

Happy Stories and Haunting Memories.... Women Teaching in Rural Schools in Twentieth Century Ontario

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"I do not believe that new stories will find their way into texts if they do not begin in oral exchanges among women in groups hearing and talking to one another." (*Writing a Woman's Life*, Carolyn G. Heilbrun, 1988 (2002: 46)

There is both pleasure and pain in telling the stories of a teaching career, much of it spent in relative isolation (from other adult company, at least) in the one room schoolhouses of mid-twentieth century rural Ontario. The sharing of these stories of retired woman teachers is the intent of the group of researchers who gathered the history of women teachers in Ontario. The interviewers document and, for the first time, bring together the stories of the lives and experiences of a diverse group of women. The narrators share a simultaneous need and desire to look back fondly over a long career of teaching generations of children; yet memories more painful and haunting come to the surface, as well – some re-told with shame, others with a sense of disappointment and resignation.

This article provides a glimpse into the lives of the women who lived and taught in rural Ontario. Though poorly paid, they were relatively independent career women, at a time when this was still rare. In the 1950's, career choices were minimal (nursing, secretarial or

teaching) yet they made a choice to teach for a variety of reasons. For many, a rural and often farming background helped them to meet the challenges in the one room school and the rural setting. As Georgina, who became the first female high school vice-principal in her county, noted:

I never found, how shall I put it, working in what was really a men's milieu didn't bother me that much. For two reasons I think. One, because I was brought up on the farm as a boy. The three of us sisters, you know, ... we had no brothers so we worked. There was nothing we couldn't do on the farm.... Plus, my parents, my father particularly, brought us up to believe that we could do anything. He gave us a job; we didn't come home until we had finished it (ACPID005).

The twentieth century saw rapid social change: urbanization, industrialization, new women's roles in society, changing educational philosophies, technological advancements. These women lived and taught through them all, and believed their teaching careers to have been during the "best of times". Even as they modestly protested that they really didn't think their stories had much to contribute to the history we were gathering, hours of taped interviews and hundreds of pages of transcripts tell otherwise.

This article can not depict all of the experiences shared during the interviews. It will attempt to juxtapose some of the joyous stories and the haunting memories as a way to paint a picture of the trials and tribulations, as well as the more comical and rewarding moments in the life of a rural woman teacher. The stories have been chosen to illuminate the rural teachers' years of entry into their chosen work, the tasks they undertook, and the relationships among colleagues and acquaintances. Finally, the narrations offer a glimpse into challenging experiences about which teachers have rarely spoken.

Becoming a Teacher

The decision to become a teacher was made through a process of elimination among relatively few options. Karen was one of those who viewed her entry into teaching as "just a natural thing." Her preparation

for teaching in a one room rural school was minimal, and she was grateful that education didn't

move as fast then. I think I was probably repeating what I had been taught, because I had gone to a country school.... and I think personally I really always wanted to be a teacher. One of the worst troubles I got into one time, my mother was outside doing something for awhile, and when she came back in, I literally had one wall of the kitchen filled with math questions, you know, adding and subtracting and numbers and stuff, I can always remember, and I had to clean it off (ACPID178).

Johanna recalls her decision to enter the teaching profession:

Probably because I'd given up the idea of being a nurse. Blood and I didn't get along too well, but I didn't realize that in teaching I'd see a lot of blood [laughter] on shirt sleeves and all the rest. But I decided probably in about grade 11 that I wanted to teach (ACPID024).

Jackie, on the other hand, did want to become a nurse, but was discouraged by her father:

He said, did I want to empty bed pans for the rest of my life? He would not let me do that. And I wanted to go to university, too, but I wasn't a wonderful student. I was kind of a, how will I put it, maybe a carefree, difficult child, I don't know. But he said I couldn't go to university because I wasn't ready to go, so I went to teachers' college.

