that the entire family, four to five, with popcorn and homemade candy, listened to Fibber Mcgee and Molly, Bob Hope, and Red Skelton. Every week or two, the radio battery was taken into town and charged at the fill-up 66 station. If some, unfortunate child missed a program because his radio battery was down, the others would tell him what he missed in great detail.

[9:32]

As Christmas approached, we began preparing for the Christmas program. This consisted of elaborate planning to include making presents for parents, making Christmas cards for parents, making decorations and decorating the school, learning recitations and parts for plays, and singing songs. About two weeks were spent doing nothing but getting ready for that night. As the time approached, a sort of frenzy seemed to seize us to make everything perfect. We drew names for presents and a limit of 25 cents was placed. The teacher always bought presents for everyone which must've taken a large chunk from her meager salary. The entire community always attended, and grandparents, other relatives and friends came to see the performance. There could be no better audience and every act was roundly and soundly applauded. Later, Santa appeared with the treats furnished by the schoolboard. Everyone left by ten or ten-thirty. And then we had two weeks of Christmas vacation which was about the right amount of time to recover, it seemed.

[10:56]

When I was in the eighth grade, the Windy Point school closed and my brother, sister, and I attended the home district Cooperville which was reopened. There were two other children attending which brought the total school population to five. A far cry from the time my great-uncles had attended there along with some forty other students and my Grandmother Christy had taught at Windy Point five mile away where there were also forty students. But the rural population was rapidly diminishing. My Uncle Jim explained that when he was young, one could look out at night and see the lights from homes on every quarter section of land. However, a year or two soon proved that a quarter section of sandy soil could not provide enough to support a family and people moved on, continued to do so, and are, in fact, still moving away from the rural areas.

[11:58]

The eighth grade at Cooperville was spent mostly, for my part, in preparation for eighth-grade exams. They were given in the spring in the Anselmo high school and lasted all day. My father and mother explained that the exams were more difficult when they took them because they were essay questions

then. They felt that the objective-type questions we answer didn't require as much ability or reasoning and they were probably correct.

[12:33]

I attended Anselmo high school for four years and then began a year's study at Kearney State Teacher's College to prepare me to be a rural teacher. In 1950, there were two professors who taught rural education, Mr. and Mrs. Powell. He taught rural psychology and rural sociology and she taught rural school management and a course, I believe, in audiovisual aids. In what might laughingly be referred to as my spare time, I worked as a waiter at the Fort Kearny Hotel coffeeshop. This was a lively social center in 1950 and was probably more educational than I suspected at the time. My salary was 32 cents an hour plus tips and one or two meals a day. It did seem that the walk from the college to the Fort Kearny was extremely long on cold, snowy days, but I felt lucky to have such a good job.

[13:44]

After I received my one-year diploma, I began teaching in a rural school in Blaine County. I found immediately that nothing I had learned in college applied directly to what I was expected to do there. The records and reports were especially complex, it seemed. The first report was called the three-day report and was due three days after school was in session. Other reports were due at the end of each six weeks. However, I soon mastered the bookkeeping and turned my attention to teaching. I learned a great deal those first few years and I've often suspected that if one could learn and retain everything presented up through grade eight, any additional information could be easily and rapidly assimilated. The students were bright and responsive. But after two years, I accepted a job at Gates, Nebraska teaching grades five through eight in a consolidated school. I was married by then and my wife was teaching the New Helena School at Victoria Springs. When the New Helena was closed, the state of Nebraska took it over as a historical building. It was started in 1867, remains much as it was when she taught there.

[15:07]

When I applied at Gates, I asked for a salary of 280 dollars a month. This was considered outrageous as the average was around 200 dollars. However, they paid it without much discussion, and I taught there three years. In order to keep everyone interested, I started a basketball team, a flag football team, a softball team, and instituted an invitational track meet in the spring. This was a heavy schedule considering I also taught all subjects to about twenty children in grades five through eight and I was also involved in traditional programs and activities and did the janitor work. Our basketball court was outside, and one winter we were invited to a rural school tournament in Anselmo, but the snow was so deep we couldn't practice. One boy in the fifth grade volunteered to run home and get a tractor with a snow blade to clear our court, so I let him out early before lunch and he returned and cleared the court. So as soon as we ate lunch, we went out and practiced in our overshoes, caps, coats, and gloves. They were a very good ball club and once, returning from a game in Merna, Nebraska, they explained that it was really easy to make baskets inside where there wasn't any wind.

[16:40]

During the time I was teaching, I was taking summer courses to keep up my certificate and it was interesting to observe that as the rural schools diminished in population, the college became larger.

When I was a freshman in 1950, there were about 800 or 900 students at Kearney. Ten years later, when I finally got my bachelor's degree, there must have been three times that number of college students. I believe that my rural school experience was a good training ground for my present job which is teaching in Sidney junior high. While I realize that we are all much concerned with stress among our teachers and illiteracy among the populace, educational benefits have improved in some specific areas. For example, I taught my first eight years without a contract including sick leave, professional leave, health insurance, or salary schedule. But then, I didn't realize teachers were entitled to benefits. I remember the first few years I taught, I was ill quite often. It seemed that every time a student became ill, I would catch the same disease in a more severe form. The manner of paying substitutes was quite simple, the schoolboard deducted for the days missed and gave a check for that amount to the substitute.

[18:15]

Yet looking back at my experience in rural schools, I remember, uh, in elementary school, one of the most vivid experiences. It was a visit to our school by the county extension lady. She was very adept at using marionettes and was a ventriloquist of no mean ability. And she produced for our enjoyment a show concerning the wise use of soil and the evils of soil erosion. The audience was entranced and perhaps it was the first professional show that many of us had ever seen.

[19:15]

The worst of times which I recall was as Dickens called the best of times. That is, Christmas, which also brought a gnawing frustration. Everyone in school was issued a packet of one hundred Christmas seals to be sold for a penny each. And the funds thus collected were to be used to prevent tuberculosis among us and others less opulent. And quite often the stamps carried a picture of a smiling but stricken child. I wanted desperately to sell my Christmas seals, but my shyness usually left me speechless. So that when the results were tabulated, I was found to be wanting. And each year, for eight years, I went through this torture. One of the few advantages I could see being in high school was that I wasn't required to sell Christmas seals at Christmas.

[20:31]

The rural school was an integral part of rural life. It was successful so long as it represented the rural ambition parents had to educate their children. And a feeling that education was lasting while most everything else was subject to erosion, loss, or violent fluctuation. The common refrain heard from older relatives and friends was, "Be sure and get a good education. No one can take that away from you." And it's only recently occurred to me that this thought might have been the unspoken philosophy of the rural schools I knew

[End 21:16]