It All Depended on the Teacher:
Classroom Resources in Texas Country Schools

by Lou Rodenberger
Resolved: Texas should be divided into two states.

When Carl Halsell suggested a debate defending or attacking that idea to the boys who had arrived early one fall morning in 1922 at their country school ground to practice basketball, most of them looked puzzled. Carl knew that the students, who seldom saw a newspaper and had no radios in their homes, would learn at least a few research techniques, as well as gain confidence from having to stand in front of their parents and friends and express opinions, whether they actually believed in their defense or not. When he laid out his plan, however, his pupils looked at each other with skepticism. How could they argue for something they definitely didn’t believe in? To them, boasting that they were citizens of the biggest state in the Union set them apart from Yankees, Arkansawyers, and Okies. Finally, their teacher convinced them that the topic merited their thought. Two of the boys said they would argue the affirmative, even if they didn’t believe it.

Soon, as their teachers, my parents Mr. Carl and Miss Mabel, had hoped, contestants were mailing letters to the governor, their legislator, mayors of several cities, and state agencies that they thought could provide information to support their stands. Parents, who stopped farm work to attend Friday literary society meetings already established by the two young teachers at the two-room school, took up the argument. The favorite topic at the post office in McCracken’s Store was the future of Texas—as one state or two.

On the afternoon of the debate, the schoolhouse was crowded. Carl raised the partition between the two rooms—an operation not
unlike raising a window, except that the wooden dividing wall was so heavy, several of his husky students had to assist the teacher. Three parents acted as judges, and after arguments and rebuttals were concluded, they huddled for several minutes. Their decision: Texas should be divided into two states. Carl remembered that those debaters on the affirmative side “knew their stuff.” He later described what he saw as valuable about the debates, which he often sponsored wherever he taught:

The constituents of most rural schools loved the debates. They were often heard, after a debate, discussing the pros and cons of the affirmative or negative side of the issue at the general store or in the post office. As teachers, we felt there was great profit in the students’ participation in debates. For one thing, it was a great panacea for stage fright. It also broadened their insights into the research needed to present intelligently their side of the question.

As Mr. Carl’s debate idea proved, providing resources for learning in rural schools between the two World Wars required ingenuity, know-how, and considerable knowledge of the art of make-do but most importantly, teachers with a passion for knowledge. My parents’ stories, while not explicitly folklore in the narrow sense of that term, reflect what the respected folklorist Mody Boatright perceived as “customs of a group with a common body of tradition.” In an introduction to *Mody Boa-tright, Folklorist* (1973), Ernest B. Speck calls Boatright “a historian of the folk” and adds that he saw folklore as “a basic expression of human belief, feeling, and practice.” The folk history unique to rural school teaching no longer exists, except in the memoirs and oral history of storytellers who knew at the end of their careers that a unique era had closed in Texas history. Both on tape and in writing, my parents left a worthy heritage—a record of a now-lost culture.

Growing up in a tough West Texas railroad town, my father, Carl Halsell, learned early how to make sure his resources for
acquiring knowledge were assured. Once he had learned to decipher what at first looked like “chicken tracks across a freshly scrubbed porch,” he read every book his hands fell upon. When his family arrived in Hawley, a raw West Texas frontier town in 1907, Carl and his sisters attended school crowded into the Methodist Church sanctuary. Soon, however, citizens, who exhibited considerable foresight, built a four-teacher school in the second year of their town’s history. The new superintendent had a college degree, a rarity in those days of teacher certification by testing. Sharing his love of good literature with his rough-edged pupils, he insisted that a separate room in the new building be designated the library. With the help of study clubs in nearby Abilene and generous trustees, he provided one of the best libraries my father would ever enjoy, even later as a teacher in Texas’ rural schools.

My father read and reread the works of favorite American poets, particularly Holmes, Longfellow, Whittier, Whitman, and Bryant. His imagination fueled by Edgar Allan Poe’s poems and short stories, he decided as a creative adolescent that the tall blond man who came in from the country every week to mail a thick brown envelope at the local post office must be a writer. He never learned if his surmise was true, but years later, he remembered every detail of this mystery man’s weekly appearances in town. Carl’s curiosity teamed with vivid imagination fueled his desire to know more. When Carl reached high school, he began to sample
Lamb and Carlyle, and decided that Kipling was his favorite English author.