Jackie went on to talk about her unhappy beginnings as an elementary teacher:

Well, I hated elementary teaching.... and I wanted to quit after the second week.... I was nineteen and it was actually the first time I was away from home for any length of time. I'll never forget that experience because I was literally sick for the first two weeks, sick, I mean I was - Oh! - I was just sick to my

stomach, I was just sick. I was home sick and just.... Oh! I was living with the principal. I boarded with him that first year. Oh! I think I cried every night.... It was a three-room school. It was a very.... it's just a village. But at any rate, I did not like it. I taught Grade 3, 4, and 5, and I just, I.... after the second year it was anything to get out of it. I mean, it's so much work, elementary school is so much work, and the three grades....(ACPID004).

Following this experience, Jackie did return to school and earned a university degree and a secondary school teaching certificate (though she had vowed not to return to teaching.) Then she taught physical education. "I coached everything, and I figure I coached every day all year long." Although she had always been an active girl, "I'd never played anything but baseball, because in a rural area we didn't have anything like that." (ACPID004) Jackie became a successful coach to every girls' sports team in the rural secondary school in which she taught during her long career.

Ruth began her teaching career in a one room rural school in 1945. She also wanted to become a nurse, but was steered into teaching by her father, who told her "Well, I would like you to become a teacher,because, just think about it, you will always be up on your spelling and your math." Despite this encouragement, Ruth was terribly disappointed by her early teaching experiences. In response to a question about her first teaching job, Ruth answered:

Terrible. [Laugh] Nightmare!.... It was at a school called Beaver Meadows School, and oh, I suppose there were thirty children, and not a lot of.... I like teaching really bright children, and there were not a lot there. [Slight laugh] And books to mark, you know, and it would be so discouraging -- they couldn't get their math right and they couldn't spell, and....It was just a one room school. I was all by myself. And no resources, no library. I don't know whether there was even a set of Books of Knowledge or any kind of encyclopaedia.... no visual aids. I did have a music instructor who came around once a week or once every two weeks... (ACPID003)

Martha recalls her teacher preparation program in the early 1960s:

We had female teachers. We had to learn how to dress properly and how to run our apartments and so on, so that we weren't, you know, stealing time away from teaching. I can recall the Home Economics teacher told us that it didn't matter if we had a little dust lying here and there, that we weren't to be such perfectionists as our mothers might be, because we had an important profession and we had to devote our time to that.

A male instructor who stands out in her memory had somewhat different priorities for female student teachers:

He used to fuss with the girls over their diamonds. Lots of the girls got diamonds while they were there. I had a boyfriend at the time, and that's one of the reasons, to tell the truth, I didn't consider university, because I wanted to get married, and I didn't want a university debt and, you know, those years of being tied up and so on. I wanted to get out there and earn money, and be ready to have my own home as soon as possible. But I didn't get my diamond during teachers' college. Some of them did... Mr. D. Had a little place on the blackboard -- he gave the girls that got diamonds stars. So, I can remember them all going in there after Christmas, "Oh! Mr. D.! See my diamond!" And he'd put on a little star... And I remember telling my mother, and she said, "Why that silly old fool." [Laugh] Now I think, "Yeah, I think she was right" [Laugh] (ACPID002).

Although the expectation at the time was that only men teachers would pursue a university degree following completion of teachers' college, Martha did return to school and obtained her degree while teaching.

Marion recalls her rural practice teaching placement:
I had one rural placement my first year in a one room school

somewhere in Brant County and it was eight grades in a class and the teacher sat at the back of the room and knitted the entire time that I was in the school. There were two of us and it was an experience. I'd never been to a one room school myself. So this was the kind of thing that you could get, but I really liked that because when I first started teaching, I was in a two room school and had multiple grades; so that experience really helped in my first year of teaching (ACPID089).

A landmark study by the Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario (1961) documented the Problems of Female Elementary School Teachers in Ontario. This study revealed that by 1961, the one room schools were "disappearing at the rate of approximately 150 to 200 per year." (p. 15) Yet the number of two teacher schools remained stable, while three and four teacher schools were on the increase. Small rural schools remained a reality throughout the twentieth century; almost one in four elementary school students in Ontario attended a school with less than four teachers, and approximately 25 per cent of the FWTAO membership taught in these schools. Rural teachers were predominantly women.

