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An Interview with Grace Carlson Nelson County Superintendent of Schools

Vito Perrone

Grace Carlson began teaching in Nelson County, North Dakota, in 1926. She has served as County Superintendent of Schools since 1951. I first met Grace in 1968 and was impressed by her knowledge of North Dakota and her deep commitments to education. During this past year, as part of a larger bicentennial activity, I interviewed Grace in order to preserve some of her experience for prospective teachers. Portions of the transcript follow.

Perrone: Could you tell me something about your elementary and secondary schooling?

Carlson: I went to Dodd School #3, just south of Lakota, through the eighth grade. During the years I was there, there was a lot of turnover as families moved in and out. We usually had between fourteen and twenty pupils enrolled in the eight grades. During one year, there were twenty-six pupils. That was the year the school was condemned because of lack of space. There was a state law that specified how many cubic feet of air space there had to be for each child. That's why, I suppose, they built the rural schools with such high ceilings. They were hard to heat but they sure had a lot of cubic feet of air space.

The curriculum in the elementary school was fairly typical. We had Reading, Writing and Arithmetic. These were considered basic subjects. We also had Agriculture, which is not taught as such now, Hygiene, History and Civics. And we spent, as I recall, a lot of time preparing for State Examinations which came at the end of the year.

Perrone: How long were State Examinations given, Grace?

Carlson: Well, they were still in existence when I came into this office in 1951. In fact,

correcting examinations was one of my big jobs. A lot depended on the school and the materials it had and the training of the teacher. If the teacher had a Standard Certificate, she could write her own year-end examination. The State Exam was given when the teacher didn't have a Standard Certificate or the school term was less than nine months, etc.

Perrone: What kinds of things did you do with Agriculture?

Carlson: We learned about various breeds of cattle-- which were milk strains and which were beef strains--and what colors they were and so on. We also learned to tell grains apart and we studied diversified farming. I'm sure I graduated from the Dodd School knowing a lot about Agriculture, but then growing up on a farm one also learns a lot.

Perrone: Did you do very much planting as part of your study of agriculture?

Carlson: We planted a variety of seeds and observed them sprouting. We also maintained a fairly large garden during some of my years there.

Perrone: Could you discuss what you remember about high school?

Carlson: I went to Lakota High School which then had about two hundred students. I took Algebra and Plane Geometry during my first two years and was hoping to take two more years of Math because it was my favorite subject. But, they lost their math teacher at the end of my sophomore year and weren't able to replace him while I was there so I didn't have any more math. I also had two years of Latin. Having had Latin has helped me all through the years. I loved Latin and would have taken the last two years of that too except the Latin teacher left, not to be replaced. I had English all four years. The school employed a Business Ed teacher during my last two years so I had typing, shorthand, and bookkeeping. All of that has been useful to me. There were also courses in the

high school for those who wanted to teach in the elementary grades after graduation. I don't recall what they were called but as a part of them, we went down and worked in the elementary grades. I was in a fourth grade room and had the children to myself for the last period every morning. That remains one of my pleasant memories about high school-- I loved it.

Perrone: Did you begin your teaching right after high school?

Carlson: I wanted to but I was only sixteen when I finished high school. It was necessary to be eighteen to begin teaching. I finished early because I skipped a grade in the elementary school. My mother let me walk to school with my sister when I was five and I used to stay. While I was there at the school I learned to read.

Perrone: Did you, then, begin teaching at eighteen?

Carlson: Yes, after a summer session at Valley City (Normal School). This was supposed to prepare me for teaching but, of course, it really didn't. It was like no preparation at all.

Perrone: Would you describe some of your summer's preparation?

Carlson: Knowing you were going to ask me about this, I got my Valley City records together. During the first six weeks I took Introductory Psychology and Rural Education and in the second six weeks I had Educational Hygiene, Personal Hygiene, Indian Life and Singing Methods. Band and Physical Education were part of my program for the entire twelve weeks. Band was really enjoyable. We didn't get to take Band in high school; I suppose because we couldn't afford the instruments. My sister and I selected Valley City because we wanted to take Band and they had free instruments. She played first trombone and I played second. We never did it again but it was a good experience.

