

School Then . . .

One of the very first schools in Kansas for white children was held in Council Grove in 1851. Classes met in the two-story stone building constructed in 1850 as a mission school for the Kansa Indians, and which since has served as a schoolhouse, a council house, a church meeting house, a place of refuge for the early settlers during Indian raids, and presently as a museum.

According to George P. Morehouse in his article "Probably the First School in Kansas for White Children," the early school in Kansas was like this:

Council Grove, even prior to the 1850's, was a noted frontier outpost and gathering-place, and one of the earliest towns and trading-points on the Santa Fe trail in the state of Kansas, and had a considerable white population. The children of the government employees, mail and stage contractors, traders, blacksmiths and other whites connected with Indian affairs and with the vast overland commerce of the trail were without school privileges. What should be done?

In May, 1851, Mr. T. S. Huffaker, whose time was not entirely taken up with his other duties, came to the rescue and established a white-school department in [The old Kaw Mission] building, and classes were formed with a dozen or fifteen white pupils. For three or four years Mr. Huffaker instructed these white pupils in the elementary school branches. The terms were not irregular and short, but continued through the year with only brief summer vacations. It was a free school, and it was a very commendable act on the part of Mr. Huffaker, and a great boon to the white children living so far out in the wilderness of the "Great American Desert."

We find, in looking over the claims of other Kansas schools, the following: Lawrence had a school organized in January, 1855, in the back office of Dr. Charles Robinson, in the Emigrant Aid building. It was taught by Edward P. Fitch (afterwards killed in the Quantrill raid), who was paid by private subscriptions, and the term was three and a half months, with about twenty pupils attending. Leavenworth county had an organized school in May, 1856, near Springdale. The schoolhouse was an abandoned settler's cabin, and the teacher was V. K. Stanley. The "union

school," with a term of three months, was three miles north of Lawrence, and was organized by Robert Allen in February, 1855. There is an account of a lady opening a school in her home near Lawrence in December, 1854, with her four children and three others of the neighbors, but as it only lasted for a part of a week it does not reach the status of a real school.



Kaw Mission at Council Grove, in which school for white children was held in 1851, Morris County. (Courtesy of The Kansas State Historical Society)

The school held by Judge Huffaker in the above old building for the white children of this locality was several years before Lawrence had an existence or the territory of Kansas was organized, and was without doubt the initial movement of that Kansas spirit and ambition for a free and liberal education which have grown to such magnitude and perfection as to receive the praise and commendation of the educational forces of mankind.

The building and the furnishings of an 1864 school in Cloud County were described by the first teacher in the Elm Creek Settlement. She even had a couple of Indian scares at her school, a not uncommon occurrence a century ago. According to that woman, Rossella S. Honey, life was not too easy those days—either in or out of school:

We came to Kansas in the spring of 1864, and my father, Randall Honey, took a claim in what was called the "Elm Creek Settlement," at the mouth of Elm creek, Cloud county. We were the ninth family to come. . . .

The settlers managed to raise a little corn, and when one person went to a trading point, like the post at Little Blue, or to Manhattan or Junction City, he generally did the trading for everybody, sometimes returning with a wagon load of goods. While we had not much to sell, still nobody went hungry, and when a new family came in everybody helped them.

After a few weeks spent in getting settled, it was decided that we should have a school for the children. There were not many children, but there were a few, and as I had been a teacher, they asked me to take charge of the school and teach. Mr. Jim Hagan offered the use of a vacant cabin for the school-room.

We had an odd collection of school books, as each pupil came from a different place, and no two brought the same kind of books.

Cloud county was under the same county government as Washington county and at that time was part of Shirley county. It had no special form of government then. I was obliged to make two trips on horseback to Washington to get my certificate to teach, as the county superintendent was not at home the first time I went.

The school house was built of cottonwood logs partly smoothed off so they would not be too slivery. The windows were merely holes in the walls, as we had no window sash or glass. The seats were wooden chairs with peg legs and no backs. However, the seats were no more primitive than those used by most of the settlers in their homes.

For the first term we had three months school, then the settlers thought they could get money enough to pay for a short winter term. There were no taxes, and the salary was what the people gave—the magnificent sum of \$8 per month. . . .