Multi-tasking in the One Room School

Until the 1960s, and in some cases beyond, rural teachers taught in one room schools. Attending to eight grades as well as all of the other functions of running a school single-handedly required the skills of a resilient and energetic individual. A sense of humour was a great asset as well! As Johanna recalls, she was not only juggling a variety of curriculum areas among her different age groups, but also preparing lunch and attending to upcoming events, as well:

And I remember one year, one time, we had this old box stove and that's what you cooked on. So I'm stirring this pudding with one hand, I have, I guess it would be, English between 11 and 12, whichever class I had, and I was teaching them, and I had asked one grade eight boy to go up above,... and it's sort

of a storage area, but an open storage area.... I'd asked him to go up and get this box because it was near Christmas time, and we were going to get decorations looked at during lunch time . He went up, got it, and on the way down, there was a nail, cut his finger on the nail, bled all over the place. That's what I said -- I got used to blood. [Laughter]. And one little girl took a look at him, and she promptly threw up on the spot (ACPID024).

Another teacher talked about her adventures with mice in the piano:

Just some of the things that happen in a rural school... We had a piano, and one morning after a weekend, I was playing the piano and there was 'Squeak, Squeak, Squeak, Squeak', and when we had a sing-song in the afternoon again we had the 'Squeak, Squeak, Squeak', so one of the boys said, "Mrs. M., I think there's a mouse in the piano." So, I set a mouse trap, and that night got one of the parents, and we still had the squeaks, and the next afternoon I set another mouse trap and I got the other parent, and the next morning when I played the piano I said to one of the boys, (I guess the only big boy I had at that time was a grade six boy), and I said, "Bill, do you suppose at noon you and I could take this piano apart? I think there's a nest of baby mice in there we have to get. "Well, I forget whether the keys start at the bass and you take them out all the way to the treble or whether they come the other way, but they fit under each other. Anyway, we started at the one end and the nest was at the other [Laughter]. And it was the most beautiful nest you ever saw. We'd made some kind of pins that we sold for Red Cross, and we had pink wool, and this pink wool was all woven into this nest, and there were these little bald baby mice in the nest, and they were squeaking, and Bill said, "I'll get rid of them for you Mrs. M.," and I said, "Okay, Bill. Just don't tell me what you're going to do with them." Well, I know what he did. He went out, lit some papers in a garbage can, and disposed of them that way. What

else did you do with baby mice? Then Bill and I had to put the piano back together (ACPID007).

Another resourceful teacher, Nell, tells the following story about her one room rural school:

The older boys always on warm spring days, they wanted to skip school and go fishing and so they always would cook up, like with teachers prior to me, they would always go and eat leeks and these elderly teachers would send them home from school. And so they came this day, and it was such a lovely spring day, and they had eaten leeks and it was so rank in the school after 1 o'clock, you know, I said, "Have you been eating leeks?" And they said yes. And I said "Do you have any more?" They said, "Oh yes, we've got lots more. Our pockets are full." And I said, "well, bring me some up." [Laughter] So they brought them up and we put them on the desk and I picked up one and peeled it and just peeled the dirt off and I ate it then and there and said, "Now we'll do our work." I always had writing lessons after 1 o'clock, first thing after 1:00 . Then all of a sudden, everybody was busy writing and everything, and the knock came at the door and it was the inspector. He was a big stout man. And he came in and said, "Good afternoon". He said, "What on earth is that awful smell in here?" So I said that the children had eaten leeks and hoped to get sent home from school to go fishing, and I said, "I ate some leeks and we're still here!" [Laughter] (ACPID057)

There were no supply teachers for the one room school, which created serious difficulties if the teacher became ill. Karen describes how her husband inadvertently entered the teaching profession:

If you suddenly became ill, you'd almost have to just close the school.... When I was at my No. 7 school, I woke up the day after New Year's and had the mumps, so couldn't go to school. So my husband went across the road to tell them that I had the mumps, and there were two of the trustees there, you know,

and one looked at the other and they said, "Well, Neil, why can't you do it? You got a good education and she can give you some work" He did that for two weeks and the following fall, he went to Normal school! (ACPID178)

In an interesting example of how gender relations operated in the teaching profession at the time, Karen's husband was immediately hired as the principal of a three room school, where she also went to teach for the rest of her career. "I told him, you're my boss at school and I'm the boss at home.... [Laughter]"

Many of the teachers lamented the loss of the local school boards when the county boards were established, but they recognized that there were some gains as well. Martha notes that:

Our Board was always very generous with supplies, we always had lots of good art supplies, all of the textbooks we needed, and never was there any deprivation in terms of supplies, yet I had left them, you see, to go for a slightly higher salary [elsewhere.] I wasn't getting paid for my academic qualifications, but they were certainly generous with the kids. (ACPID002).

The later amalgamations of the school boards (in the late 1990s) led to even greater tensions between rural and urban communities. In Martha's area, for example:

We have the tobacco community, and so many of our kids for years and years have worked in tobacco and have been given a chance to catch up -- the school's been delayed for a week or so. Now, they still manage to, even with the new legislation, still manage to pull that off in the [neighbouring] Board, but some trustees, you see, have no sympathy for urban rural needs, you know, "Why would you support the tobacco" and that? And I tend to almost agree with that myself and I kind of understand where they're coming from, but that's kind of why they're resented in this community (ACPID002).

Georgina, who became the first female vice-principal of a rural secondary school, thoroughly enjoyed living and teaching in a rural community, and resented both the earlier rural school consolidations as well as the more recent school board amalgamations:

The [rural school] numbers are small, and I don't care what they say -- I'm seventy-five -- and bigness is not better. I can remember when they consolidated the schools here, you know, and they talked about all the wonderful advantages, you know. They would get shops, they would get better libraries, they would get labs, and so on..... they didn't look at the disadvantages. For example, if I were a parent now with a young child, I would never let them ride the buses. [Then,] you knew your Board members.... you knew your kids much better [The most recent amalgamations were] a big mistake. Because the bigger the thing gets, the more bureaucracy you have, and bureaucracy is a waste so far as I'm concerned - totally (ACPID005).

Female Camaraderie

In the larger, particularly secondary schools, the staff rooms were often separated for the men and the women. Many of the teachers talked about the close relationships among the women, fostered in part by this separation during lunch hours and other informal gatherings. Nancy recalls the resistance to common staff rooms:

In '69 we went to the common staff rooms, so for my first ten years they were separate staff rooms, and really, you never really got to associate that much with the men. But the women were very close, in both schools that I taught at they were very close, and I think supportive of one another, definitely, and is it all right if.... am I supposed to tell silly little stories? Our Principal had the habit of walking into the Ladies' staff room and not knocking. And one day he came in, and I forget what we were, what someone was doing, whether they were pulling up their pantyhose or what they were doing, but they had their

dress up to here, and that was the end of that. He quit that. He used to just drop in. And I imagine the men were, well, I know the men were close too. Yeah. And when we went to the common staff room, oh gosh, there was a furor over this I remember. Neither one of them wanted it. The men didn't want it and the women didn't want it because we thought that, well, we had some really raunchy discussions in our staff room, and I'm quite sure the men did too, and we thought that this was going to inhibit us, you know (ACPID008).

The teachers also talked about supporting other women teachers who were having difficulties. Jackie tells the story of one colleague who was ultimately dismissed.

