Pioneer Schools - Nebraska Folklore

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This pamphlet, on pioneer schools in Nebraska, does not attempt to tell the history of the early schools in the State, but is limited to relating some of the lore (customs, habits, stories) of the pioneer school. Nearly all of the material was obtained through word-of-mouth interviews with early Nebraska students and teachers. Information obtained from other sources, such as newspapers, books, journals and bulletins, is credited where used. The names of verbal informants are also given in the text itself, to give full credit to the individuals, who often went to considerable trouble to furnish their personal recollections and reminiscences.

Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Historical Background</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early School Buildings</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locations</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equipment</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanitation</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heating</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Textbooks</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Teaching Methods</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Teachers</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Activities</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Historical Background

Schools are like water, you never miss them until you are without them.

Nicholas Sharp (Nebraska pioneer)

The above thought was shared by nearly all of the Nebraska settlers who, as soon as they had a roof over their heads and the prairie soil broken, began thinking about education for their children. An editorial in the Blue Valley Record for October 26, 1871, expressed the attitude of the pioneers when it said, "It is a cheering thought to know that education is a leading topic in all the social circles. Even on the great thoroughfares of trade Nebraska's men and women find it an irrepressible subject."

The first school for white children in Nebraska Territory was held at Camp Missouri (later named Fort Atkinson) in 1820. The second school, in Bellevue, did not open until 1849; in the intervening period, however, the few parents who lived in the sparsely settled territory had given their children a small amount of rudimentary education in reading and writing in their cabins and dugouts. This was a practice which was often followed in
the outlying sections of the State, as settlement moved slowly westward, up to the '70's and the beginning of the '80's.

Many of the first schools in Nebraska were known as subscription schools, which meant that the teacher taught for what he could get for each pupil in his school. The average pay was a dollar and a half a month for each student. The school year consisted of from two to three terms, each term lasting three months.

One of the first of these schools was located near what is now Nebraska City, in Otoe County, in 1855. The teacher, Margaret Martin, had 12 pupils, each of whom paid her $1.50 a month.

The first subscription school in Omaha was probably held in a room in the old State House. Classes were conducted from July to the middle of December, when they had to be discontinued in order to make room for government offices. Forty pupils were enrolled in this school.

The first Territorial Legislature enacted a free school law in 1855. The law contained what now seems an odd clause stipulating that the librarian of the territory was also to be superintendent of public instruction. The annual salary for both offices was $300.

The act also provided for the election of County superintendents and district boards of school directors, who were to locate and build school houses, buy supplies, and examine the qualifications of applicant teachers. Tax funds were available for buildings and supplies but not for teachers, they were to be paid by subscription among school patrons.

But the new law was not sufficiently enforced, as was shown by Governor Cumming's message of Dec. 9, 1857, when he said, "In many if not all counties no districts have been formed, no taxes levied, no teachers employed and no steps taken in respect to school laws."

Due, in part, to Governor Cumming's criticisms, the entire school law was repealed in 1858 and a new system set up, which made the township the administrative unit for schools. Each township (usually six miles square) became a school district with a school board having the power to build schools, hire teachers and levy school taxes.

But it was not until six years later, in 1864, that the new law became workable, for it was only after the passage of the Enabling Act by the United States Congress that improvised and sparsely settled communities found it possible to build schools. This act aided all school districts by setting aside the sixteenth and thirty-sixth sections in every township for the support of common schools, and a total of seventy-two sections in the State for the use and support of a university. In addition, five per cent of the proceeds of all sales by the National Government of land within the State (minus incidental expenses) was set aside to defray the expenses of common schools. From these funds was built the basis of the educational system as it is known today. Its effectiveness may be judged by Nebraska's present literacy rating, which is excelled by only three other states.

A statistical study of school reports from 1870 to the present (1940) is
both interesting and revealing. For instance, it shows that in 1870 there were 797 districts and 298 school houses—only one school district out of three had a school. From 1875 on, the proportion between schools and districts became more even. In this year there were 2,405 districts and 2,018 schools; in 1880, 3,132 districts and 2,701 schools; in 1885, 4,266 districts and 3,631 schools; in 1890, 6,248 districts and 5,907 schools. By 1900 the number of schools (for the first time) surpassed the number of districts by 28, with 6,708 districts and 6,733 schools. The 1938 Report lists 7,209 districts and 7,526 schools.

The number of children of school age (5 to 21) who did not attend school at all was very high in the early 70's. In 1870 only 12,791 students out of 32,589 were enrolled; in 1875, 55,245 out of 80,122; in 1880, 92,549 out of 142,348; in 1885, 163,348 out of 233,060; in 1900, 240,300 out of 332,243. Today (1929 Report) 282,102 students out of 376,909 are enrolled in schools exclusive of colleges.

The proportion of male and female teachers remained nearly the same during the first half of the 70's. In 1870 there were 267 men and 269 women teachers; thereafter the proportion of women teachers increased rapidly. In 1875, there were 1,504 men and 1,587 women; in 1880, 1,670 men and 2,430 women; in 1885, 2,575 men and 6,344 women; in 1890, there were 4,833 more women teachers than men—7,401 women to 2,062 men. Of the 12,731 teachers in the State in 1938 only 863 were men.

Early School Buildings

Many of the early schools were held in strange places—such as tents, a room or corner of a settler's home, granaries, dugouts, and churches—until the community became prosperous enough to erect a school building.