Gaining access to the books as he needed them—and finding time to read—required scheming. My father had several older sisters who considered him the chief errand runner in the family. Small for his age, young Carl discovered that he could squeeze behind the upright piano sitting “catty-cornered” in the living room near a window. He read there undisturbed long afternoons in the summer, ignoring his sisters’ demands. When he reached high school, he took the job as school janitor, a duty requiring daily monotonous sweeping of the entire school house. It was worth it. The bonus kept my father on the job. He could take a book out of the library overnight, read it, and have it back on the shelf before a teacher missed it the next morning. Other students could check out books only over the weekend. His book source for the summer was guaranteed because Carl had the foresight to leave a library window unlocked. In summer dusk, he would stealthily crawl in and make his next selection.

My mother Mabel’s love for reading found an early outlet in the serial stories that ran in the *Semi-Weekly Farm News* that arrived regularly in her home. The Art Literature Series, reading textbooks in which literary selections were illustrated with reproductions of famous paintings, fueled her budding appreciation of both art and good writing. In high school, her love for math and literature blossomed under enthusiastic teachers including Lexie Dean Robertson, the English teacher who would later become poet laureate of Texas.
The two young teachers, 23-year-old Carl and 18-year-old Mabel met in 1922, when they arrived at Romney in Eastland County to take positions in a two-teacher school. Right away, both Mr. Carl and Miss Mabel decided that the more involved the pupils and their parents were with the school, the more likely learning might take place in classrooms with no library except Carl’s World Book reference works and the knowledge they had acquired along the way to earning teaching certificates. In 1923, they merged their lives as well as their enthusiasm as teachers when they married on December 1. For the remainder of their long careers, they demonstrated (as they had with their organization of a Literary Society where students could debate, recite poetry, sing, and participate in community plays) that if any learning took place, it would depend on the teachers to provide the resources for learning in those barren rural classrooms.

By 1936, the year Texas celebrated its Centennial, my father was teaching for a second time near the Brazos River in Palo Pinto County at a school called Lucille, a place where he said, “There was one road in and no roads out.” When the two teachers told their charges that this year they would be celebrating the hundredth birthday of the “greatest state in the union,” their students in the two-room school enthusiastically began planning how they could observe the occasion. My father asked the students to appoint a committee to work with the teachers. Two boys and two
girls elected by their classes sat down with their instructors and worked out their plans.

The boys decided they wanted to make replicas of a Conestoga wagon, the Alamo, and a pioneer log cabin. My father knew a thing or two about the famed covered wagon that had brought pioneers to the area. His own family had traveled east out of drought-stricken West Texas in 1917 in a covered wagon, seeking a place to graze their cows and find shelter in Callahan County. He asked the would-be model makers, “Do you know what a doojin pin, rocking bolster, stay chain, neck yoke, tailgate, chuck box, coupling pole, ox bows, doubletree, and wagon sheet are?” Few had more than a hazy idea of how the wagon should look. Then, one boy volunteered that he knew of an old Conestoga wagon that had been abandoned on a nearby ranch. The teacher organized a field trip.

The would-be model makers soon learned that the doojin pin (probably properly spelled dudgeon pin) served two purposes: to attach the doubletree to the wagon and to function as a wrench when the wheels needed greasing. The wagon miniature would need a rocking bolster, or wheel-like mechanism, to turn the front wheels without torquing the wagon bed. The coupling pole held the wheel frame together and furnished the mechanism on which to attach the brakes. From the practical information the students gained on their field trip and under the tutelage of their knowledgeable teacher, they were able to build the wagon model authentically. Even the wheels were individually assembled from hub to outer rim, as the early blacksmith had fashioned wagon wheels originally.

The Alamo model was built to replicate pictures in their Texas history books. Most of the boys roamed around crumbling log cabins, many with dogtrot porches, still located on surrounding ranches and farms. Within a few weeks all three models were complete. Lucille school was almost ready to sponsor a community celebration.

Working from textbooks, the reference books my father furnished, and the well-known Pennybacker *History of Texas* from their teacher’s personal library, each student wrote an essay about his favorite Texas hero. David Crockett, Stephen F. Austin, and Jim
Bowie proved popular subjects. The teachers chose the best of the essays. Each winning author memorized his essay to be presented as part of the program the school patrons had been invited to attend. On March 2, Texas Independence Day, maps, pictures, and the models were ready to exhibit. In addition to the essay readings, the program that evening included the pupils’ performances of Texas songs, early Texas poetry, excerpts from speeches of early-day leaders, and several one-act plays depicting events in Texas history. My father summarized the celebration this way: “When all of this was finished, the students of the two-teacher school out on the owlhoot were not only proud of their accomplishments, but they were proud that they were citizens of the Lone Star State.”

