

An Interview with
Jeanne Oldweiler

at the Daniel Boone Regional Library in
Columbia, Missouri

19 September 2008

interviewed by Jeff D. Corrigan



Oral History Program
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One-room Schoolhouse Project

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PREFACE

Jeanne Oldweiler was born in 1937, in Stratton, Nebraska. She attended first through eighth grade in a one-room schoolhouse in District 60 in Freedom Precinct, which was about twelve miles southeast of Stratton. Her father had attended the same one-room school, although the original building he had attended burned down and was rebuilt in the 1940s. Oldweiler describes the physical school building and discusses teachers, recess, lunchtime, and how this particular school was financed through a quarter section of good Nebraska wheat land owned by the school district.

The interview was taped on a 1GB CompactFlash card, using a Marantz PMD-660 digital recorder and an audio-technica AT825 microphone placed on a tripod. There are periodic background sounds but the recording is of generally high quality.

The following transcript represents a rendering of the oral history interview. Stylistic alterations have been made as part of a general transcription policy. The interviewee offered clarifications and suggestions, which the following transcript reflects. Any use of brackets [] indicates editorial insertions not found on the original audio recordings. Physical gestures, certain vocal inflections such as imitation, and/or pauses are designated by a combination of italics and brackets []. Any use of parentheses () indicates a spoken aside evident from the speaker's intonation, or laughter. Quotation marks [“”] identify speech depicting dialogue, speech patterns, or the initial use of nicknames. Em dashes [—] are used as a stylistic method to show a meaningful pause or an attempt to capture nuances of dialogue or speech patterns. Words are *italicized* when emphasized in speech, when indicating a court case title, or when it's the proper title of a publication. Particularly animated speech is identified with **bold** lettering. The use of underlining and double question marks in parentheses [_____(??)] denotes unintelligible phrases. Although substantial care has been taken to render this transcript as accurately as possible, any remaining errors are the responsibility of the editor, Jeff D. Corrigan.

JC: This is Jeff Corrigan, Oral Historian for the State Historical Society of Missouri.
Today's date is 9-19-2008 and I am with Jeanine Oldwier.

JO: Oldweiler, Jeanne.

JC: Jeanne Oldweiler. Thank you, [and] sorry about that. Jeanne could you tell me when
5 and where you were born?

JO: In Stratton, Nebraska, in 1937.

JC: 1937. Could you describe your home situation? Where did you live? Any siblings
you had? What your parents did?

JO: I was born into an Irish family. We lived in an Irish community. I was one of six
10 children. My mother did not work outside the home. My dad was a cattle
rancher/wheat farmer.

JC: One of six. When and where did you start school?

JO: I started school at District 60 in Freedom Precinct, southeast of Stratton about twelve
miles. It was the same school that my dad had gone to but the building, the physical
15 building, had burned about 1940ish, so I went a newer school. I started when I was
about seven and a half years old. There was no Kindergarten for any of the children.
Most children started at six, but because I was small at birth, I only weighed four
pounds, they determined, both the doctor and the County Superintendent of Schools
that I was not healthy enough by the time I reached the age of six to go to school. So
20 they had to hold me out of school. My parents were determined that they were going
to fatten me up a little and so my Irish dad would come in every afternoon for his
bottle of beer and he would pour four ounces in a little glass for me to drink and I
would drink my beer in the afternoon and eventually, at the age of seven and half I

was able to start school. It was an eight year school so at the end of eighth grade, I left.

JC: Okay. Could you describe the school for me? What did it look like?

JO: It was a white frame building, as I say it was built approximately 1940 so it was much
5 nicer than a lot of rural country schools. It was two rooms. The road ran along the south side, but the east side and the north side all had huge windows all the way around. You entered the room on the west side through the smaller room and this room held coat closets, and storage rooms, and had a place for the water cooler. And each year we brought our own glass and we had to be careful where we set them so
10 that they didn't touch another glass and get germs on 'em. And there was a bar of Lifebuoy soap there for us to clean our hands with. The building—the main room, as I said, had the windows all along the North and East side, the chalkboard [was] across the South wall so we wouldn't be distracted if automobiles went by. The teacher's desk was back on the—what would be the Northeast corner and then the desks of
15 various sizes. They were all single desks. The room was heated by a propane gas heater. We had electricity and we had a telephone, but we did not have indoor bathrooms. We had the little one-room outhouses, whatever they're called. One for the boys and one for the girls.

JC: So there was two? Always one for the boys and one for the girls. Now your school
20 was a little different. Do you think that was entirely because it was built new? Because most of them didn't have electricity, didn't have a lot of the amenities that some people might think that you had there. Did they build it on the same site as the old one?