Mrs. Maude Hershey, of North Platte, says that her first school, in 1886, was held in a large room with a grocery store conducting business at the other end. This arrangement was also used in Crete, where classes in the winter of '71 were held in the front of Ocker and Grimm's carpenter shop. Reverend T. W. Worley, son of a circuit-riding minister, tells in his unpublished memoirs of attending school in the Congregational church at Milford in the same year. The teacher, G. B. France, was a lawyer, but his practice was so limited that he found time for teaching. Nebraska School Buildings and Grounds, a bulletin published by the State Superintendent in 1902, describes a school erected in Scotts Bluff County in 1886 or '87 that had walls of baled straw, a sod roof and a dirt floor. This strange building was 16 feet long, 12 feet wide and 7 feet high. Two years after its erection cattle, on range in the vicinity, literally ate it to pieces. Few straw school houses were built because of fire hazard; although State Superintendent Fowler, in 1900, argued that baled hay could be used as a school building for the fall terms and then fed to the cattle in late winter.

Izzie Lockwood, of South Sioux City, attended her first school in 1870 in a granary in Dixon County. Mrs. M. E. Armour, of South Sioux City, first attended school in Mrs. Will Berger's home in that city. Classes were held in the dining room, which was also used by the family. The teacher (who was
the housewife) arranged her schedule so that when she was cooking in the kitchen the pupils studied, and when the family used the dining room at noon the children played in the yard.

William Young, a Cass County settler, saw the need for a school building in a community too poor to erect one. Young, with true pioneer hospitality, solved the problem of finding school space by donating half of his two room cabin for the pupils living in the vicinity during the winter of 1857. A subscription was taken among the neighbors for hiring a teacher.

The first school in Allen, Dixon County, was held in a granary; later a sod school house with sliding windows was built. In Holdrege, in 1876, school was first taught in the attic of Solomon Timber's home; seven children attended. In Gering, in 1887, the first school was held in a saloon that was temporarily vacant. District No. 52 in Madison County went through the evolution experienced by many school houses. The first structure was a sod house to which, as time went on, wood was added for its walls and roof until it came to resemble a board shanty. In 1892, when the community had become sufficiently built-up, a new frame building was erected.

Ellsworth Paine, who combined farming with teaching school in Goshen County during the early 80's, gives the following description of the school where he taught:

The school house was picturesque both inside and out. On approaching it from the southeast it appeared to have bulged up and out of the ground to a height of four or five feet. A rusty stovepipe protruded through the top of a dirt roof. The roof was supported by timbers. From the adjacent background two partially transparent windows broke the monotony of the low sod wall. The door facing the south was approached by a short trench from the creek bank. This door of undressed boards was especially designed for timid school mams who desired to inspect their room before entering. By applying the eye to one of the copious cracks one was able to command a good view of the interior.

J. B. Jones, who taught in Custer County in 1897, says his school had been excavated out of the side of a hill; on the top and back of the school house was stored corn that was used for fuel. Wandering pigs often raided the fuel supply by running across the roof of the school. When this happened one of the boys was sent out to shoo off the pigs. At other times the pigs would run to the window, which was near the ground, and stare in. Will Rockwell, when a pupil in Dakota County, also remembers "pig trouble." One morning, when he arrived early with another boy, they heard so much commotion within the school that they were afraid to enter. Closer investigation, after the teacher had arrived, revealed that an old sow had entered through an open window and given birth to a litter of pigs during the night. Another nuisance, according to S. G. Jacoby, who attended school in Sioux County in the 70's, were gophers. Mr. Jacoby says they sometimes tunneled their way into the school room through the earth floor. But it was snakes that caused the most commotion in taking the minds of teacher and pupils away from their work. Mrs. M. A. Springer, who attended school in Dakota County in the 70's, recalls an afternoon when the entire school had to
vacate the building through a window because a large rattlesnake stood guard at the door.

Many of the early schools were difficult to heat, partly because of the scarcity of adequate fuel (coal was unheard of and there was little wood) and because they were often flimsily constructed. District 26, in Boyd County, held school in a church that had no door. Snow, sometimes two feet deep, would form drifts across the floor, forcing the children to complete their lessons in a huddle around the stove. C. D. Den, who taught in Antelope County in 1880, says that during severe storms enough snow sifted through large cracks in the walls of his sod school house to entirely cover the dirt floor. W. W. Cox, in his History of Seward County (1895), writes of a similar experience when teaching in 1866. Mr. Cox adds, "The school door [on a morning after a severe snow storm] would not budge. Upon investigation I found the room full of snow to the roof. We were compelled to abandon the school for the winter term."

The school houses that were built before public tax agencies had been established were usually built by the settlers themselves. Very little building material had to be provided for these undertakings because, with the exception of lumber for the door and window frames, these first schools in Nebraska were built of sod or made as dugouts. A building bee, to which the settlers wives brought lunches, usually enabled the men to erect a sod school in a few days.

Logs were used where timber was available. Such a school in Hamilton County, according to Andreas' History of Nebraska, was erected in 1870. Each settler in the neighborhood furnished a log; two old bachelors donated windows and the pine boards for desks. The seats were made of split logs.

Three settlers in Saline County dug a school house out of a cave along the bank of the Blue River in 1866. Lumber for the floor and roof was obtained on railroad land 14 miles away; from there it was hauled to a local mill and sawed into boards. A fireplace, likewise dug out of the river bank, was used for heating. Mrs. Lee, the wife of one of the settlers, taught the first school term. Thirteen children attended.