- Perrone: Did you continue your preparation by going to summer sessions?
- Carlson: I did my entire Standard by going summers. I never went to school during a regular year.
- Perrone: How many summers did it take for you to complete your Standard? Were the summers consecutive?
- Carlson: It took six summers but they weren't consecutive. I couldn't always afford to go, certainly not on the salaries we were paid. I went in 1926, 1928, 1930, 1931, 1933 and 1934.
- Perrone: Did you do very much with Child Development during those six summers?
- Carlson: We had one course in Child Psychology but I wouldn't say that there was very much emphasis on Child Development. I learned that in my teaching. In fact, most of what I learned about teaching was learned in my rural classrooms. The summers were interesting though and it was good to see the other teachers and hear about their experiences.
- Perrone: Grace, would you describe your first teaching experience?
- Carlson: I taught in a school in the southern part of Nelson County. My biggest shock was to come there and find it was a seven month school. In Lakota, as well as in my home district, they had gone to a nine month term and I just assumed that all schools were nine months. At the end of the year the Board of Education asked me to return but I told them I wouldn't do so unless they extended the school year. They wouldn't go to nine months but they agreed to have eight months of school. I later found out that most of the schools in the county had seven or eight month terms.
- Perrone: Why wasn't there uniformity?
- Carlson: The law, at that time, required seven months, so most of the districts were living up to the law. The County Superintendent in those days encouraged them to go to nine

months but they felt it would interfere with their Norwegian schools. The Norwegian schools were generally held for one or two months. These were language, cultural and religious schools.

I had some difficulty in my early years of teaching because English was a second language for so many of the children. Norwegian was their first language. I came to understand a lot of Norwegian words in those years. But I pushed English pretty hard. So much so that many of the children must have thought I hated Norwegian.

Perrone: Let's go back to your first year of teaching, Grace. How large was the school? What kinds of things did you do?

Carlson: There were thirteen in the school. I know because I looked it up among the county records. I also have my teacher's report for that year. There was one first grader, three second graders, two third graders, two fourth graders, two fifth graders, two sixth graders and two eighth graders. Let me tell you an interesting thing. It happened in that school as well as the other rural schools I taught in. The parents felt the children needed a hot meal at noon, so they took turns furnishing something hot. We kept it warm on an old jacketed heater. So you see, we had a hot lunch program long before the State developed hot lunch programs.

Another interesting thing, to show you how much rural people cared about their children, was when the School Board Director heard that I played the piano a little bit. He brought his organ from home so the children would have some accompaniment for their singing. At every rural school I taught in, the community raised money to buy a piano or an organ. That was a standard piece of equipment. They also helped construct rhythm instruments.

With regards to what happened in the school,

I followed the North Dakota course of study as well as I could. I had to improvise, though, because the guide was developed for nine months and our school only met for seven months.

Fortunately most of the children were fairly good with reading. All I knew about teaching reading was what I remembered from my own school years and that wasn't very much. One of the boys, an eighth grader, took the encyclopedias home, volume by volume. He read the whole set, cover to cover.

The rural schools were all good about having books and this school was no exception. I wish I could remember some of the titles of the books.

Perrone: What was your daily schedule?

Carlson: The day was quite long. We began at 9:00 a.m. and finished at 4:00 p.m. The morning began with 5th grade Reading, then 6th grade Reading and then 1st grade Reading.

Perrone: What did the others do while you were having reading with a particular group?

Carlson: They were generally doing assignments left over from the previous day. I am surprised, in looking at my old records, that I didn't begin with 1st graders because they were the hardest to keep busy. After 1st grade Reading, I had 8th grade History, 2nd grade Reading, and 4th grade Reading; and then, it was 6th grade History three times a week and Agriculture twice a week. All of this took place before the first recess. After recess, I had 5th and 6th graders for Math, 1st and 2nd graders for Numbers and then 4th grade Arithmetic and 8th grade Arithmetic. This was followed by 5th and 6th grade Hygiene and Geography which were alternated; Hygiene three times a week and Geography twice. This brought us to lunch which was an hour period. This is interesting. On the basis of this report I completed way back then (Grace Carlson's Teacher's Report for 1926-27) I didn't even have any opening exercises.

That's astounding! After lunch, I had 8th grade Grammar and then 1st and 2nd grade Language four times a week and Nature Study the other day.

Perrone: Tell me about Nature Study.

Carlson: Much of it, as best I can remember, had to do with plants and seeds. We tried to identify all of the weeds that children brought in. We also studied animals.

Perrone: Was Nature Study part of the State Curriculum?

Carlson: Yes. It was Nature Study through the sixth grade and was called Agriculture after that. After the Nature Study, I had 8th graders for Our State. It was rather new to me at that time and I learned along with them.

Perrone: Did you do a lot of learning with your class during that first year?