My desk for the school room was made from one immense walnut log, split and polished, with peg legs like the seats. Mrs. John Thorp was the first of the settlers to die after we came, and as they could not find a board long enough to make the bottom of the casket, they used the slab my desk was made of and the rest of the casket was made from pieces of packing cases.

One day as school was in progress, I noticed two of the girls

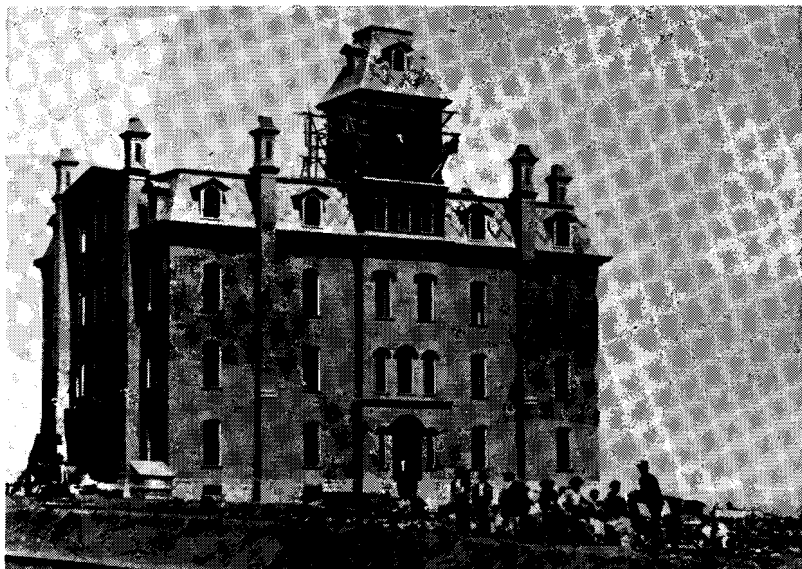
shaking violently. I supposed at first that they had the ague, as it was very common at that time, but their eyes seemed to be fixed on a point back of me, I looked around, and there was an Indian with arms resting on the window sill, grinning in a seemingly sarcastic way, enjoying the fright of the children. Needless to say recitations ceased for the half hour or more he stayed there.

Another time Mrs. Hagaman came to the door of the school room and said, "The Indians are coming; pick up everything you do not want them to see or handle." She signalled to Mr. Hagaman who was working in a field near by, and he immediately came in. The Indians rode up, dismounted and entered the house, looking inquisitively around, and handling whatever objects excited their curiosity. It took quite a while for each one to look around, and needless to say there was no more school that day. . . .

Another early-day school teacher, Mrs. Emily Haines Harrison, told about one of her school experiences in 1866 in Ottawa County:

In the summer of 1866 Mr. Tripp paid me thirty dollars to teach his two youngest children, Emma, ten, and Sarah, eight. That was the first school held on the river. Before state school funds could be secured a school had to be taught in the district, so my school was considered to have been the first public school in that district in Ottawa county. The little girls wore only their short calico dresses and a sunbonnet each. They were full of the life of the prairies, acquainted with all the little animals of the country. At recess they would beg to be allowed to go and play with the rattlesnakes. On speaking to their mother about it she said, "O yes, let them go. The snakes won't hurt them." While in my cabin at their lessons one day they saw a skunk coming up the path towards the house, and were anxious at once to kill him. I tried to prevent them, but they were sure their mother would not care. So, being not unwilling to witness the sport myself, I said "Well, go ahead and kill your skunk." It was quite a large one. They each seized a buffalo rib and ran down the hill towards it. The skunk fled, but finding they were overtaking it, the animal turned about, as if to chase them, and they, having some respect for the weapon, retreated, when the skunk again went on his way. But they pursued, and after several similar maneuvers, finally killed the animal, being much worsted themselves. I sent them home, not liking the smell of their clothes. The next day they returned, their mother having washed out their dresses, which still

had some odor of the fray. The mother was not at all displeased with the episode; said she wanted the skunks killed, for they killed her chickens.



School at Leavenworth, Leavenworth County, 1867. (Courtesy of The Kansas State Historical Society)

Although there were schools running in the eastern part of the state in the 1850's and 1860's, much of the western area was not even settled yet. In 1869, the western end of the Central Branch Union Pacific reached only 100 miles west of Atchison, only a quarter of the way into the state.