Sometimes the simplest necessities for building were entirely lacking; Charles Lederer had no nails when he built a school in Blair County in 1887. In this instance, with true pioneer ingenuity, the sills and studding were joined together with mortise and wooden pegs.

Elyah Filly, according to his son, Dr. N. C. Filly, fought an entire school district in Gage County in 1867 for a large school. Most of the settlers thought a structure large enough to house the nine children in the district at that time would suffice. But Filly wanted a building that would take care of the community's school needs after it had become more settled. He won his battle by building most of the school himself; he and other settlers who wanted a larger school quarried the rock and erected the structure.

The oddest thing about this affair was that the only tax at the time was on personal property, of which Filly owned the largest share in his district. Consequently he found himself being assessed for one-third of the cost of this school in order to pay for the labor of its building, of which he had done the largest share of work himself.
The location of the first school house in a neighborhood often created considerable contention since all the settlers (who usually had to sacrifice a great deal from their meager earnings in order to support a school at all) wished to have it located as near their respective homes as possible. In some instances work on a proposed site was begun and stopped four or five times before the final location was agreed upon.

Another form of contention sometimes arose when two districts consolidated in order to build one school, and the inhabitants of one of the districts felt they were not receiving the attention or services that were their due.

L. H. Thornburgh, who began teaching school in 1885, writes of such a district squabble in the June 16, 1927, issue of the Ericson Journal:

The next year [1886] I contracted to teach school in a district five miles southeast of Holdrege. This was in reality the consolidation of two districts. The patrons of the districts built the soddy by popular donation and labor—patrons of one district putting up the walls while those of the other put on a thatched roof.

I contracted to teach with the school district whose patrons had built the walls and in whose territory the soddy was located.

After the term had begun the officers announced that all pupils not residing in the district must pay tuition. The parents who had put the roof on the school house declared if they must pay tuition to send their children to the school they had helped build they would come and take off the roof. This they did one day when the school was in session. As a result we were forced to finish our term in a dugout which was a bachelor's residence.

S. McKelvie, father of the present publisher of the Nebraska Farmer, tells, in the December 8, 1939, issue of this magazine, of a similar experience when farming in Clay County in 1879. One day, when he was braking the sod in preparation for spring planting, he saw the frame school house slowly moving across the prairie towards Clay Center. Mr. McKelvie explained the reason for this strange action as follows:

In the fall election a vote in competition with other places in the County was taken which resulted in the county seat being moved from Sutton to Clay Center... There was nothing to speak of at Clay Center prior to this election; no railroad, not even a school house. So they [the people of Clay Center] conceived the idea of taking the school house from District 40 that I, with a few others, had paid for. As soon as I figured out what was happening I unhitched from the plow and on horseback made for a director's home one-half mile away. As soon as I found him I pointed toward our school house which was slowly moving towards Clay Center.
The director immediately mounted a horse and sped towards Clay Center as fast as his horse could go. From there, with the sheriff, they went to the house-mover and served an injunction. The following evening a meeting was held in the school house to establish ownership. That was the hottest meeting I ever attended. Clay Center claimed the district lines had not been established, so we established them that night and moved our school house back to its original site.

Mrs. Ada Delano, of Lincoln, recalls a more successful sharing of the same school between two districts at Lee Park (now a Ghost Town) where half of the school house stood in Valley County and half in Custer County.

Grant Essex, of Lincoln, who has lived in the State since 1878, says the school house of pioneer days was never locked because it was often used as a haven during a storm or other emergency. A few sandhill schools were also stocked with food caches for travelers who became lost or caught in severe storms. This custom was dropped when it was found that travelers would use up supplies in fair weather or when there was no genuine emergency.

Many of these travelers were tramps. School houses were considered common property in those days, so no tramp ever passed one up when he was looking for a place to spend the night. It was also a common practice for settlers to send these unwelcome visitors to school houses in order to get rid of them. Evelyn Grandy, of Lincoln, who was a teacher in the 80's, says these tramps even cooked on the stove, judging by the cans of vegetable peelings left around. But one tramp, who lifted a window and camped one night in a Thayer county school house, showed both a sense of humor and a sense of courtesy when he left a note thanking the district for the three buckets of coal used during the night. Sometimes, when the weather was very severe, passing travelers not only used school houses for themselves but also for their horses. Charles Miller, when a pupil in Gage County during the 70's, received five cents a day for building the school fire. He says, "One cold morning I found unmistakable signs that horses had been stabled inside. Some effort had been made to ready up the place but it did not require a very sharp eye to see that our school had served as a barn. This, I am told, had happened a number of times over the State."

Equipment

The equipment and furnishings of the early schools were often as primitive as were the school houses themselves. The County Superintendent's school report for District 16 in Seward County for 1874 was typical for many schools:

S. H. Williams, director; Miss Caroline Jensen, teacher. Department behavior of students, fairly good; recitations pretty well conducted. An old sod house, poorly lighted and ventilated; no cupboard for books, maps, etc.; no hooks for hats, caps, etc.; no out houses, furnished with board seats and desks. School house and seats wholly inadequate for the number of pupils. No recitation seats; no chair for teacher; teacher's desk; 24 feet of black-board surface; no globes, maps, charts, dictionary or books
or reference. Pupils in the district, 47; enrolled 34;
present 25; average attendance, 29. No visits by director.
Several visits by parents.

