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Loraine Keltner Memoir

K299. Keltner, Loraine (Mrs. David R.)

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 25 mins., 17 pp.

ONE ROOM SCHOOL PROJECT

Keltner, a teacher who taught in rural schools near Chatham and New City, Illinois, discusses teaching, daily instruction, school buildings, parent-teacher relationships, difficulties, and quality of the instruction.

Interview by Jane Stout, 1972

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PREFACE

This transcript is the result of a tape recorded interview conducted by Jane Stout for the Oral History Office on March 2, 1972, with Loraine Keltner.

Loraine Keltner's teaching career spans more than 25 years. Her first job was in a one room country school near Chatham, Illinois. Later she taught in a two room rural school in New City, Illinois.

Readers of this oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Sangamon State University is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

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Lorraine Keltner, March 2, 1972, Chatham, Illinois.

Jane Stout, Interviewer.

Q. I am talking to Lorraine Keltner about her experience in one-room schools. Would you give us a little information about yourself?

A. Well, I am a teacher who has taught for twenty-six years. However, I guess I would have to say that the first two were in rural, one-room schools and then I taught for approximately four years in a graded system and then I went back into a two-room rural school.

Q. What sort of preparation did you have for this teaching experience?

A. At the time that I taught in rural schools, I had what they call the "Rural Teacher Education Curriculum" from Illinois State Normal University and we were very much rural-oriented. We had education courses that included agriculture. I learned about the sheep and the pigs and the cows, all of these things, as well as educational theory.

Q. How many years were you actually involved in one-room or two-room rural schools?

A. Probably a total of five of my years of teaching has been in that sort of a situation. I think I probably got in on the best of the one-room school era. It was just at the time that it was going out of existence--my first two years of teaching. I had a group of twelve youngsters. These youngsters were spread through eight grades and we

had very much what you would call "individualized" learning. Each youngster was in his own place in his own book and we made terrific progress. I think I did some of my best teaching the first two years that I taught school.

Q. Was it the number of students, or was it other things?

A. I think it was a total of the number of students plus the fact that they had been spread through the eight grades. Now, we'll deviate a little bit here and take in my sister's experience, too. She taught in a similar situation at the same time I did and had about twenty-six to twenty-eight youngsters and she found the same thing to be true that I found to be true. She was working with numbers of three and four in a grade, and when you work in numbers of three or four, you're really going to be individualizing the youngsters work and we would get through the skill subjects rather rapidly because we would go through on an individual basis. And then the afternoons we had free in order to do other things, such as putting all of the youngsters together in one big unit and studying their unit of concern, such as the science unit, social studies units. After we had had the more formalized learning, we could go into this unit type of approach whereas now we don't have time for this. Now all we have time for is teaching children skills and getting youngsters off to special education classes and getting youngsters off to music classes, physical education classes--bringing them back and getting them someplace else. All we do now is keep up with a schedule, whereas then, we were free to deviate; to do the thing that was needed at the time--follow the youngsters' interest.

At this time that I was teaching in this one room school, it was during the War, and, of course, that was the time when it was popular for us to take an afternoon off and go out and gather milkweed pods. It was the same as kapok for parachutes. That was a very popular thing. We would go out and collect big gunny sacks full of milkweed pods, then they would be sold for a token amount. But the thing was, it was a war effort. We had big, huge paper drives, and I really think we helped with pollution. It wasn't called pollution in those days, but there certainly was participation on the part of the students in a community--a national project, that youngsters don't really seem to have now.

Q. So you really adjusted schedule to child, rather than child to schedule.

A. I think that this is the way that you can sum it up. I believe that we have lost something in the bigger situations where we have numbers. When you had fewer, the teacher probably had to do much, much more planning in those days, because we had eight grades to plan for. We had reading; we had spelling; and we had math, English, social studies, science. We had all these things to plan for all grades.

But, at the same time, it was an individualized experience, and the day was really no longer in comparison to what it is now. But we seemed to get through and I think that we got through well.

