

District 65: Memories from a One-Room Schoolhouse in Rural Buffalo County: Part 2

The millennium saw District #65 still thriving, with one teacher, five students, and an active three-member school board. Linda Miller, who had served as clerk on the school board previously, was hired as sole teacher in 2001. At that time, five students attended, in grades between kindergarten and sixth grade. Those five students were in order of age, youngest to oldest, Whitney Ahrens, Aman Miller, Derek Musil, Seth Musil, and Olga Miller.

A normal school day started at 8:30 a.m. with math and reading lessons. From there, what subjects and what grades were taught next depended on the students. If one student was not quite done with their homework from the previous day, they would be skipped and the next students' lesson would be taught until the first student was finished with their homework. Of the subjects taught, math, reading, science, history, and language arts were taught every day. Keyboarding was minimally instructed, music and art were taught about once a week, until the time came for the seasonal musical program in which music would be practiced everyday. If a student was finished with their work for their lesson before the teacher was done teaching another lesson to another student, the student would sit in on that lesson as well, therefore learning double. Perhaps the greatest aspect of the one room schoolhouse dynamic was that the older students were willing to help out the younger students with any subject they may be struggling in. The main idea was about working together as a unit to better each other as students.

This sense of community was the reason that Nebraska fought hard for the tradition of one-room schoolhouses. However, not all citizens were supportive of the one-room schoolhouses. Among these critics was Nebraska author, Dorothy Weyer Creigh, who stated the schoolhouses offered "slip-shod teaching, with a criminal lack of books and other teaching tools," and should all be consolidated with bigger schools with more funding and more resources. With many of the schoolhouses falling into disrepair, paint fading on the outside and no insulation in the walls, critics were using aesthetics to enhance their position that the "condition of the school facility can affect a student's learning experience," for instance if the lighting is poor the student might not be able to see his work clearly and therefore might lose his focus. But the first attempt in 1980 to shutter rural schools by law died before it even went to the legislature. When another bill tried to shutter the schools in 1985, it was passed but then overturned by voter referendum. With the idea that the small, single unit classroom was better for learning at an accelerated rate and the fact District #65 had technology to match Ravenna Public Schools at the time, there was no need to close the school. School board members, the families involved, and the students fought hard against the state in order to keep District #65 open.

In June 2005, Nebraska LB126 was passed, over the veto of then Governor Dave Heineman, which meant the end of Class I and Class IV districts, forcing consolidations of these smaller districts into bigger, neighboring districts. Class I, for elementary school districts, and Class

IV, for high school districts, hosted small student populations in rural locations. Nebraskans, especially Class I United, fought LB126, creating petitions in hopes to gain enough signatures to have a referendum on the ballot. In order for this to happen, ten percent of Nebraskan voters needed to sign their petition, but Class I United only managed to receive seven percent of signatures needed.

The reason the Nebraska government wanted to close the smaller, rural districts was the result of a financing structure created by another Nebraska law (R.R.S. Neb § 79-1007.02) in 2003. This law severely undercut the budgets of small, rural schools leaving them without funds to "1) adequately pay and retain teachers; 2) purchase textbooks, equipment and supplies; 3) renovate facilities; 4) offer college bound courses [and] advanced courses." With the creation of three categories of schools, standard, sparse and very sparse, the law did not provide adequate funding for the schools that were too small to be labeled in one of the three categories because of a formula that provided funding for only for those districts with more than two students per square mile. The Nebraska Coalition for Educational Equity and Adequacy did file a lawsuit stating the financing bill went against the Nebraska Constitution, but it was dropped after the court established it was not the place "for resolving broad and complicated policy decisions or balancing competing political interests." Coupled with Nebraska LB126, the financing structure that failed rural schools, and the two student long roster for the coming school year, District #65 was forced to closed its doors after 121 years of teaching Nebraska's youth within its walls.

District #65 served for many as a reminder of days gone by, as a different, but better way, of teaching the next generation. On May 25, 2006, Ruhter Auction and Realty Inc., of Hastings, Nebraska, hauled its auction block, microphones, and trucks up on that one-acre of land south of Ravenna and starting auctioning off items that had accumulated throughout the years. For the months leading up the auction, classified advertisements had been placed in all area newspapers, such as the Gibbon and Shelton newspapers, the *Kearney Hub* and even as far away as the *Hastings Tribune*. Flyers were hung up throughout Central Nebraska and the radio played the same advertisement acknowledging the sale date and times. These advertisements boasted, "selling building and real estate consisting of [one] acre and a one room school building with basement and storage building. Also selling a full line of school equipment, books, computers, playground equipment and miscellaneous."

The auction, in total, raised \$5,593, not including the building, the storage shed and the acre of land that the school sat on, which originally was supposed to go back to the family free of charge. General schoolhouse items were sold, such as microscopes, books, computers, desks, playground equipment, but also more interesting items were sold such as an inflatable dinosaur, the old merry-go-round, and the schoolhouse hand bell. The schoolhouse hand bell went to longtime school board member, Leann Hervert of Ravenna, Nebraska for an astounding \$675, while the merry-go-round was sold to Anson Nielson of Minden, Nebraska for \$375. Besides those two items, all the other 239 items went for less than one hundred dollars, with some items only going for a couple of dollars such as ball gloves, clocks, and the school first aid kit. Some items were bundled together, such as a box of learning supplies, the world globe and some cassettes, educational totes, and one random bundle included a drum, wood blocks, and miscellaneous other items. Of the total amount that the auction brought in, \$1,591.95 went to Ravenna Public Schools. Ruhter Auction charged \$839 for an auctioneer's fee, while \$638.59 went to the various aforementioned advertisings methods. Just \$23.37 was charged for credit card fees that Ruhter's charged the day of the sale, and lastly, \$2,500 went to Class 1 United, the co-operative that helped run rural schools in Buffalo County.