William D. Street, writing a fascinating account of "The Victory of the Plow" in North Central and Northwestern Kansas, gave the following description of starting a school "out there" in the 1870's:

The invading settlers sought out their claims, and then drove to Junction City, away to the southeast 75 or 100 miles, to the United States land-office, there to make entry on the land selected. After securing this initial title to their claims they commenced in earnest the struggle against the elements and climatic conditions Men in many instances broke the prairie sod with their guns strapped to the plow

The pioneers brought with them a desire for education and the hope of religion. Schoolhouses of rude pattern, built of logs or sod, sprang up everywhere. They were used for the dual purpose of education during the week and devotional exercises on Sunday. . . . The building of the schoolhouse in any neighborhood was an event of more than passing interest. They were frequently built before a regular organized district was set apart and before any taxes were levied for schools or school buildings.

In such cases work would be donated by some and funds by others. On occasions persons were asked to contribute enough to buy a joint of stovepipe or a board from which to manufacture a seat. The building of the sod schoolhouse was an event from which occurrences were reckoned, as happening before the schoolhouse was built or after. The site being decided upon, the neighborhood gathered with horses, plows, and wagons. A piece of virgin prairie sod would be selected, the sod-breaking plow would be started; the sharp share would cut the grass roots and slice out a long piece of the sod from two to four inches in thickness, by twelve to fourteen inches in width.

After the sod had been turned and the place where the edifice of learning was to be reared had been cleaned of the buffalo-grass down to the bare soil, men with sharp spades would cut the long furrows of sod into convenient lengths to be handled. These bricks of sod would then be loaded into wagons and taken to the building site, the foundation laid, the door frames set in at once, and as the work progressed and the walls had reached the height of a foot or such a matter, the window frames were set in and the building continued to the required height. Great care would be taken to break joints with the sods and also to put in binders, soft mud or fine soil. The latter was used more frequently to stop up every crevice or vacuum in the walls until they would be almost air-tight.

Then the roof, sometimes of lumber, but more frequently of dirt, would be put on. To put on a dirt roof, a large log, the length of the building, was selected, or two, if one long enough could not be secured from the native timber sparsely scattered along the streams. This log would be put on lengthwise—a ridge log, it was termed. Shorter and smaller poles were then cut and laid from the sides of the walls to the ridge log. Over these would be placed small willow brush; then sod would be carefully laid over the willows; later to receive a layer of fine dirt carefully smoothed

over the entire roof, which completed the job. The floor, usually of dirt, was sprinkled with water to lay the dust, and as this process was continued the dirt floor became hard-packed and easily kept in order. . . .



Glendale School, Cheyenne County, built in 1886 out of sod. Apparently this is a photograph of the pupils and their parents, perhaps at a school program of some kind. (Courtesy of The Kansas State Historical Society)

A description of the school of the 1870's, and the life around the school, was given by another pioneer, J. S. West, who later in his life became a judge on the state supreme court:

That winter I had to do what every strange boy dreads — start to school. My former experiences had taught me a new boy's first few days in school are usually remindful of the reception met by the man who started from Jerusalem down to Jericho. But here things were different. All the boys were friendly, made me welcome, and with childlike simplicity said they were going to try my skates next — the first ones they had ever seen — just as if we all owned them in partnership. I found a good juvenile example of how sweet and blessed it is for brethren to dwell together in unity.

The little schoolhouse was of logs, with puncheon benches for seats. The boys and the girls had separate recess; but at noon all played town ball, blackman, pom-pom pullaway; something like the gentle dove and its gentle mate, said by McGuffey's

reader to play together in love, and never show anger nor hate. . . .

