



# Buffalo Tales



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Volume 5, No. 6

Buffalo County Historical Society

June 1982

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## BY-GONE SCHOOL DAYS

by May Clayton Stover

### Introduction

*Mrs. Stover's story is excerpted from her account of "Early Days on the Cedar Creek" written in 1965. Mary May Clayton was born May 5, 1887 and was raised in the Cedar Creek neighborhood. She later taught in country schools not so different from that described here. A copy of Mrs. Stover's memoirs was donated to the Buffalo County Historical Society by her children, Allen Stover, Glenn Stover, Roy Stover and Dorothy Rodehorst.*

The school was named Rose Hill District No. 64. It was on my mother's land and some say it was named after my mother as her name was Rose.

When I asked my grandchildren what they had for lunch at school today, this was the menu. Hot dogs, mashed potatoes, butter corn, fruit, cookie and milk. I think back to our school lunches in the 1890's. We all carried a tin syrup pail or possibly a "store bought" pail. There was no waxed paper or paper napkins to wrap sandwiches in and



May Clayton Stover

Buffalo Tales is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization. It is sent to all members of the Society.

Gene E. Hamaker ..... Editor  
Alice Howell ..... Circulation  
Telephone 237-7858

Membership in the Buffalo County Historical Society is open to anyone who has an interest in Buffalo County and its people, or in the history of the area.

- Annual dues, payable January 1:
- Family membership.....\$ 5.00
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Trails and Rails Museum Phone . 234-3041 If no answer, call 236-5566 or 237-7858.

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### WITH THE SOCIETY

Members of the Historical Society were saddened to learn of the sudden death of Board Member Laverne McMullen on May 13 at Gibbon. "Moon," as he was affectionately known, had been one of the Society's strongest promoters and supporters since reorganization in 1972. He had served six years on the Board of Directors, his last term would have expired on June 1.

Our deepest sympathy is extended to Mrs. McMullen and the family.

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A display of the antique woodworking tools of Glen Matson and Maynard Envick are on special exhibit at the Trails and Rails Museum through June 24.

Beginning June 25 and running until July 15 will be a special exhibit of barbed wire collected by Jim Goedert.

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There will be an evening picnic of the Buffalo County Historical Society on Sunday, July 11, at 6:00 o'clock on the bluff at Sartoria. This is the farm home of Mr. and Mrs. Harold Arp, and is located seven miles west on the first east-west road just north of Pleasanton.

Bring your own sack lunch; also a blanket or folding chair. There is no planned program, but will be a get-together of members and friends of the Historical Society during the summer when we do not have regular meetings. The Sartoria area on the Loup River is one of the most scenic in the county.

If you need a ride, or wish to pool rides, please contact the Board Member in your area.

people were very cautious about putting food next to tin for fear of tin poisoning, so a piece of clean white cloth was placed in the bottom of our pail. Our sandwiches were two large slices of homemade bread, one slice spread with homemade butter and the other with sorghum. If both slices had sorghum on it would soak into the bread and be a soggy mess. I cannot remember having meat sandwiches. We had jelly made from wild plums, grapes or choke cherries. Peanuts were cheap so now and then we had a few peanuts in our pail. We sometimes had a hard-boiled egg. The eggs were boiled and cooled, not shelled as a boiled egg can sure smell up a pail with a lid on. No food was wrapped in a newspaper as the ink in the paper might be poison.

My brother and I were a little more fortunate than some as my father had set out an orchard so we could have an apple, but I doubt if today's boys and girls would eat them as they were not Jonathan, Winesaps or Delicious, but Ben Davis, a cooking apple. In the fall we had a handful of wild plums in our lunch pail, an orange at Christmas time only. In the winter it was so cold the lunches would freeze if left in the hall, so we were allowed to bring our pails in and set them under or around the stove.

Most all walked to school, even though some walked two and a half miles. No one rode a horse when I went to school. We walked about a half mile. Parents usually brought the children if it was bitter cold or a hard north wind. My brother went early and built the fire and was paid a dollar a month.

There were 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th readers. Our 5th readers had no pictures in and very dry reading. The lower grade books were the same. We used Harper's Readers, Barnes' History, an easy edition for younger, and a more advanced type for older pupils. One geography was the Colton. We had two spelling books, **big** and **little**. I do not remember the name of the grammar books, or language, as the one for the younger pupils was called. We had penmanship once a week. Each one had a copy book, it had a sample of writing in and we were to copy it as nearly as possible on the vacant lines below the copy. We did not use tablets much because we couldn't afford them. Everyone had a slate, some had a double slate, two slates laced together. They were highly prized as we could work the next day's arithmetic lesson, fold the slate over the lesson and it could not be erased. Then along comes a triple slate—really something! We had to use slate pencils which broke easily if they were dropped. They were noisy things, squeaked when using them and the teacher would shout, "Don't hold your slate pencil so straight." We all took a piece of cloth from home for a "slate rag" to dampen and clean our slate. Some of the boys would spit on their slate and wipe it off with their shirt sleeve.

Our desks were double, two pupils occupied each one. You could choose your seat mate but you had better be quiet or the teacher would change your position. Our desks sloped and there was a groove along the top of each side to keep pencils from rolling off. In the center between the grooves was an inkwell—a hole containing a small glass jar that held probably a tablespoon of ink. It had a sliding metal lid flush with the top of the desk. Before we had penmanship the teacher had one of the older boys check the inkwells and fill them from a large bottle of ink kept in her desk. I had two braids of long blond hair and often had the ends of the braids colored (much to my mother's disgust) by being stuck in the inkwell by the mischievous boy who sat right behind me. The desks were fastened to the floor, which made it difficult to sweep under them.