In Crete, in 1878, the teacher's chair was a nail keg, the desk was
made out of an organ. J. Entella Allen says that in her school, in Fillmore
County during the 70's, they used for desks, rough tables, none of which had
been scaled down to fit the different ages and sizes of the children. When
there weren't enough benches to go around, as was often the case, the child-
ren sat on the floor. Too often this was a dirt floor, dusty in dry weather
or muddy with pools of water from a leaky roof, following a rain. When there
were enough desks and benches, the older students used the desks while the
smaller pupils studied on benches placed in the center of the room. Sometimes,
as happened at the Mount Hope sod school in Frontier County, the teacher fur-
ished her own chair by bringing it from her home. The rest of the school
furniture consisted of a blackboard and three long wooden benches without backs.
There were no desks, nor was it thought they were needed because the students
wrote on slates which they could hold on their knees. The blackboard looked
like the throw board from a cornhusking wagon that had been painted black. It
was supported by wooden stakes, driven into the earth floor.

A school held in Mrs. G. M. Harvey's sod house in Furnas County 1879, had
no blackboard until the teacher made one by painting the bread board black.
But Lizzie Lockwood, who attended school in a Dixon County grarnary in the 70's,
was not even fortunate enough to use a bread board. The students in this
school learned their first letters on the stove. She recalls that the settle-
ment was so poor that she first saw a blackboard twelve years later—after she
had been teaching in this district for two years. Even lead pencils were a
luxury. There was only one in the vicinity of this school, and it was constant-
ly borrowed by the settlers in the neighborhood who, according to Miss Lockwa-
rd, kept it wrapped in paper. Isabel Garnish, who taught in Custer County in the
early 80's, says that her first blackboard was made by applying a coating of
soot and oil to six feet of builder's paper. When the commercially-made slate
came into vogue it made school work easy for both teacher and pupils. The
boys usually erased their figuring or writing by spitting on the slate and
then rubbing it off with their coat sleeves. The girls, more fastidious, car-
rried pieces of cloth with which they washed their slates after wetting the rag
at the water pail. Miss Edna Davis, who taught in Washington County, recalls
that a lady who lived near her school used to furnish hot water in individual
bottles for cleaning the slates. C. H. Smith, who was a student in Colfax
County in 1865, says the school blackboard consisted of the top of a black
trunk nailed to the wall. Mr. Smith adds, "In 1868 I enjoyed the luxury of
a slate, costing 60 cents. On this I wrote my lessons. When the slate was
full I moistened it with spit and wiped it off with the sleeve of my coat.
After many successive fillings of the slate and subsequent wippings of cor-
rected lessons, the slate acquired an odor which would have staggered a healthy
man nowadays. But that was before the days of sanitary experts; and a slate
without an odor was as uncommon as a rose without a smell."

The chalk for these blackboards, according to L. W. Conklin, who taught
in Saunders County in the 70's, was sometimes made of soft white rocks found
in the gullies. Soapstone was also used. The manufactured slate pencils were
commonly used until the 80's. Miss Edna Davis says she remembers them because
of their gay wrappings—gold and silver—like Christmas tree decorations.
Purple ink, according to Grant Essex, who attended school in Chase County during the early 70's, was made out of poke weed berries by steeping them in water. Nicholas Sharp, who taught near Liberty, Nebraska, in 1870, says he also made his own ink. Either powder or indelible sticks were used, with water added. Stove soot, with oil, was also used. This strange concoction, being thick, resembled printer's ink. The quill pens were, likewise, made by the teacher or his older students. It was a common practice to bury the bottles of ink in ashes taken from the stove to keep them from freezing solid. Some teachers used a box filled with sand as an anti-freeze storage place for ink.

Sanitation

Dr. F. M. Gregg, who has studied teaching methods in Nebraska, at the Wayne and Peru Teachers Colleges, and is now Professor Emeritus of the Psychology Department at Nebraska Wesleyan University, recalls that the lack of sanitation in many of the early schools was almost incredible. One problem, according to Dr. Gregg, was the common drinking cup. The old dipper and water bucket were in almost constant use in the average school room, gathering, during the course of the day, a muddy pattern around them. Edna Davis tried to solve the problem by keeping the water in a big jug where it couldn't be easily contaminated. But usually the teacher satisfied her conscience by watching the children when they took a drink to see that they didn't pour back into the bucket any water left in the dipper. Two of the big boys went after the water. Sometimes it was obtained from a nearby creek but usually it was laboriously carried from a nearby farm house. Even such a simple act as going after water was not without its dangers in the open prairie. K. A. Springer recalls that one of the pupils in Dakota County, during the early 70's, was bitten in the big toe by a rattlesnake when returning from such an errand.

Heating

The early school stoves were often crude affairs that gave out more smoke than heat. Sometimes the chimney was merely a stove pipe sticking out of a hole in a window. The Saline County News, describing such a stove in January, 1878, said "The smoke actually took pains to clear the building and came back to the stove from where it filled the room. Consequently some of the scholars have not succeeded in getting a clear complexion to this day."

The most common stove for burning wood was the square box type. E. J. Estes, who taught near Fairbury in the 80's, says he always kept a foot-warming log in front of it so the pupils would have a place to warm their feet when they came into the room on cold mornings. Another school stove was the upright barrel type which came into common use after coal had taken the place of wood and corn cobs as fuel. But the most unusual kind of school stove, according to Nicholas Sharp, who taught in Gage County in the late 60's, was a horizontal wood burner which had a hollow heating drum on top of the fire box. (See illustration, next page.)

It was sometimes difficult to obtain fuel for the early schools before coal was introduced. Wood and corn were the most popular fuels but sometimes they were not obtainable in bad weather, as is testified by the Weekly Bur- tonian for March 24, 1881: "The School Board will probably close the schools
for a few weeks in consequence of the scarcity of dry wood.