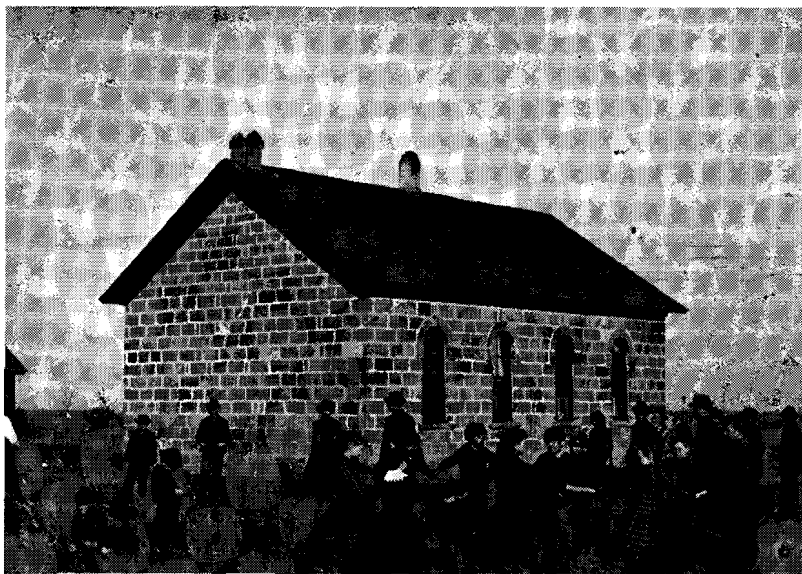
In early days many got well of malaria and typhoid fever, but had to live many years to get over the medicine, supplies of which sufficient to start a drug store were administered. Women never spoke of putting on their shoes and stockings. It was dressing their feet. An eastern man, addressing an audience at the schoolhouse, spoke of some man as a person of fine breeding, and the feminine sense of propriety was disturbed. At school it was usually deemed a privilege to go after a pail of water from which all the children would drink with a common tin cup, and frequently they would ask to go.

One term up at the Large school it happened that the teacher had sent Sam Rockman, a boy about thirteen years old, several times. One noon on the playground Sam said to the teacher, "Mr. Bursly, I don't want to carry water any more." The teacher was not only complete master of his pupils, but he was also a judge of human nature. He said, "All right, Sam; you needn't go any more." He saw at once that the boy felt that by carrying water by command, and not on his own request, he was assuming the attitude of a servant, and he promptly relieved the respectful but proud boy of even the appearance of vassalage, recognizing and admiring his spirit as that of a true American.

While they would go to the limit in feeding and caring for the team of a guest, they would utterly refuse to hold the lines for a stranger to climb into his vehicle. This smacked of meniality; and those hardy sons of McCompin county sires were princes in their own right, and as fully, if not as consciously aware of their blood as a Montague or a Capulet.

There was little in the amusement line. The proverbial shindig was seldom if ever invoked. School exhibitions and play parties were the Olympics of Drywood. At the latter, ring around the rosy, dropping the handkerchief, and paying forfeits were the star performances. Another, old mother Wobble Gobble, was also popular; in this all were seated and the presiding genius would say, "Old mother Wobble Gobble, pray pity you; old mother Wobble Gobble, do as I do," whereupon the reciter of this inspiring rhyme would distort his features, or do some other ridiculous thing, and all the rest were at once to prove their lineal relation to the missing link by doing the same thing — which led to much gayety. At one play party, Wash Hardy set the

example by standing on his head, and Hettie Nance was the only suffragette brave enough to wobble according to Mrs. Wobble Gobble. All the others were suffering what Shakespear calls a "prudency so rosy," which if drug stores could sell something to produce its like now, Edna Wallace Hopper would go out of business.



Cut stone school building, Centennial School District No. 9, Montgomery County, 1892. It looks as though some of the children are playing Ring Around the Rosie—and the "Rosie" doesn't look very happy! (Courtesy of The Kansas State Historical Society)

The real tocsin was sounded when all joined in the melody:

Here comes the king of Dover
He has just come over.

Or —

Rain and the hail and the cold, stormy weather
In comes a farmer drinking up his cider.
I'll go the reaper, who'll go the binder?
I've lost my true love,
And where shall I find her?
Fol de rol de ray.

Forfeits were adjudged and paid on this wise: One would hold some object over the head of another one seated, repeating, "Heavy, heavy, what hangs over your head." The one in the

chair would say, "Fine or superfine?" If a gentleman were intended, the answer would be, "Fine"; if a lady, "Superfine. What must the owner do to redeem it?" One popular sentence was that the owner of the "fine" object pick three cherries with Sally Edmunds, for instance. Thereupon Sally would come forward, blushing, and the gallant gentleman would kiss her three times, neatly, methodically, expeditiously, and just as simply as A, B, C. . . .

School in the 1890's was, of course, similar to that of the preceding years and of the succeeding years. Heritage of Kansas is privileged to print a special essay written by an Emporian who attended school more than seventy years ago in Marshall County, and who taught school some sixty years ago.