Carlson: Oh, I should say so! I think I learned much more than I taught. Fortunately, I had such good pupils. I don't know if it was my sister, who had them the year before, or if it was just their nature to be so interested in their work. I remember that old school house well. The door was in the east and my desk was at the west end. The windows were on the south and the children faced me. People would come to the door and I could carry on a conversation without a child becoming distracted. It was interesting teaching after my sister. I remember one day while I was sitting at my desk working, one little boy came up, stood by me and said, "You know Grace, you look just like Miss Carlson."

Perrone: Did the children call you "Grace?"

Carlson: Of course. I guess I really contradicted what they taught us in college - NEVER let a child call you by your first name. I taught as Grace and it really didn't affect discipline or anything like that. I was a part of the community; the adults all called me Grace and it was quite natural for the children to do so as well. I don't believe what you are called makes any difference in the

quality of children's learning.

I should get back to the schedule. After "Our State" we had a recess. Then it was 5th grade History, 8th grade Literature, 1st and 2nd grade Reading and Phonics, 4th grade Geography and Hygiene and then at the end of the day came all of the spelling, writing and drawing. It was, needless to say, a very full day.

I will come back to the actual transcript and its interview format but I did want to share with readers some random comments which Grace Carlson made in response to a variety of questions relating to her teaching experience.

In the rural school, the teacher also had to serve as the cook. I learned that having spelling just before noon was good because you could stir the pot with the hot dish and pronounce the spelling words at the same time.

We always worked hard on our music. That's something I would always have in a school. Parents always appreciated it and so did the children. It just made the school so much more enjoyable . . . One year I had a boy who played the guitar; he used to bring it to school and we would have him accompany us in singing. . . Many of the children would come to school early in the morning. Someone would sit down and play the organ and others would sing. So I almost always had entertainment in the morning.

The most children I ever taught in my twenty-five years in the rural schools was eighteen. That was the year I had fifteen boys and three girls.

You might be interested in some of my experiences during the thirties. The depression was on and it was hard times. Each year, I got ten dollars less per month. In 1932-33 my contract read "if the community bank closes, the school will close." In March the bank closed. This was kind of serious as the 8th graders needed to finish the State Examinations in May in order to go on to the high school. I finally said that I would continue teaching if the people would board me. And, I never had more fun in my life. I stayed for about four nights with each family and I really got acquainted with everyone. That

was probably the highlight of my teaching. The parents appreciated my willingness to stay on and the children worked harder than ever.

I was in five different communities during my twenty-five years of active teaching. One year, one of the rural schools that was close by hired a woman who had been a city school teacher. When she found out that she had to teach children in all the grade levels, she quit. Because I had only five children in my school, I was asked if I could bring my five children to the other school and teach both groups. So each morning I loaded up my five pupils and we drove to the next school. I was hoping they wouldn't find a teacher except I knew that it might be a problem driving when the winter came. They did find someone after a month. I really enjoyed it and it was good for my children to be in a little larger group.

When I finally completed my Standard Certificate, people tried to talk me into going into town to teach but I loved my rural schools. Let me tell you an interesting thing. When I was a freshman in high school, everyone was given some kind of I.Q. test. It may have been the first one; at least it was the first one I had ever seen. The superintendent, when the scores were all in, reported: "The surprising thing is that a student from a rural school had the highest score." I remember being upset by the tone of his voice and thought, "well if you come from a rural school you aren't supposed to know anything." Can you imagine! . . . when I first came into office as County Superintendent, legislation on School Reorganization/Consolidation came. One of the legislators who was pushing this came to me and said that with all my experience out there in the rural schools, I should be pushing the legislation hard. "Just look at all the things those children lack," he said. He listed a number of academic things. I told him that I didn't agree with him. There were a lot of extras that they should have had but it wasn't as bad as he seemed to think. I asked him to look at the Lakota High School records and see where the honor students came from. He did and found that a lot of them came from the rural schools and he apologized to me. No

one could tell me that children learned to study better just because they were in town schools. . . People seemed to think our rural schools were ill equipped, lacking in up-to-date textbooks, etc. During the reorganization, J.T. Carlson, who was Superintendent of the Lakota Schools was out to my home school. He wanted to see what materials were there that might be brought into the town school. He said, "Oh, will my sixth grade teacher be happy. There's an up-to-date set of encyclopedias that we haven't been able to afford. And we sure don't have maps as recent as those."

Perrone: Was the one room rural school a good learning environment, Grace?