C. D. Don, who taught District 10 in Antelope in 1880, says that in the three months he taught school the wood-burning box-stove was never lit. Mr. Don adds: "Hundreds of times that winter the stove was blessed by pupils and teacher alike by 'laying on of hands.' How many times I looked into the stove's depths in hopes that symptoms of a fiery zeal might be noted only to meet with the discouraging sight of a feeble fire at the back and sap seething and dripping from the front end from the green elm wood." A. C. Hardin, of Lincoln, also recalls the difficulty of heating schools. When he was a pupil in Furnas County in 1875, the teacher would place pans of hot coals along the aisles in an attempt to keep the children from freezing. There was no danger of fire because the room had a dirt floor.

Mrs. Isabel Cornish, who taught school in Custer County in 1886, tried to warm her school floor, which became frosted in severe weather, by spreading straw over it. Mrs. Cornish adds: "The straw made the school warm for all concerned, including several thousand fleas, who moved in along with the straw. Bodily activity among scholars and teacher often exceeded mental gymnastics for the duration of the term."

Early Textbooks

The students, up to 1891, furnished their own textbooks. The resulting lack of uniformity was the bane of the early teachers, since many of the textbooks had been brought from the East by the parents of the pupils. Mrs. Cornish found six different kinds of readers in a class of eight beginners. In some instances the early students came to school without textbooks at all.

A. B. Cornish, who taught in the same county as Mrs. Cornish (before their marriage) printed lessons in a small account book given out by a patent medicine concern for one boy who had no books during the first seven weeks of school. The first school in Jefferson County, in 1860-61, did not have a single textbook during the first year of school. The teacher had to substitute as best he could with the Bible, Pilgrim's Progress and almanacs.
Some of the early textbooks were Hilliard's and McGuffey's spellers, Montieth and McNally's geography and Clark's book on grammar. The 1869 report of the superintendent of Burt County said the Eclectic and National series were the most widely used books in this territory.

The Nebraska free textbook law, passed in 1891, one of the first in the nation, was an improvement over the old system but it, too, had its drawbacks at first due to the sales methods employed by competitive book companies. Many of the book companies, after passage of the new act, gave away textbooks free in exchange for the ones previously in use. This led to confusion in the teaching procedure, especially in schools where textbooks changed as often as four times in one year.

Dr. A. A. Reed, who taught school in Gage County in the early 80's, says the salesmen, in an attempt to drive a wedge for their particular books, argued that the frequent changing of texts gave the spice of variety to hum-drumschool work by stimulating new interest and effort. After the new books had been installed, the salesman took the opposite side of the argument by saying the school had perfect textbooks so it would now be wisest never to make a change. Such sales sophistry was practiced by book salesmen throughout Nebraska in the 90's.

Early Teaching Methods

The early schools devoted most of their attention to the three R's—reading, writing and arithmetic. Little else, outside of occasional singing, as taught. There were no uniform methods of teaching, the systems employed depending on the training and temperament of the teachers.

Mrs. Adda Armbright, of South Sioux City, remembers, when she attended school in Dakota County in the early 60's, that there were no grades in the school and report cards were unheard of. Boys as old as 20 attended. The teacher had these older pupils take the younger ones into the hall to hear them recite their spelling lessons. Dr. A. A. Reed recalls arithmetic as a bugbear to the early schools for teachers and pupils alike. One teacher in Cass County found a problem so difficult he worked on it three months before solving it. Mr. E. C. Estes, when teaching in Jefferson County in 1881, found that writing had been so neglected by the former teacher that some of the 10 and 12 year old pupils could scarcely write at all, although they were fair spellers and often good readers. One boy couldn't even sign his name but knew how to read. Mr. Estes added that he quickly remedied the writing problem by ruling the blackboard and slates with horizontal lines diagonally cross-ruled from the upper right to lower left corners. The students then learned their letters by drawing them within the ruled-off spaces by adding straight lines, wals and half ovals. Edna Davis says she used the same method of teaching writing in Washington County by ruling lines into the slates with a knife. The multiplication table was sometimes sung. Several tunes were used, the most popular being Yankee Doodle.

Nicholas Sharp says that the first school he attended in Nebraska was in Gage County in 1867. The teacher, Miss Wymore, had had only two or three grades of schooling herself so she was unable to figure in fractions.
Her desk was a packing box, but she had little to put into it. The equipment consisted of a few slates, some foolscap paper, several well-thumbed McGuffey's readers, spellers, and one copy of Ray's arithmetic. A man teacher, named Peter Ballinger, later took over the school. He insisted that the scholars study aloud; the one who made the most noise was supposed to be the best student. Mr. Sharp adds: "I could hear the students going over their lessons in unison long before I reached the school house when the wind was in my direction. The noise became especially loud when studies in reading, spelling and arithmetic were carried out simultaneously. The teacher thought this method would compel the students to study harder than they would alone."

Some of the young pioneer teachers knew little more than their pupils. They were hired because sparsely settled communities could not afford to pay the wages demanded by more experienced teachers. Often no salary was paid at all—only board and room; or the pay was limited to 75 cents or a dollar a day. In some districts it was the custom, according to Estella Allen, to hire women teachers for the spring and fall terms and men for the winter term.

Winter storms and the building of school fires were considered, by the directors of these districts, too severe for women teachers.

John Turner, of Columbus, recalls one young girl, hired in Platte County in 1871, whose entire education had been limited to one two-month term of school. The director's reason for hiring her was because "she was in need."