JO: I believe so. Something I think is interesting as I have read about other one-room schoolhouses is how this one was financed. Now we're in the edge of the good wheat country and [the school was located on] one acre. The school district owned a quarter of a section of good wheat land. So one of the local farmers farmed that, taking
5 shares of course, and the profit [that] was left paid the teacher, the upkeep of the building, and the like so they had a nice little money pot. So they could afford, I think, to have a nicer school.

JC: Okay. Can you describe any of your teachers? What you remember about them or their teaching style or their influence or did you know them all personally? Were
10 they just from the local area or—

JO: The first teacher was a woman by the name of Erma Ford and she was there two years. She was excellent. I really enjoyed her, but also, see I enjoyed the opportunity to go to school since I was held out for a year and a half. This was a big deal for me, to go to school. But she was a very good teacher and very nice. Then, the next two
15 years we had Edna Bergen and she was an Irish woman that had grown up with my dad, and they were—she and my dad were good friends and bitter enemies at the same time as only the Irish people can do. And she had had polio so she was on a crutch and I was always a little afraid of that crutch, that she might reach out and *whack* somebody with it. She was an excellent teacher. Then after that, there were a
20 couple—two different young girls that didn't know how to teach, they could care less. It was really sad. The last two/three years were really poor, poor years. But I had an excellent basis for learning from the first two teachers.

JC: Okay. Could you kinda tell me about what the general location of where the school was located at? Was it on the outskirts of—or was it in the middle of nowhere or was it in—

JO: (laugh).

5 JC: I mean, how close or how far were people coming from to get to that school?

JO: I would say probably the longest distance anybody had was a mile and a half.

JC: Okay.

JO: Probably something like that. But it was about twelve miles southeast of Stratton and it's really out in the boonies out there.

10 JC: How did you get to school each day?

JO: If the weather was nice, we could walk following cow paths through the pasture. If we had to take the road, it was probably three fourths of a mile. But going across the pasture was probably about a fourth of a mile. And often we rode the horse.

15 Especially when my older siblings were gone, I was number five in the family. So when it just my little sister and I going we would often get on our horse, bareback, [with] the two of us on the same horse and we'd ride the horse to the corner of our land catty corner from the schoolyard and we'd slide off the horse, take the bridle off and hang it on the post and slap him on the back and say, "Go on home now Spotty." Then at the end of the day, we would stop and pick up the bridle and walk home. But
20 if the weather was bad, dad would drive us.

JC: Okay. What activities do you remember doing at the school?

JO: Other than just the three "R's," you mean? 'Cause we were really drilled in the three "R's." That was our main thing. We always had music every morning. Oh, and we

always said the Pledge of Allegiance. And I don't know that as a child I really, or any of us really understood the words, but we all knew it was important. We all knew that saluting the flag—most of us in that part of the world were children of first generation or second generation Europeans. There were a lot of Bohemian families and then, of course, the Irish families around us. And our parents had taught us that we were mighty lucky to be Americans. I don't think we really understood the words, but I think we really understood the meaning behind them. And we would have music and sing with gusto. We had no piano or anything, we just sang. The big deal of the year was the Christmas program and it was a *big deal*. I mean we had stage curtains and they partitioned off the boys' room and the girls' room and we sent out invitations and people from other schools came and the cousins came and *oh* we'd put on a show. We were proud. (laughs)

JC: That sounds great. Did you have recess?

JO: Always—always recess. We had morning and afternoon and then lunchtime recess too. After we'd finished our lunch we could go out and play. And when I was young and there were, you know, many older children at school, what I really remember is that it was a requirement that everybody had to play together. There was none of this dividing off two, three over here, or somebody go over there. We played a lot of group games and they'd choose up sides for the teams. Our younger teachers would get out and play with us and were just as competitive as any of us. But, we *ran* hard. We played hard. Never was it ever allowed that an older child could make fun of a younger child. So it really built, I think the self ego of the younger children, that they could get out and play just like the big ones. Sometimes we had baseball games. As I

got older and the population dwindled in that part of the world because people were buyin' up other peoples' farms, and there were not as many in the school, they bought a lot of playground equipment for us because there again, that particular school had money to spend. So they bought a lot of nice playground equipment. But it wasn't as much fun as when there were, you know, all those *fierce* games we played.

JC: Did you have any chores to perform at school?

