

Westman Oral History collection

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Narrator (interviewee): Marie MacDonald
Interviewer: Dorothy P. Martin
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[Beginning of Tape/Side A]

[00:00:11]

Today is May the 12th, 1981. The following is an interview with Marie MacDonald, a retired high school teacher who lives with her husband George on a farm in the Brookdale area. This interview is being taped for the Westman Oral History Association Project "Voices of Yesteryear" by Dorothy Martin of Neepawa. Mrs. MacDonald taught almost full 30 years in schools from Ochre River in the North to Kemnay in the North. Besides that, she raised a family of three. One is a nurse and one a teacher. When not teaching in a classroom, she was busy tutoring pupils. She will always be remembered for her wonderful teaching ability. She will relate to us some of her experiences. You must have really liked your profession to stay with it all

those years. When and where did you begin your close contact with education?

Answer: [00:01:29]

It is true, I have been in close contact with education in Brookdale district and several others. Ever since I enrolled in grade one as a student in 1915. At that time, there was a four-room school in Brookdale. My memory of those days are rather hazy. I have no recollection fond or otherwise of my teachers or my fellow students. I do remember that we were taken to school in horse-drawn vans. Wheels in the summer, runners in the winter. Three years later my family moved to a farm one-mile North. Which put us out of the consolidated district and into Preethan school district, a one room school. I remember the next two years very fondly, teacher, Miss. Edith Hockin, and no other student of my age group. I was encouraged to progress at my own speed. An innovation, that was. It wa- didn't become the "in" thing until many years later in teaching methods. We drove an all-white pony to the school. In 1919, I think, Freeland joined the consoled- Brookdale Consolidated district. The two things I remember most of grades five to 11 were fire drills. Down a metal chute from the top floor, were the senior boy to push you from the top and another to pick you up at the bottom. And, fire on Christmas day in 1923, the school burned. Our hopes of an extended holiday were dashed. They had a [unsure] school board, strung up curtain down the centre of the church and the upper classes opened on schedule.

The principal was Mr. Hugh Conley. He taught grades nine to 11. It must've been a horrendous year for him, but it was a first. Open room teaching in its most primitive form. My final high school year I enjoyed the luxuries of the new school, complete with indoor plumbing, steam heat, a lab, a gym, a board and staff room. Few of any rural schools could compare.

Q: [00:04:01]

What gave you the urge to enter the teaching profession?

A: [00:04:06]

Well, my oldest sister was a schoolteacher and was making fairly good money. And, my father thought that I should become a teacher too. After four years in Brandon College and a year in education at the University of Saskatchewan, I started my teaching career in 1931 at Justice, Manitoba. I was hired as principal, teaching grades seven to 11 in a two-room school and a salary of \$1,200 per annum. Now a couple of my students were almost as old as I, but they were all willing and cooperative and together we managed. The school had none of the modern amenities, but the pupils were transported to and from school. The next year, the board told me they would like me to stay on, but, they'd be unable to pay the same salary. So, I accepted a salary cut of two-hundred dollars. My father died in 1932, so I resigned and came home to live with my mother.

Q: [00:05:25]

Did you miss teaching and the pupils?

A: [00:05:28]

Not really, because that Fall, a group of students approached me to teach grade 12. The Brookdale board couldn't afford to hire another teacher, so it was arranged that each student would pay me 10 dollars a month and the board would give me the small grant the department would allow for an extra grade. Another first for Brookdale. I taught six students in the board room, hm, approximately six by eight. A full course, math, poetry and drama, novel and comp, chemistry, French. Quite a year. I had to re-learn the work each night to be able to cope. Inadequately, I'm sure with the next day's lessons. Each of my students was dedicated to achieving grade 12 standing. Four of the girls later entered the teaching profession and one became a graduate nurse. The two boys were partial students who wanted something challenging to do during the Sum-Winter months on the farm. Hm. For a week that Winter I was confined to bed with Lumbago. It was no deterrent to my class. They simply brought their books, seated themselves in chairs around my bed and classes continued. The next year, 1933, I accepted the position of principal at Ochre River School at six-hundred dollars a year. Classes were held in a two-room building, and two one-room buildings in different parts of the village. I taught grades nine to 11. The buildings were old and drafty with no modern facilities, nor transportation. The students walked, rode horseback, bicycles, drove horses, but, maintained excellent attendance records. Enrollment was high, 25-30 in