Mrs. A. V. Wilson, of Lincoln, tells of an experience she had in Colfax County where she went to school in the 70's. "The teacher was a young girl whose education hadn't extended past the fifth reader. She managed fairly well until she came to the advanced grades where, whenever she encountered any lessons she didn't understand, she avoided them by skipping to the next lesson. This was pretty frequent too. Whenever the school director came to the school one of the older boys, who was aware of her real reason for skipping lessons, would invariably appear to get confused and then, selecting one of these avoided lessons, would ask the teacher questions about it. She, knowing her limitations, would just as invariably say, 'The lesson had been passed over because she didn't think it important enough for class work.' Nothing was ever done about her lack of knowledge so the skipping of lessons continued."

John Bowler, when teaching county school in Saline County in the late 80's, had an ingenious method of preventing tardiness among his 15 pupils. He opened school every day with an old-time "hoe down" for which he furnished the music with his fiddle. None of the students in the neighborhood wanted to miss out on the fun, so they were always on time. Most teachers opened school day with singing; sometimes verses from the Bible were read.

Discipline

Early school discipline, according to Mr. and Mrs. F. N. Herzing, who taught school in Saunders and Cass Counties during the 80's, was either excellent or very poor. Once out of hand, discipline usually sank to the lowest level, until there was a change of teachers. The efficient teacher was, however, usually looked up to in the community. Mrs. Herzing recalls one parent saying, when bringing in her unruly youngster, "Remember lickin' and turnin' go together." Mrs. G. G. Barber, of Lincoln, recalls a teacher she
and in Lancaster County in 1882 who punished a misbehaving child by throwing a ruler at him; the culprit was then forced to pick up the ruler and carry it to the teacher for a whipping. Mrs. A. Witte says that her teacher, in Lancaster County, enforced discipline during study hours by standing in the back of the room where the seated students couldn’t see her without turning around in their seats. This method is still in use.

Sometimes, as happened to a teacher named Monlock in Adams County in the 1870’s, the teacher got the worst of the deal. Monlock, who must have been an inventor at heart, invented a whipping machine made out of straps. But when he tried to use it the first victim, a big boy, became so indignant he struck the teacher on the jaw. The Crete Globe for February 28, 1886, said big boys in a Douglas County school did as they wished to such an extent that the teacher was utterly helpless until he was driven to the expedient of carrying a big forty-five calibre revolver; he laid it on his desk and flourished it threateningly whenever he wished to command attention.

Early Teachers

The life of the early teacher was often far from pleasant. Salaries, then paid at all, were infinitesimal, and nearly always were paid partly by room and board. When this was done the teacher made the rounds of the various families in the district who had children of school age. The teacher stayed the longest in the homes that had the largest number of children—the places where, on account of the crowded living conditions, he would have preferred to spend the smallest portion of his time. Usually the sad home of large families was so crowded that the teacher was forced to sleep with one of the children; sometimes the entire family, consisting of five or six persons, slept in one room.

Food was another problem. A teacher in Saunders County spoke of being denied nothing but milk and parched wheat in one home of many children. Home-made molasses and corn-bread was another common diet. Some teachers, who could get away, were known to drive miles to their own homes during week ends in order to secure a change in their diet.

B. C. Jones recalls that, when teaching in Custer County in 1867, he had so much difficulty in finding a place to stay that for a time he thought he would be forced to sleep out in the open. At one soddie he shared a bed with two boys with chickens roosting at the foot and pigeons in the rafters overhead. Later he secured a permanent place in a soddie which he thought luxurious on account of the board floor. The family, Bohemian settlers, prepared his meal separately, in American style; they ate their own meals out of one large bowl.

E. T. Grantham, in telling about his teaching experiences near Swan City (now a ghost town) in Saline County in 1876, says: "Besides my $20 a month pay I was entitled to free board, a week at a time, with the various settlers of the district. After a week at one place I moved on to the next, so you can readily understand I became somewhat of an authority on the cooking and housekeeping skill of all the people in the community. When the circuit was exhausted, I would start the round all over again by going to the first settler again.
Teaching qualifications were very low in the 70's and 80's. The passing of the sixth reader was often considered sufficient for a boy or girl to enter the profession. Isabel Cornish tells of teaching school in Custer County in the fall of 1884, when she was 14. She came to the school, younger than some of her pupils, wearing short skirts and with her hair in long braids. Later, dressed as a typical lady teacher of the time, she wore high shoes, a long skirt, a tight waist and blouse with long sleeves and a high neck. Her hair was coiled high on her head. Some teachers added a professional touch to their appearance by wearing a white apron in the school room.

Grant Essex, who lived in Chase County during the 80's, recalls that after the first school was erected in his district, in 1884, one of the women of the neighborhood, named Nettie McCanley, volunteered to teach without pay of any kind. Needless to say she had no trouble in getting the job and started off with 20 pupils.

E. T. Grantham, of Lincoln, went to a school in Saline County taught by a teacher named Dr. Cross. The doctor had agreed to teach the school provided he was allowed to go on call whenever needed. When this occurred the pupils were left on their honor to behave the same as they did when he was present.

Anna Brubaker, when teaching school in Frontier County in the 80's, received five acres of plowing on her homestead for every pupil she taught. She had seven students, for which her pay amounted to 35 acres of plowing at the end of every term.

H. E. Paine, who taught in Gosper County in the 80's, was not so fortunate with his pay. It was supposed to be $75 for the school year, but when the warrant was written out on an empty treasury he was forced to sell it for $30 in order to carry on farming.