JO: Not that I can remember. I can't remember of doing any. It was an honor to take the erasers outside. It was like who was the best of that day got to go out and clean the erasers. But the water—because we didn't have running water and I suspect the reason we didn't have running water was because of the fear of pipes freezing. So some father would bring the water every morning and pour it in the big water cooler for us to use. And then before the teacher went home at night, she would drain it and leave it open to air out. But I don't remember any chores. If we were asked to do something, it was an honor and we were tickled to death to do it.

JC: Did—during lunchtime, did people go home or did they eat there? Did the school teacher provide a lunch or did you bring your lunch do you remember?

JO: We always bought our lunch and we always stayed in school. If it was nice, we could go outside and eat. During the war, our lunch pails were syrup cans that mother would—after she used up the syrup she'd wash 'em out, test to make sure the bale was good and strong and we carried our lunch in that. And then after the war, we bought these, you know, pretty, colorful lunch pails, but I don't ever remember that that was a big deal to have a colorful lunch pail. I was always interested in what was on the inside, what I got to eat.

JC: And you attended this school until you graduated, is that correct?

JO: It's an eight grade school.

JC: Eight grades, okay. Let me ask you this question and you can take it in any direction.
What influence do you think attending a one-room school had on your life?

5 JO: I think we were taught respect. I think we were taught respect for each other and
respect for ourselves. We were never allowed to speak out loud without permission.
If we wanted to go to the bathroom, we held up one finger and if the teacher thought
it was okay, she gave us a quiet nod and we could go, but we knew we had to go very
quietly. If we wanted to get a drink of water, we could hold up two fingers and if the
10 teacher wanted us to go, she'd give us a quiet little nod, [and] we could go. But I
think, you know, just like in playing those games, the older children were taught to
take care of—take care of the younger children. The younger children were taught to
respect them. I found it a real challenge when I was young-*er*, that when the older
children would go to the blackboard and work on geography questions or arithmetic
15 I'd pull out my big chief tablet and *boy* I would try to work those problems, and that
was, you know, advancing my education by doing that. I don't think that there was
ever, you know, any discipline problems or anything. But I think respect is what we
were really, really taught.

20 JC: Do you think you learned more by watching those older kids and what they were
doing?

JO: Oh definitely—

JC: —picking up—

JO: *Very* definitely. And when they would give book reports or maybe their reading class would be reading something—*Oh*, I could hardly wait to read that same book myself and it would challenge me to read it and I felt very important when I could read those older students' books—

5 JC: —Do you think—

JO: —It was a real challenge and I think if I would have been in a classroom of children my age, I probably wouldn't have done [it], because frankly, I probably would have been, [well] you know if [the class] was—divided into three ability groups, I probably would have been in the top ability group. So I wouldn't of had that challenge.

10 JC: So do you think you were better prepared to go on after eighth grade because you had a—you kinda were getting a more education or, or knowing that what else was to come because you're right, if you are in one classroom, you're learning the same thing, but if you could get an eye on what was to come—

JO: I think so. Now, I have some hesitation there because as I said previously, the last
15 two teachers we had were really poor. And they didn't encourage us to do anything extra. And I got very lackadaisical; I'll be honest about it. When I graduated from eighth grade, you had to go into the county seat, all the eighth graders in the county and take a passing exam. And I was just—you know at that point after having teachers for the last two years that just “Yeah, you know if you want to you can. If
20 you don't, you don't.” So *I* just really goofed off on that exam. It was not important to me at all and a couple days later my parents got a telephone call from the County Superintendent of Schools—*really* telling them that they needed to take good charge of me, that she had singled me out as a prodigy through the years and now all of a

sudden, she expected me to be a top student and I was middle or below. I mean, it was—so obvious I didn't do too well there at the end, but I did go on to do better once I got in high school.

JC: That's good to hear. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experiences
5 going to a one-room schoolhouse or a story that sticks out or anything else you'd like to add?

JO: No, I always enjoyed going, even when we had those two poor teachers. I still enjoyed every day of going there. I enjoyed the challenges that I had. I enjoyed the fun of recess, but just everything about it was always very enjoyable. It was a very
10 positive feeling. I had a little bit of an inferiority complex when I went to town to Campfire Girls. My mother would pick me up at school and run me into the Campfire Girls meeting after school. And I had a little bit of an inferiority complex to the town girls because they went to town school. But when I got a little older and was able to reflect on that, I thought, you know maybe I shouldn't 'a felt inferior,
15 maybe they should 'a felt a little inferior to me, you know. But I—you know, that's childhood, children do things like that. (laughs)

JC: (laughs) It sounds great. Well I'd like to thank you very much. We'll conclude the interview here now but we really appreciate you coming in today and sharing your story.

20 JO: Glad to do it.