If rural teachers loved books as my parents did, they could usually persuade trustees to turn loose of enough money to buy a few storybooks and reference works. But my parents remember very few schools with more than a two-foot shelf of books. My mother’s resourcefulness was tested to its limit when she became teacher at Cedar Bluff, often referred to as Last Chance, a one-room school in Callahan County. She taught there four years at the ragged end of the Great Depression, which tailed out into World War II before she finished her tenure there. With an average of eighteen students ranging in age from six to seventeen in grades one through seven, my mother conducted at least thirty classes a day. Although newly painted, the schoolroom offered few learning resources except a tin-lined sandbox on legs, then called a sand table, where pupils could lay out miniature gardens during free time. Alphabet charts and illustrations of the Palmer method of handwriting decorated the top of the blackboard across the side and back of the room. An old tin cookie display case on which an occasional book had rested completed existing resources. No books of any kind were shelved there, however, when my mother arrived.

Moving her piano into the schoolhouse came first. Then, my mother ordered a hectograph, a flat rectangular pan just larger than a sheet of legal-size paper, filled with gelatin. Drawings and class materials could be superimposed from a master prepared with
a special pencil. Thirty or forty copies could be made before the ink disappeared into the gelatin. Sponging the surface repeatedly with cold water prepared the copier for the next job.

Willing students painted the make-do cookie display case a bright blue, converting its slanted shelves into a bookcase, which became the school library after my mother made a trip to Baird, the county seat, where the county superintendent kept a special collection of books for use in the county’s rural schools. There in a dusty closet, she could choose about twenty books, mostly novels and biographies, to keep for a month. Students read them during free time or checked the books out overnight. Parents also occasionally took advantage of the check-out service.

Often on Fridays, near holidays, my mother planned a picnic as part of the celebration. Her pupils, who brought their lunch to school anyway, usually added a treat or two to share with friends. Before noon, all of the students set out with their teacher across the ranch bordering the school grounds to picnic in Devil’s Hollow, a cool natural bowl formed in a nearby creek by years of erosion. After eating, many added their initials to those carved over the years on the sandstone walls. On their return to school, my mother slowed her rambunctious students in a holiday mood down to a walk by pointing out the fact that they could make their trip back a nature hike. She encouraged them to collect interesting rocks and plants along the way. Once back in the classroom, her students arranged their finds into a garden in the sand table.

No project those four years, however, generated more enthusiasm for learning than the exchange program with other schools across the nation. My mother initiated this program with a letter to the Instructor Magazine. She had always subscribed to this publication, even during the tight money days of the Great Depression. Lesson plans, seasonal patterns and pictures, and articles on teaching methods augmented the teacher’s creative energies. Together, her pupils composed a letter requesting samples of products, information about local life and letters from students in other rural schools across the country. Their letter appeared in the
School Exchange column, a regular feature of the magazine, after a month or two of eager waiting. Within two weeks, the mailbox at the end of the lane began to furnish exciting surprises each day.

Samples of wheat arrived from rural schools in Kansas and Nebraska. Children in Minnesota and Wisconsin sent cheese samples. Booklets the children prepared to inform their correspondents included maps, product samples, state flowers, trees, birds, songs, and mottos. Soon several pupils were exchanging letters with pen pals across the nation. For many years, one of my mother’s students, who became a school teacher herself, reported regularly on the activities of her New York pen pal.

For their contribution to the project, Cedar Bluff students, with encouragement from their teacher, made booklets in the shape of Texas. Explanation of state symbols accompanied their drawings of the pecan tree, the bluebonnet, and the mockingbird. Illustrated maps described the terrain and located regional products of Texas. For seventeen boys and girls growing up in an isolated community where newspapers were nonexistent, this exchange brought knowledge, new ideas, and the excitement children feel from anticipating daily the arrival of another package of surprises.

These experiences exemplify the ingenuity that my parents, as well as all Texas country teachers, needed to furnish even minimum resources for learning to their rural charges. In those years between World Wars, rural school teachers fought to give their students opportunities for learning and to encourage unity of community spirit. By 1950, most Texas rural schools would be consolidated into nearby small-town schools. Schoolhouses would become community centers exclusively. My parents’ former students, now gray-haired retirees, often express their regard for the positive influence the rural school and their teaching had on their lives. Many completed college educations. If they learned little else under Mr. Carl’s and Miss Mabel’s guidance, they learned how to find out about the world for themselves.

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