grades nine to 11 and more in the lower rooms. The salary was small, but there were compensations. Board and room, 15 dollars a month. Gas, three gallons for a dollar. The town had a nice hall for plays, dances and an enthusiastic if inept, badminton club. My second year at Ochre, I agreed to tutor grade 12 classes in the evenings. Again, the students' dedication carried the project a full course. They did the chem experiments in my hearing, if not my supervision during school hours. At that time an inspector from the department tested this area of work and all, at all high schools. So, my class went to Dauphin for the test. Those who could, paid me ten dollars a month my tutoring services. One young man who couldn't went to University of Manitoba after his war service taught, and later became an inspector. He didn't forget. Years later, I received a cheque and a beautiful letter from him.

Q: [00:08:50]

Did you stay very long at Ochre?

A: [00:08:52]

Well in June 1936, I married and settled down to housekeeping instead of teaching. But that wasn't for long. I was [unknown] into tutoring students liking high school credits they required for nursing or typing courses came to my house in twos and threes. I had fairly enjoyed keeping in touch, even though the work was strictly vol-volu-volunteer. In 1941, my husband went overseas, and I came back to Brookdale to teach math and French in grades

nine to 12. Then, for two years at Kemnay, as principal of a two-room school. Again the building was old, wood burning heaters in each room, water pails, no indoor plumbing and oh yes, a fire escape that was pulling away from the outside brick wall and, there was a four- foot jump from the bottom. At every inspector's visit, he inquired regarding fire drills and highly disapproved when I told him I had not had any. Finally, I said to him okay, you go down it and I'll follow right behind you. He didn't accept the challenge and made no further mention of fire drills. After Kemnay, I taught in Brandon. Earl Hag, Alexander, and a brief stint in the collegiate. Later I spent three years as principal at Brookdale two as principal of a twelve-room school in Carberry.

Q: [00:10:32]

Were the salaries any better in the 1950's?

A: [00:10:35]

As a matter of fact, they were. When I was approached to take the principalship in Carberry, I was offered this stupendous amount, of five thousand dollars a year. I thought never in my wildest dreams that I ever thought I could ever make that much money. So, I accepted it. In 1959, I went back to Brookdale, and that time, there was a large enrollment, 40 pupils in high school, and approximately a hundred in the lower grades. We used portable building for the junior high class. Our new collegiate building was completed, and the high school moved in in February 1962. A beautiful

new facility, complete with well-equipped labs, library, gymnasium, an enthusiastic student body from [unknown] districts took full advantage of both academic and physical education. They excelled in volleyball, basketball, track and field. Arrangements were made enable-enabling grade seven to nine students to take home economics and shop programs in Neepawa collegiate. A volunteer with a university degree in special training in library work promoted interest and enthusiasm in reading and research. Another volunteer, with special talent in music, taught choral singing. We even had a square dance club. The academic staff was outstanding. Most graduates went on to university or nurses training, but all enjoyed their skills in later years. From 1967 to 71, the high school classes were gradually absorbed by Neepawa and Carberry collegiates. In the larger schools the students enjoyed a greater choice of electives.

Q: [00:12:44]

Were there any shortages of teachers?

A: [00:12:48]

During the war years, teacher shortage became quite a problem. In 1942, the department of education opened a six-week course. upon the completion of which, students were given a letter of authority to teach in one or two-room schools. Rurales. This short course was continued for several years. A friend of mine attended a session in 1945. About two hundred students were enrolled that year. She had taught one year on permit after grade 11. The

next year, she attained grade 12 standing then attended the short course in teacher training. Many years later she taught on my staff in the unity collegiate in Brookdale. An excellent teacher. Proving my favourite method. A good teacher is born with a special talent. Years of training may sharpen the skills, but she learned by reading, studying, and experimenting.

Q: [00:13:52]

Do you remember a time when there was a surplus of teachers?

A: [00:13:57]

Not really in my years of experience, but there does seem to be that problem right now. There seems to be too many teachers for the jobs. I retired from teaching June 1972. My approach to teaching that year was the same as in 1932. No corporal punishment. If a teacher treats a student fairly and honestly, invariably the same will be freely given to him or her.

End of interview.