In some districts the teacher had to know as much about fighting as he did about teaching in order to maintain discipline and keep his job. The entire school district took on an air of expectancy when a new teacher took over a tough school, waiting to see if the teacher or the students would win out. In at least one case, bets were made on the outcome.

E. T. Grantham, of Lincoln, had a similar experience when he was literally drafted into teaching school in the early 80's by his father, who was County Superintendent of Saline County. All previous teachers at the school had been forcefully driven out by a school director who was rather officious. Mr. Grantham, in recalling his experience at this school, says:

"A boarding place at Andy Norton's, a settler, was arranged for. The first thing Andy did was hand me a Frontier 45 Colt's revolver when I started for the school house, with the advice, 'Keep it ready in your desk. If that brute of a director starts his regular rampage settle him with a few bullets.' I didn't want to use a gun to guard a job which I didn't want in the first place, but I took the gun to school and put it in the desk.

"The day that I took over the school the director was away, but his two children were there and I will say that they behaved perfectly. I really felt encouraged by this success, but not for long, because that night the
the director returned and heard about the new teacher. He immediately became furious because he hadn't had a hand in the appointment.

"So the next morning his children came to school and started misbehaving as soon as they had taken their coats off. As the day wore on their conduct grew worse. I asked them why they were acting in such bad grace. They replied in unison, 'Daddy told us we didn't have to mind any new smart Alec teacher and to do as we wanted to.'

"Things quieted down the following day because the director's children didn't show up. But the next Monday morning a big overgrown hulk of a boy came to school. He acted strange all morning, as if he had something on his mind. Finally he said he was from Lincoln and was staying at the director's house. I immediately saw the connection; he had been planted in the school. That afternoon I found out what he was up to when, without warning, he picked up his heavy wood-bound slate and hurled it across the room, striking a boy on the head and knocking the little fellow to the floor. It was a vicious thing to do. I immediately said, with fair control of my voice, 'Come here, I want to talk to you.'

"He snarled back, 'If you want to talk to me you'll have to come and get me.'

"That suits me,' I replied. 'I'm coming.' I was pretty husky myself then, having done some boxing at Duane. As I approached the boy he lashed out at me with a vicious blow. This I parried, then snatched him so hard on the face he fell across a row of seats. Before he could get up I dragged him to the door and threw him into the yard. Then I picked up his cap, coat and dinner pail and threw them after him.

"I was now thoroughly aroused, knowing the director would show up in a day or two, so I was not surprised the next morning when two of the older boys, new friends of mine, happened to glance out of the window and saw his curly form swaggering towards the school house. One of them told me to get my gun, which they knew I had. But I didn't like the idea of using it.

"The two boys, seeing my hesitation, got up from their seats and went to the iron stove for the two ash wood pokers. Then they went to the side door leading into the vestibule. The ferocious director was now knocking loudly at the door. The first thing he did when I opened it was to swing at my face with his fist. The blow didn't land because I ducked. Then, as he came into the room after me, the boys hit him on the head with their pokers. He keeled over, knocked dizzy. The boys, with my help, picked him up and threw him out. And that, without a word being spoken, was the last I ever saw of him. His children behaved like little angels from that time on."

Students

Many pioneer students had an intense desire for learning. This was probably due to the difficulties involved in obtaining any schooling at all in those days. Dr. J. M. Howie, for example, says that when he taught in Saunders County in the 80's, the older students requested that Christmas vacation be observed during cornhusking time so they wouldn't miss school. Their request that school close for two weeks in the fall and remain open in Decem-
ber was granted. Hettie Surber, who went to school in Dakota County in the 70's, says the length of the school term was doubled by having the children of two school districts sharing schools. All the pupils of one district would attend the neighboring school for three months. Neither district could afford to support more than one term.

But if many pupils had a desire for learning they also had a desire for mischief, some of which tended to be rowdy. Mrs. Ada Delano says that when she was living in Custer County, during the 80's, big boys fired their shotguns in the school room "just for the fun of it."

The playground equipment used during intermission in the early schools was very meager; often there was none at all. Consequently simple games like drop the handkerchief, hide and seek, blackman, and dare base were played by the smaller children. Older pupils played shinny and ball. The ball was usually made of string by one of the pupils. Judge W. M. Ryan, of Homer, says that the favorite pastime in the winter was coating on the snow. As there were no small sleds for this pastime, the tops of desks, boards, dishpans, and scoop shovels were used as substitutes.

Another form of sport was killing rabbits or snakes that the students found during recess. The bigger boys sometimes carried guns to school for this purpose. Another fall sport, according to Rev. A. V. Wilson, who taught in Colfax County in the 80's, was raiding bumblebee nests. The boy who showed the most sting was regarded as a hero for the day.

Frank Pilger, of Lincoln, who attended school in Pierce County in the 80's, recalls another hazardous sport indulged in by the more venturesome boys. These students fastened homemade skis to their shoes and grabbed the tails of cattle grazing in the vicinity. These cattle, when excited, pulled the boys over the frosty buffalo grass at a fast pace. Sometimes, Mr. Pilger relates, bad bruises resulted from this sport. Riding steers was another bold activity occasionally indulged in during recess according to S. G. Jacoby, who attended school in Sioux County during the late 70's.

