

# A Breathless Day in the Life of a Rural Schoolteacher

*The challenges of teaching children  
of different ages and levels*



by Melvin Owen

*as recorded by Jeffrey A. Kaufmann*

School day started about 9:00 to 9:15. We had what we called opening exercises, and I generally read a story to them from a book. One of the books that the boys really enjoyed was *Toby Tyler* by James Otis. It was a story about a boy that ran away to the circus and his pet monkey. They enjoyed that tremendously, and of course we always had the Pledge of Allegiance. At that time, we generally listened to this old phonograph with a record on it. And then from 9:15 to 9:30 I always had the little ones work on phonics and read several little stories. I always made flashcards for the new words introduced. And then from about 9:30 to 9:45, the third grade, I only had one student in there, he had a reading book, Elson Gray reading book. And he's up there about fifteen minutes. Then the sixth graders, they came up, and they stayed about fifteen minutes. They all sat on a recitation bench by the teacher, and they had their reading. And then the seventh graders, which is only one lone boy, came up. It's very hard to teach a young boy that age, just himself, because he had no challenge, you know. He was a real good boy, but he just was so laid back you really had to work on him to get much response from him. Then we had a recess for about fifteen minutes. In good weather they went outside. Of course, then, when it wasn't so good, they had to stay inside. And we played on the blackboard, "hang the man" and games like that. Then we had arithmetic from about 11:00 to 11:15. The first grade, of course I introduced numbers to them, simple little combinations, made a lot of flashcards for them. Then the third grade, they had their arithmetic from 11:00 to 11:15; 11:15 to 11:30 was sixth grade; 11:30 to

11:45 was seventh. Then we had lunch, and we generally had it for about an hour. Sometimes that got kind of long if you had to keep them inside, but they wanted it that way. Outside, of course, then they thought it was too short because they'd get to playing. Then in the afternoon, the primary, they worked on some kind of handwork or some handouts I'd given to them, and then I had some coloring books for them to work on. Then there was a sandbox in the back of the room, and they had some sand in it, and there was some little trucks and different figures in there. The little ones played in that. I only told them they could play there if they were quiet. Then the other ones, they had geography and history from about 1:00 to 1:30. Then there was recess from 2:30 to 2:45. Then there was the primary, they worked on their lessons they were assigned, and I found them, a lot of times, they were just sitting there listening to the others, you know. Because they learned a lot from the others really. And some of them would do that. Some weren't interested in that, they just went about their own work or what they were doing. And the last thing was history and geography. I combined the sixth and the seventh grade for that. One day we'd have history and the next day we'd have geography. Always about 15 minutes before they left to go home, they had to straighten up everything and keep everything in order. They were dismissed about 3:30. ❖

*Melvin Owen taught at Linn Grove School in Cedar County in 1938-1939. His description above is excerpted from Jeffrey A. Kaufmann's dissertation, "Teaching Practices of Iowa Rural Teachers in the 1930's" (University of Iowa, 2000).*