This one teacher said she was the most amoral and immoral person he ever met, and I think it was true.... She drank a lot, and I think she was a - what do you call it when you like men and women? Bisexual, yes. And she was something else. We all really liked her; it was funny. She knew her English, I'm telling you.... I think she had her M.A. and I don't know whether she maybe even got her Ph.D., but she was just a character! We used to cover up for her all the time. She'd be drunk and.... we'd call up, and we'd send somebody down to get her to school, and, I'll never forget, this one day I went in to the principal and I said to him, "Soandso isn't here today, but she's coming. She's sick. She's sick this morning. But don't worry, she'll be here and we're filling in for her. She'll be coming." And he just said, "You know darned well she's not sick. Now tell me what's wrong with her." I said, "As far as I know, she's sick. She's sick. She's not able to be here." But at any rate, she was let go, and I think it was probably a good thing...(ACPID004).

Haunting Memories

Without exception, each of the rural teachers interviewed claimed to have no regrets and overwhelmingly fond memories of their teaching careers. Nonetheless, stories crept to the surface, seemingly to the surprise of the participants. These stories, some of which took place

thirty or even forty years ago, came alive in vivid detail, with all of the pain and, in some cases, shame and regret, that had been buried so long ago. Some of these stories had to do with corporal punishment, others with perceived failures with students the teachers were unable to help.

Wilma recalled, hesitantly, one of her most painful moments during her first years of teaching:

I'm afraid... I'm embarrassed to even say this, but I was nineteen at the time (that's gonna be my excuse) and a mouse, didn't say boo. I had this Native student, little girl, I can still remember her name and I can still see her face, and she wouldn't do the work, especially the math. She didn't learn the math. So, it got about November, and I thought, 'Well, I'd better go see the Principal.' He said if I had any problems to go down and see him. Right? So, I told him, and he said, "Oh, bring her down to see me." So, one recess I took her down... and we talked... and she wouldn't talk. That's another thing, she wouldn't talk. He said, "If you don't talk to me, Miss D's gonna give you the strap." Well, I felt sick to my stomach, and I thought, 'You really won't do this to me. You really won't do this to me.' I'd never even seen a strap. He did. He pulled it out, and I gave her the strap..... And I still feel sick, and I mean that's why I never, I never wanted to be a Principal. I thought, 'You're all drips. You don't.....' And people say to me, "Oh, you should have just said no." I said, "You don't know the times. 1966. I'm nineteen; I never said boo; I never disobeyed." I mean, you know, one of those things. But I never went back, and I never told him one thing that was going on in the classroom..... I hate having to tell that, because I feel so ashamed, but anyway, it happened (ACPID010).

Ironically, Wilma went on to fill every administrative post possible within the educational system in the province - *with the exception of Principal!* Illustrated by this quotation is the move to multi-class, centralized schools, headed by male principals who were often brought in from other communities to fill the position. Among the changes in the working conditions of rural teachers during the latter half of the twentieth century, sometimes the integration of Native children into local schools

was mandated, and learning about their culture and ways of learning was something that Wilma ultimately figured out on her own.

Discipline and control were issues that women teaching alone in the one room schools had to contend with. Karen made up her mind early on that she would be in charge:

I think what you had to be careful of in the one room schools, that you didn't lose control of the students. When I went to my first school, apparently the year before the kids had decided they were going home, so they closed their books. I heard that. I had in my mind, and I probably said it at the time, "There's one door and I'll be in it, so they're not gonna walk out on me." [Laughter].... I think discipline was the most important thing, and I think that's why you sort of look at your students and decide what they were about so that you had control (ACPID178).

Another potential difficulty for rural teachers was boarding with a local family, often the home of one of the school board trustees. Catherine describes her situation as follows:

I think I just stayed two years [at a particular one room school] but I would have stayed longer there except that I had a rather difficult time where I boarded, so I felt I had to leave The Board asked me if I would stay if they found me another place to board and I couldn't do that because I felt bad for the woman where I boarded but I couldn't stand her husband and so, you know, you can't stay in a community like that He just became a pest to me and I couldn't live there And I felt I didn't handle him very well.... He was okay but he was kind of a ladies man and you always had to be on your guard and I didn't like that so ...(ACPID073).