The most important item on the auction block that fateful summer day was the schoolhouse itself. According to auction documents, Robert (Doug) Hervert of Ravenna, Nebraska was the highest bidder, bidding \$4,300. Hervert was required to pay \$860.00 the day of the sale, with the remaining balance due on or before June 5, 2006. In the next year, the schoolhouse would sit virtually vacant until Hervert decided to sell it to another Ravenna citizen, Gary A. Jones for \$13,000. For that price, Jones received the one-acre of land the house sits on, the storage building, and the schoolhouse itself as is. Jones and his wife currently use property as their house, and Jones has spent much of the last five years renovating, remodeling and giving new life to the ninety five year old schoolhouse.



Student Aman Miller in front of District 65

Today, the schoolhouse still sits atop the hill on the corner of Pawnee Road and 265th Road, proudly displaying its long life to the people who choose to drive pass. The outside has not changed much, the concrete stairs with the broken right steel-pipe railing, who so many children climbed to get to school, are now gone and the Jones's have added a sliding door on the south. But if a passerby happened to turn their head to the side and listen to the wind, they could still hear children laughing and playing on the now gone playground equipment, the school bell ringing for the start of school. Although, no longer used as a schoolhouse, District #65 serves as a legacy to the perseverance of the school board members, families and students who fought so hard to keep the little schoolhouse in operation for so many decades.

Special thanks to the following people for sharing their stories with me: Liz Lockhorn, Adarene Miigerl, Sue & Rex Musil, and Linda Miller. Other sources as follows:

"Gather in Tribute at the Old School," newspaper clipping, November 4, 1974, District 65 folder, Ravenna Historical Society, Ravenna, NE.

"Another chapter in the life of Dist. 65," *The Ravenna News*, April 5, 2006.

University of Nebraska Rural Futures Institute, "Losing A Way of Life," <http://www.countryschooljournal.com>, accessed November 30, 2016.

Sarah Dewees and Patricia Cahape Hammer, *Improving Rural School Facilities* (Charleston, The Rural Education Specialty 2000), 16.

Jonathon Zimmerman, *Small Wonder: the Little Red Schoolhouse in History and Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 181.

Steven J Buss, "Public School District Reorganization and Consolidation in Adams County, Nebraska 1949-1989," *Nebraska History* 4 (1991): 93.

"Submit School Redistricting Plan to State," *Kearney Daily Hub*, December 3, 1959.

Photo courtesy of the Buffalo County Historical Society Archives

Coming Events:

Continually until Sept 30th—Trails & Rails Museum/BCHS will continue to be a part of the 2017 Nebraska Passport Program in the Thrills & Chills tour.

First two weekends in Dec. (Dec. 2/3 and Dec. 9/10) from 1-5 pm: Open to the public: **30th Annual Christmas Tree Walk**

*** Saturday, December 2 from 12-1pm: Members Only Preview of the 30th Annual Christmas Tree Walk.

Education notes (see website for additional details):

*Fabulous Fridays are held on the 2nd Friday monthly at 2 pm.

Locations vary, so check the web site "Events" Tab!

*Listen to Mardi Anderson on KGFW 1340 AM at 9 am on the last Friday of each month for a fabulous story about Buffalo County!

*Join the Trails & Rails Museum Blacksmiths (check our calendar under the "Events" Tab on our website) to learn about blacksmith meetings and/or possibly join in the fun!

*The Archive Department will be open on Mondays from 1-4pm year-round or by appointment. Contact bchs.archives@hotmail.com for more information.

Volunteers, chairpersons, and sponsors are still needed. Please contact the office for more information on supporting your Buffalo County Historical Society!

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We hope you enjoy these stories about Buffalo County. If you have a memory of Buffalo County and would like to write a story to be considered for a future newsletter then please email us! We'd love to hear from you. Please submit your memories or/and stories to us by emailing them to bchs.buffalotales@hotmail.com or sending them to the post office box: BCHS, PO Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848.

We appreciate your support!

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Director's Report—Jen Murrish

- The Passport Program has wrapped up and I can honestly say it was probably one of the best \$100 that we have spent on Advertising. A combined total (both virtual visitors through the Passport App and in-person visitors) of 4752 people visited Trails & Rails/BCHS through this program!
- Our archive activity has increased dramatically. Many donors have been dropping off items, and I think that they've been waiting for the new building to open to do that. We're also had people just randomly walking in and asking more and more questions about the research. Luckily our volunteer, Elaine, has been here almost every single day volunteering!
- The Children's Museum donated a bunch of mannequins that they no longer use and wanted to know if we would like them. We greatly appreciated this donation.
- The half marathon committee has met and we are preparing for next year to be bigger and better!

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 member!

**A Huge Thanks to our Silver and Gold Engineers
 for their support of the BCHS/Trails & Rails Museum**
 (Contact Trails & Rails Museum for more information on becoming an Engineer)

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Meredith Underwood, Editor

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