We usually had three 3-month terms, sometimes a different teacher every three

months. When the winter term began on December 1, the big boys in the district came to school. They were really grown men 19 and 20 years old. When the teacher asked what books they wanted, one usually spoke for a group of five or six. "We want a readin' book, 'rithmetic book, a jogify (geography) and a spellin' book, and we don't want no grammar book cause it don't make sense to make a lot of lines and put words on 'em. learnin' which is nouns and verbs don't matter to us. We want a 'rithmetic book cause a feller ort to know how to figger".

One of the favorite pastimes of the older boys in some communities was to see if they could "run the teacher out". They were big and rowdy, wouldn't pay any attention to the teacher, and otherwise cause so much disturbance that she couldn't teach and she would finally quit. One district hired a small middle-aged lady to teach. She probably wouldn't weigh over ninety pounds and the big boys decided they would run her out the first week of school. On the first day of school one of the big boys promptly put his feet on the desk in front of him and the teacher told him to put his feet down and sit up. He said he was comfortable that way and had no intention of putting his feet down. She didn't say anything but went back to the stove and picked up the stove poker and started to stir up the fire. When the poker was red hot she turned around and told him to get his feet down and sit up. He put his feet on the floor and then she asked if anyone else felt like putting their feet on the desk—of course, no one else did. She taught the rest of the school year and didn't have any more trouble.

I remember we younger ones were fascinated by a set of blocks which could be folded as the sections were fastened together with leather straps and riveted and could form a triangle, a rectangle, a trapezoid and a globe to teach the way of finding the area of different shaped bodies. (School districts usually didn't buy anything that expensive).



Rose Hill, District No. 64  
(May Stover at right in doorway)

At recess we played Blackman, New Orleans and Ante-over. The boys played ball as soon as spring came, girls couldn't play ball—didn't know enough, according to the boys. There was no playground equipment, not even a tree so a swing could be put up. When the boys played ball the girls jumped rope, two girls turning the rope. We would "go in the back door", which meant jumping in on the wrong side, which was much harder. We all walked to school unless it was raining or snowing or a thunder storm coming up. The teacher had orders not to send anyone home in a storm, so if it began snowing the older boys were sent out to bring in extra coal in case we had to stay until someone came.

The teacher received twenty-five dollars a month, never over thirty, and she usually boarded in the district for two dollars a week.

School programs were held in the afternoon as there was the problem of lighting. However, a Christmas tree was lighted with candles, men standing near the tree with pails of water in case the tree started to burn. Men brought lanterns to light the room. The teacher gave each pupil a stick of candy and a pretty card. The candy was a striped peppermint stick, a licorice stick, horehound or cinnamon, and were we happy with one stick of candy!

We carried drinking water from a farm nearby. The pail of water sat on a bench, a long-handled dipper in it; all drank from it. I don't know where the germs were in those days. One day two of the big boys brought a pail of water but set it down outdoors instead of bringing it in. One went to see what some other boys were doing. Grandpa Stover's old bird dog named Skip came up and took a drink out of the pail. The teacher just happened to see him so she rushed out and emptied the rest out and called the boys to get another pail of water. They refused—they weren't carrying water for her to pour out. She told them the dog drank out of it and one said, "you could have poured a little off the top—he didn't drink out of the bottom."

We had no curtains or shades at the tall windows, only shutters. Some were slatted like venetian blinds, while others were wood covered and the teacher must close all shutters every night as a hail storm might come and break a glass.

I do not remember ever taking school work home. In September, if the weather was warm, the flies, wasps and box elder bugs were very annoying and there was no such thing as spray to fight them with. The school house was about one-fourth mile from a small creek, and in the spring the wild plum bushes were white with bloom. The teacher had a rule that no one could go off the school ground but she used to let a group of girls go down and pick a huge bunch of plum blossoms as they smelled so sweet. She would ring the bell when it was time for us to start back.

If we happened to have a heavy rain during the night in the spring, the ground would be alive with little toads. We kids were sure it had rained toads. The boys would amuse themselves by chasing the girls and threaten to put toads in our apron pockets, and we ran screaming for the teacher.

When spring came and it was warm enough so a fire was not necessary, my father would start a Sunday School at the school house. There was a Presbyterian church in the neighborhood but not all attended those services. There was no money to buy coal to have Sunday School in winter. The meetings were well attended and all enjoyed the fellowship and singing hymns together. I can remember such meetings at Rose Hill, also Cedar Creek and Star school houses. One of the men served as superintendent for the summer.

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One source of entertainment in the summer was when a man would come to the school house in the evening with a phonograph and some records. He charged children 5 cents; I don't remember if he charged adults the same or not. He would play his records, and play any a second time if anyone requested it. \* \* \* The man would stay in the neighborhood that night, get supper and breakfast, feed for his horse, and a place to sleep for 50 cents.

Very few girls went to high school. One could teach at 17 years of age if you could pass the county exams. Most of the girls when they got "too big to go to school" worked out, doing housework for \$1.50 a week or sometimes only \$1.00. Some learned dressmaking and that was a real profession for a woman.

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