There was no language for sexual harassment at the time, but more than one young woman teacher had to leave her school due to incidents of harassment.

Ruby recalls the one big disappointment of her long teaching career:

I had this little girl who couldn't walk, and she had some

rheumatoid arthritis, I guess it is, and I knew the family. I mean I wasn't close personal friends with them, but I did know them. This child was seven years old and [had] never been to school, and finally they decided they'd send her to school if I could take her to the washroom. Well, the washroom's downstairs, and you had to carry the child ... because that's the only way she could get to the washroom, you see. It wasn't a big deal and I was a big, strong girl then, you know. I could easily do it.

And my own daughter was born with a club foot, and we had been to London to a specialist, and gone through all the procedures and she was then able to walk and she has been fine ever since. So after I'd [carried her up and down]... for about two years, I arranged to have them go down and see this doctor, take the child.... I convinced them to go. Anyway .. they took her to the specialist and he recommended surgery to straighten her knees. See, her knees were at a 90-degree angle, and of course they wouldn't hear of it..... They refused, and I blew my top -- that's the only time I ever did over school things -- they took her out of school and she never had a day of school since. I see her once in a while..... around the town sometimes in her wheelchair... but anyway, that was the worst experience of the whole 30 years. I feel that, you know, that I failed some way... (ACPID174).

Summary of a Cherished Career

None of the rural teachers interviewed expressed any regrets about their choice of career despite some of the less pleasant memories that came to the surface during the interviews. Typically, they expressed sentiments such as Catherine's, "A very ordinary life I think. It was a lot of fun and a lot of good times" (ACPID073), and Wilma's: "I just figure I taught in the best of times. I did. I think I had a charmed career" (ACPID010). Both of these women experienced sexual harassment more than once, in each instance causing them to transfer from schools and communities which they loved, having no other means of dealing with the situation at the time.

Despite Valerie's frustrations with working in small schools in 'company towns' in Northern Ontario, she too found satisfaction in teaching "what they used to call occupations – I loved it. They were the kids that would be passed over and when they got too big for the seat in public school, they were pushed into secondary school." When asked what she taught these students, she answered: "Manners, I hoped, and self-respect." (ACPID028)

Though most of the teachers had stories to tell about having almost exclusively male principals and inspectors and school board trustees, few of the women interviewed aspired to administrative positions. Neither did they feel that their teaching careers were hampered by the fact that they were women. As Nell put it: "No, I don't think so. I think I was born at a time when they needed teachers and I think that was how come everything went so well." (ACPID057)

Some of these retired rural teachers continue to live in the small communities in which they taught for most of their careers. Martha is one of those who continues to enjoy the community bonds forged over the years:

They were a great bunch of kids when I look back now.... most of them . The Grade Eights are turning fifty this year, so here are all these mature people still living in the community that I rub shoulders with all the time. I have coffee early in the morning, I did this morning, with one of my first Grade Eight pupils from that year. She's fifty, and you know, I mean, I thoroughly enjoy her. And so, it enriches my experience living in this community immensely now.... And now I get to see who their children marry. This is all quite intriguing to me, to see this flow of humanity that I've had a little input into.

Martha also laments the fact that today many younger teachers choose not to live in the small communities in which they teach.

It's really a great deprivation to the smaller communities who were always used to having teachers live in the community and contribute, you know, to various things....[The teachers would] belong to the churches or belong to the skating club or whatever, and they supported it through their presence and through their dollars too, and sometimes through their

leadership, and that's missing now (ACPID002).

While there is ample nostalgia for the way things were in the small rural schools, there is also a recognition of progress. Retirees mention the better equipped central schools and the improved working conditions for teachers. Though not all changes are welcomed (the amalgamation of school boards, and the semester system in high schools stand out as two examples that are viewed as counter-productive), there is a strong overall feeling of satisfaction, a job well done, a fulfilling career, and mostly fond memories of days in the small rural school in mid-twentieth century Ontario.

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