Q. This really was not so long ago?

A. This was, well, I've taught for twenty-six years; I took two years off. So I would say roughly sixteen years ago, that I was in the two-room situation.

Q. Describe the actual physical situation.

A. The first two years that I was in a one-room situation, we had a beautiful school. It had just been renovated when I went into the school system. We had city water, we had a telephone, we had a sink in the back of the room which was nice for art clean-up and that sort of thing, we had indoor toilets that had septic tanks. Of course, we had to pour a bucket of water down them to flush them. Our main handicap was that the teacher had to go each morning and start the fire and carry in the corncobs and the coal from outside. But we could usually draft a boy to do this.

This was the New College School. It was up around the wildlife sanctuary and I taught that school the last two years that it was in existence. At the end of two years, I felt that I wanted to make a change because this is my home school, so they closed the school and brought the youngsters into Chatham. In the meantime, I taught at a greater distance and then I had a yen to come back to the Chatham community, and, at that time, I went over to New City--and this was the two-room situation.

Now, when I got over to New City, this was rather primitive alongside the kind of building that I had had when I was at the New College School. There we had a well and the youngsters had tin cups and went to the well; we didn't have an indoor water faucet. We had outside

privies that the youngsters went to. And of course, this was always good for a walk when the youngsters got bored and tired of school. But this wasn't all bad—they got the fresh air they needed.

In order to have warm water, we brought in a bucket of water and poured it into a heater out in the hall so the youngsters could go out and wash their hands at noon. For lunch, we got on a bus and went to the high school and had lunch and then we rode back on the bus. So the youngsters did have benefit of a lunch program.

The teacher of course was the physical education teacher, the music teacher, the art teacher, the nurse, the principal, the disciplinarian, the janitor. Everything that we have now, the teacher was all that rolled into one. But I don't think that this was all bad. I think that probably the people in the community looked up to the teacher a little bit more at that time as the one person who had the answer. Whereas now, we are spread so thin that we kind of get lost. There's the administration, there's the janitors, there's the bus drivers, there's the cooks and all of them seem to play an equal part as the teacher in the educational process.

Q. What about your relation to the community, the teacher-parental relationship, the teacher-community relationship, and maybe the building-community relationship? Is there a great difference now?

A. Yes, I think that the people looked toward the teacher then, as the lone authority. In other words, there was no place to dodge to. If they didn't like the teacher's opinions, they couldn't go to the

principal or somebody that was over and above. I can remember my very first year of teaching in a rural school. I followed a teacher that had been a little bit ineffective in the teaching situation. And when I went into this school, we gave achievement tests and the youngsters were mostly about two years below where they should have really been. So I called in the parents and we had conferences and the parents very willingly allowed me to put back the youngsters into the grades that I thought they belonged.

In other words, I don't think that this could be done nowadays.

If I found a youngster in my room and I didn't feel that this youngster was able to work effectively at this level, we would have to go through many authorities before we could get this youngster re-placed. But then, I had direct contact with the parents. I talked to them; they agreed that their youngsters were not ready to work after they saw the test results. I would imagine we put half of the school back at least one grade level. The youngsters more than made up this progress by the end of the year. After we gave achievement tests at the end of the year, they had made up the progress. So I think that maybe we had a little bit more relationship with parents in those days. Now, we call the parents in and we try to conference with them where the youngster is, and we then wait until the end of the year and then we have another conference to try to decide what is best for this youngster to do.

But I really feel that the parents in those days were really just as open-minded about keeping their youngster where they should work, as

parents are today. I really find that I have more problems today in getting parents to hold their youngster back a full year, for instance, in order to give them a headstart, than I did at that time.

Q. Aren't they sometimes more concerned about the record than about the child?

A. And they want their youngsters to keep up with the other youngsters in age and so forth so that they don't have social problems. Then, the youngsters were separated enough, and there were only one or two in their class, it really didn't matter that much. They all came back to the same school and the same teacher and the same room next year, regardless whether they were going to the first grade or the second grade and it just didn't seem to have the stigma in those days that it has now. Many youngsters were sixteen before they got out of school in the era of the one-room schools.