Carlson: It sure was! Children learned so much from each other. The older children were very helpful to me in teaching the younger children their spelling and helping them with their reading. They were like assistant teachers. In the rural schools you could also take care of the children who were having some difficulty learning, who weren't advancing as fast as others in their grade. Children who were learning very rapidly could also be taken care of without a lot of complicated arrangements. In the town schools where every grade is separate, this is harder. Last night one of the speech therapists was telling me about the testing they are doing and he described a young boy in a primary grade who was so advanced in Arithmetic. The teacher told the speech therapist, "If I were out in a one room school, I could have him work in Arithmetic with older children but I can't send him up to the 4th or 5th grade for Arithmetic here. It would just be too difficult!"

Perrone: Can you describe other positive aspects of the rural schools.

Carlson: The close relationships that existed in the community. Every child knew every other child's parents, brothers and sisters. You didn't have discipline problems in that kind of an environment. Because everyone knew

each other, there was a lot of interest in what was going on at the school. The teachers were also a part of the community.

That was good.

There was also more individualized instruction. Schools are trying to go back to that now. One year I observed that one of my first graders seemed farsighted. I went to his parents and discussed it with them. They wouldn't get glasses so I had to work out ways to help him. I had that youngster for six years and put many things on the board especially for him. He would say to me, "Grace, if I stay in at recess, will you read my Arithmetic problems to me?"

In settings as small as mine were, you just knew when children were having trouble with something. This one boy was so anxious about Arithmetic that I just knew by the expression on his face whether he was understanding what I was trying to teach. When that happened, I just assigned seat work to everyone and worked with him individually. If I didn't he would just follow me around and say, "Grace, I don't understand it, I just can't do it."

Perrone: Did you view the size of the school to be an advantage?

Carlson: As I said, it made it much easier to work with individual children who were having difficulty. I felt good about the schools when they had twelve to eighteen children. That was large enough to provide some variety. It was difficult, though, when the school got very small as some of them did. One year, we operated a school for two pupils. They were brothers. The teacher, I remember, said, "I've never taught a harder school - it was almost impossible to keep things interesting."

Perrone: What do you think were some of the negative features of the one room rural schools?

Carlson: In the early years, so many of the teachers were really untrained. I even think of

myself and others like me: our only real background was our previous experience of going to school. We weren't really prepared to teach all of the things that came up. This is not to say that over the years we didn't become more skilled. There were some years when teachers, especially those going to school to get their Standards, were impossible to find. When that happened rural schools often picked up people with no training at all - people who just shouldn't have been in schools. I remember one lady who told me she was going to meet with a School Board Director because they needed a teacher. She had had some business training but said she understood it was easier to get a job in a rural school than in an office. I asked her how she was going to teach little children how to read. She said, "Oh, you let them color until Christmas and then you give them a book and they'll read."

Fortunately, she didn't get the job.

The children in the rural schools might have missed out on some things such as art training and athletics. This wasn't always the case but I am afraid it was quite commonly the case. We had county-wide activities to stimulate such things but they were limited. The social life, especially in the very small schools, was limited, too. The children didn't have opportunities to meet many students from other backgrounds.

Perrone: How about the turn-over of teachers?

Carlson: Turn-over was quite common. I think this was true in the city schools as well but it was, I understand, even greater in the rural schools. Children faced a new teacher quite frequently. Maybe for the better.

Perrone: Why was the teacher turn-over so high?

Carlson: I suppose there were a lot of reasons but one that I know the most about is related to the problem of salary. I remember my first job. My sister had taught in this school the year before, right out of high school.

They paid \$75 a month. They offered me the job because my sister went to a different school. They had a good sense of humor, I guess, because they recognized my summer training by offering me \$77.50 per month. The next year, they paid me \$87.50. I didn't continue in that school because the Board didn't want to pay \$97.50 for my third year. They preferred to find someone they could start again at \$77.50. This was one of the reasons for people staying in a school only one or two years. Some teachers were just unhappy. They always wanted to be somewhere else. Those that were going to summer school, working on their Standards, were often trying to qualify to teach in the city and town schools. The rural schools were principally places for them to gain experience.

We discussed from this point many of the changes in schools over the past fifty years. The improved preparation of teachers was one of the principal things that Grace Carlson commented on. She also described the improved services from specialists that are now available; for example, speech therapists, nurses, music and art specialists, special education teachers. I learned a great deal from Grace Carlson and hope that the partial transcriptions presented here have been as interesting to others as they have been to me.