



photograph by Tom Parker, Barrett School, Marshall County

# **An Interesting Six Years**

**By**

**Grace Kissell (1906 – 2000)**

**Emporia Presbyterian Manor**

**Written at age 86 ½**

I, Grace Hickman Kissell, graduated from Norton Community High School in the spring of 1924. In the fall, I began my teaching career in a little one room country school, Dry Creek District 23, eleven miles north of Norton, Kansas, near the Nebraska line. An interesting little creek ran past the school, shaded by many trees. Students enjoyed eating lunch on the creek bank in the shade of the trees. I warned the students “Don’t go near the water.” How happy they were to tell the teacher something she didn’t know, “Miss Hickman, there’s no water in the creek,” hence the name Dry Creek.

I made my home during the school year with a farm family 1/2 mile south of the school. During the cold winter months, my room was not heated; a stove for heat was in the dining room. I had to go through a cold living room to my room on the north. Many mornings I couldn’t light the coal-oil lamps because the chimney was frosted.

Teachers in the country schools were their own janitors. A potbellied stove with a large top provided heat, and was a perfect hot plate to brew a pot of soup for a hot lunch at the noon hour. After students were dismissed at 4, I swept the floor, cleaned the black-boards, dusted erasers, and packed in the coal for the next day.

Many winter mornings, I went to school to find someone had stayed in the school-house over night and had burned all the coal. The school was located on Hi-way 283. Most of the neighborhood thought there was a group using the building for a gambling place.

After teaching my second year at Dry Creek, I was offered a contract to teach at a larger school, Union, 9 ½ miles northwest of Norton. They offered more salary, so I was glad to accept.

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Grace Hickman was born January 15, 1906, on a farm in rural Phillips County Kansas in Northwest Kansas. She was the youngest of nine children. After graduation from high school in 1924, she began teaching in a one-room country school. In 1930, she married Jean W. Kissell, and they had two daughters. Throughout her life, she enjoyed cooking, sewing, crocheting, knitting, tating, and crafts, and was a Red Cross Volunteer for thirty-five years.

The teacher who followed me at Dry Creek was shocked one morning to find a dead man in the ditch beside the road. Most of his clothes had been taken, and, presumably, most of the money he had won gambling. A few coins were left in the weeds and grass about the body. Many thought this event solved the gambling mystery.

Many years later, the Dry Creek School house was moved to Elmwood Park in Norton and refurbished. I attended the dedication just before moving to Emporia Presbyterian Manor October 15, 1990.

Unusual happenings followed me to Union School. This was my 3<sup>rd</sup> year teaching.

In the class of my first year at Union, a young neighborhood man decided he did not like the man who was president of the school board. He took a can of gasoline, saturated the front of the school house, set it on fire and burned the school house down. He went on to the board president's home and shot and killed him while he was doing his morning chores. Imagine the excitement and grief that followed. They found the man who fired the shot hiding in an old building. Of course they took him to court to be evaluated. The courtroom was on 2nd floor. Not being watched too closely, he jumped out the window. Injuries put him in the hospital. Later, he was sent to a State hospital at Larned.

I thought I would not have a school the next year, even though the contract had been signed, but not so. The men of the neighborhood went to work with hammers, nails, saws, and building material. They built a new school house. The women provide home cooked food, country style, for the workers. I was the first to teach in the new building. How I cautioned those pupils, they better not put a mark or scratch on those shiny new desks.

When the country schools were moved into nearby towns, Union school was moved into Norton. For several years, a well organized country club met in the school building. Lightning struck the school house burning it to the ground. Nothing was left but a dry spot in the good old Kansas prairie, and a lot of memories both good and bad.

As Miss Hickman (no first names allowed) I taught my last 2 years in 1928-1929 at Pleasant Valley, a standard school requiring a first grade certificate. The school was located 4 miles east of Norton on Hi-way 36 and was nicknamed Frog Pond. The building sat in a puddle of water when it rained. The frogs made it their home and croaked loudly to let

you know they were there.

The big bell in the belfry of the school building was rung at 8:30 each morning. Those beautiful chimes could be heard for miles around Prairie Dog Valley.

The 2 years at Pleasant Valley were a joy with 20 students, and 7 graduating from the 8th grade.

In my 6 years teaching, school opened each morning at 9 with the flag salute followed by The Lord's Prayer.

Visits from the County Superintendent and State School Supervisor encouraged me to give of my best to the teaching profession. I enjoyed all 6 years spent in 3 different schools in Norton County, Northwest Kansas, during the years 1924-1929.

Those 6 years were not all work and no play. Many times on Friday after last recess, we enjoyed geography matches, ciphering or some other games the students liked. Once a year in all 3 schools, we had a box supper and program. Money from the sale of boxes was used to buy something useful for the school. Best handwork was pasted in the school room.

Who would think of salaries today ranging from \$80 to \$100 per month, \$20 of that going for room and board?