Q. Now if, as you said, a child made two years progress in one year, would you have had the authority then, to advance him two grade levels?

A. Oh yes. This was possible. Now we would have to get permission to do this. I think since I have taught in a graded system, that I have done this actually once, and then it was with permission of the principal and superintendent.

Q. Do you recall any particular discipline problems at any time?

A. I can remember I had one little boy in fifth grade---and of course having twelve youngsters in the first year that I taught--this one little boy was a member of a family of five, five youngsters in one

family. He was in the fifth grade and he was the one who was supposed to be the ringleader the year before and kept the school going. So, knowing this, I decided that this little boy would sit in the back of the room close to the door. I put him in the back of the room. If he wanted a drink, he was free to get up and get it. If he wanted to go to the bathroom, he was free to go. He was not on exhibition in front of the rest of the youngsters. I never had any problem with this little boy that I had been forewarned about. But he was supposed to be the youngster that was going to cause my problems. So I think I cannot remember any particular discipline problem that I had in a rural school. Again, I think maybe it's because we worked very closely with parents. We didn't have a principal to send youngsters to, so we took care of the youngster right then.

Q. You had the younger children?

A. In the two-room situation I had the younger children. The little boy that I was just mentioning right now was a fifth grader in a one-room situation.

Q. As you recall, were there any hardships that you just couldn't face again?

A. I think the only time that I felt that I couldn't face a hardship was when we were in the two-room situation in New City. And the last bus picked up at five o'clock. And this was a long day, from the time that they came early in the morning at 7:30 until the last youngster was picked up at 5:00.

Q. And then the janitor still had his work to do?

A. That was the teacher. (laughter) We tried to do the sweeping and the janitor work that was our responsibility. We did have a lady that came and built fires in that particular situation. But we tried to do the sweeping and the board cleaning and the dusting--all this sort of thing--and all the youngsters waited, and I kept an eye on the youngsters at the same time. So five o'clock was pretty late every night to stay and wait on that last bus.

So at this time, I felt that I was going to have to make a change in schools in order to avoid this five o'clock bus business every evening and I brought this to the attention of the superintendent and he, in turn, brought it to the attention of the board--that I was going to leave the particular situation because of the bus situation at five o'clock. The next year they brought the bus in and all of the youngsters were loaded at four o'clock, which was perfectly possible for them to do in order to keep the two teachers they had in that particular situation. So, this was the only time that I felt anything was unbearable--that we were being taken advantage of.

We didn't have to have a negotiating committee to iron this out. It was taken direct. If I wanted to go back to the school, all right; this is my privilege to leave, if I don't like it, so I made it known. I didn't have to have a negotiating committee intercede for me. Not even a welfare committee. I simply made my need known that I was going to have to transfer and go to another school if this continued, and it was taken care of.

Q. What's the best thing you remember?

A. The best thing? I think playing ball with the youngsters. (laughter)
This was the first two years that I taught. And the situation that I had then--twelve youngsters--and the youngsters and I, neither one, could wait until recess time so we could get out and play ball. At first we played work-up and I took my turn with the youngsters and we had a fabulous time. There wasn't enough room in the schoolyard--we had a sloping school yard--so we climbed the fence and went over into the neighbor's pasture which I think was planted with clover. We climbed the fence and we had a beautiful ball diamond over there. And we played terrifically hard. I played as hard as they did, of course. I was 18 at the time and some of the youngsters were about as old as I was. I expect the oldest youngster was about 14. So I was kind of a youngster with them and we had a marvelous time. We would all go back in refreshed, and we'd go back and work. I don't think I'd have that kind of energy today. (laughter)

Q. How about any things in the actual educational system then that should be re-incorporated into our present system?

A. I think that I touched on that rather briefly at the first of our interview; the individualized instruction. We make such a big thing today of individualized instruction, but when you have 25 to 30 youngsters of one grade level in one room, individualized instruction can be pretty hectic. When you have, I think of 25 youngsters spread through eight grades, that gives us an average of four to six per grade. This is individualized. Especially if you have one or two in a grade that's lagging, it's not going to make too terribly much difference. The

others are going to help him catch up.