Play of a more mischievous nature was also indulged in, such as putting live mice or snakes in dinner pails. Charles Wilson, of Lincoln, recalls such an incident in the school he attended in Gage County in the early 70's. Mr. Wilson says: "My school had the reputation of being tough because of the attendance of grown boys who had nothing else to do. These boys, some of whom were 25 years old, had driven away every teacher that had taken over the school. Finally, in desperation, the school board hired a small timid girl, thinking, maybe, the boys would behave for her whereas they wouldn't for a vigorous teacher.

"Everything went well at first, and it looked as if the school board had used good psychology; but this did not last long. One noon the teacher opened her dinner pail to find a live mouse in it. With a squeal she dropped the bucket and went into hysterics, laughing and crying at the same time. Then, after calming down, she grabbed her wraps and left the school. The boys were delighted because they were, again, without a teacher."

Otto North, of Lincoln, who was a student in Webster County in the 70's, says it was a favorite trick to pick hackberries and throw them on the hot stove, where they would pop and snap like firecrackers. Mr. North also re-
calls that they used to pick wild parsnips along the creek banks during recess. Being hollow inside they made fine bean shooters.

But a school-boy prank more serious than shooting beans is recalled by Nicholas Sharp, who attended school in Gage County in 1865; he was 14 years old at the time.

"The teacher this winter," says Mr. Sharp, "was a man who was disliked by most of his students. Two boys, who lived south of our place, had a special hatred for him, and often said they were 'out to get him.'

"One morning they had an idea for revenge which they immediately put into practice. I suspected they were up to something because they were nervous and fidgety all morning. They got the idea for their dangerous prank by knowing the teacher locked after the wood-burning stove himself. They also knew he usually fed the stove at noon, when we were seated on our slab benches eating lunch.

"This noon, as he had always done, the teacher went to the wood box and selected a couple of sticks of wood which he pushed into the stove. None of us thought anything about this ordinary task, but what happened in a couple of seconds, gave us plenty of reason to remember it. Because, almost as soon as the stove-door had been closed there was a muffled roar and a bang that blew the stove-door open, scattering ashes and live coals all over the room. The air became filled with smoke.

"Everyone, at first, was too stunned to move; then a hubbub started as students milled about, falling over benches and desks as they knocked burning pieces of wood off their clothes. Some of the girls' dresses were afire and an old map blazed up. The teacher, fortunately, remained cool-minded enough to grab the water pail with which he doused the places where fires had started in the room.

"When it was all over and everyone had calmed down a bit, we could see the school was a mess for fair. The sticks of wood the teacher had stuffed into the stove before the explosion were laying in front of the wood box. The teacher, after picking them up, gasped with surprise. He had found a charge of black blasting powder at the end of one of the sticks. In the middle of the stick was another charge, unexploded. Only one charge had ignited, the force of the explosion having blown the stick through the door before the other charge had time to go off.

"For a time the teacher thought that, in splitting logs by blasting, a charge hadn't exploded, but this theory was doubtful. Besides we all remembered the restless behavior of the two boys all morning. There is no doubt in my mind but that they had fixed up this stick of wood and planted it in the wood box, where the teacher would find it at noon. Nothing was ever done to the boys because it would have been a difficult case to prove. It is needless to say that the teacher, thereafter, carefully scrutinized his wood supply."

But a pioneer student's life was not all study and pranks, as is testified by C. D. Don, who, recalling teaching school in Antelope County in the winter of 1882, writes: "During this time the entire school went out twice
to fight prairie fires."

Eleanor Brown, of Madison, who taught school in the 80's, writes that it was then the custom to devote one day out of the school year to cleaning and scrubbing the school room. Pupils and teacher worked together at this task. Edna Davis, when teaching in Washington County in the 80's, used to assign one of the students to sharpen pencils at the end of the school day. This was done on a sandpaper disc grinder.

Both students and teachers brought their own noon lunches. Frank Pilger, who attended school in Pierce County in the 60's and later became county superintendent in the same vicinity, recalls that these lunches often consisted of cold pancakes and scowbelly (fat salt pork). For gym, students chewed large wads of white paraffin. Otto North, who attended school in Webster County in the 70's, also remembers the early school lunches. He says the bread often became soggy, especially when it got mixed with such combinations as boiled turnips and dried apple pie. Often, also, the children's lunches would freeze when carried from their homes to the school house on cold winter mornings.

Social Activities

The last day of school was always a gala affair, to which parents brought baskets of food for picnics after the closing exercises had taken place. The district schools were also used for box suppers, spelling bees, literacies, and, in many instances, sermons. At Christmas it was a common practice for parents, pupils and teacher to gather in front of the school tree, which, according to Evelyn Grandy, who lived in Saunders County in the 70's, was decorated with gay home-made festoons of popcorn and red cranberries strung on black thread. The teacher (often out of a meager salary) was expected to give presents to her pupils.

Nicholas Sharp, in recalling box socials, says: "Our first box supper in the district was held in 1878 to raise money for a school organ. The bidders were more inspired to get attractive supper partners than the lunch itself. Of course a knowledge of which girls had brought particular boxes was supposed to be a profound secret but tips leaked out. This information led to competitive bidding." Many schools held box socials in order to raise money for a school bell, a new blackboard, or any other equipment needed. Sometimes, according to Mr. Sharp, voting contests were held at a penny a vote. The purpose was to determine "who was the most luscious girl in the neighborhood."

Judge E. H. Ryan recalls that when he was a pupil in Dakota County entire schools visited each other for literary or spelling bees. These gatherings, like the socials, were usually held at night. Prizes were sometimes given to the winning school at these contests; if the districts were poor, all the winners received was glory.

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