Q. So the fact that they helped each other . . .

A. That's right and also if you had a problem in the first grade you could conveniently call on a youngster in the eighth grade who was brilliant and had his work done, to go over and help the youngster in the first grade. We had our teacher aids built in. Also, each year each youngster would hear again the recitations that he had had the year before. If he were in third grade, he was listening in on second grade work; if he were in eighth grade, he was listening in again on seventh grade work. So again he had a review. Also, it worked the other way. The youngster that was in first grade was in on second grade work so that he knew what he was going to have coming up. It wasn't a one-time thing and they lost. And I think that sometimes some of this could be brought back into our modern day methods of teaching. And I think that it has been kicked around a little bit in educational circles--maybe put in more than one grade level in a room. And I can remember before I started teaching I was comparing notes with another teacher who had taught both in a one-room school and a graded system. She said, "Oh, my, it's so much easier to teach in a one-room school than a graded system." And I thought that she was absolutely out of her mind. I couldn't imagine how this could possibly be. But after having had experience in both, I really am inclined to agree. That it's easier to have teacher-relationships with pupils in a one-room situation, than it is in a graded situation.

Q. Is there any particular thing having to do with the actual curriculum or the educational system itself that you are especially glad to be rid of?

A. I don't think that there is too much that is gone and past in curriculum. I think that it's simply been added to. The only thing that I can really specifically say is gone and past is the old-fashioned lithography that was dwelled upon in seventh and eighth grade. And I believe this is pretty well incorporated into our reading series now under the heading of phonics. So I don't think that lithography is something that has actually been thrown out. There was a little bit more study, I believe, in Illinois history, maybe, than what there is now in the upper grades. I don't think that this is especially good. I think that perhaps, what we label as modern math today, maybe wasn't as down to the youngsters' level as what the youngsters in those days were doing. Then, they were actually figuring the area of a well. They were putting it into use. They were actually figuring the size of fields—this they were going to use.

I believe that math had more meaning for youngsters in those days than what our computation has for youngsters today. There's very little relationship between the math that we're studying today and what a youngster has a need to know, whereas in the rural school they had a need to know these things. They used them. Once we went through the problems, there was a specific need and they went home and helped their fathers figure out how much a particular grain bin would hold. They could relate to what they did learn when they got home and now I don't really feel that the youngster has the use made of what he learns in school like we had in those days. Maybe we've deviated a little bit from your original question.

Q. Not at all. That is the thing I was getting at. Quality of instruction, now and then. Do you think maybe the fact that parents feel so alienated these days from modern math helps make it harder for us to get the idea across to the children?

A. I think this is part of it. I think the parents feel alienated from the school. I don't think we have the parent participation in school that we had in those days. It was nothing unusual then to call in a mother to play the piano and help with the Christmas program. It was nothing unusual to have a parent come in early because they were picking up their youngsters. They came in and sat down and waited for the end of school. Parents were around a little bit more. They would bring their youngster to school in the morning and they would drop in. Not because there was a problem, but just drop in. This was their social life. We had a Community Club. At the Community Club sometimes we would give little demonstrations of what the youngsters had learned. We had just more parent participation in school in those days than what I think is even possible now. When we had a PTA or a Community Club meeting, the community turned out 100 per cent.

Q. In the school building?

A. Yes, in the school building. If we have a PTA meeting now, what is our ratio—maybe 15 parents from a district that represents 1400 to 1500 parents?

Q. And more teachers than parents?

A. And more teachers than parents. So I think we just had a lot more parent participation. And the parents felt a part of the school. They

were running the school; and the teacher, I think, respected this and took the parent into his confidence. We call the parent in now if we have a problem. If the youngster's doing well, we don't see the parents.

Q. Thank you very much, Lorraine. This has been very informative, and we appreciate it very much.

END OF TAPE