

An Interview with  
**Wilma Roper**

at her home in  
Joplin, Missouri

**21 March 2012**

interviewed by Dr. Virginia Laas



**Oral History Program**  
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One-room Schoolhouse

CD 16



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## PREFACE

Wilma Roper was born in 1914 in Reeds, Missouri. She attended a two-room school house in Reeds before graduating from Carthage High School. When Roper was 19, she received a job as a teacher at a one-room school house. Roper describes her typical teaching routine as well as special events such as the pie suppers held to earn money for new equipment needed at the school. Roper also discusses activities she participated in with the students, including outdoor games and reading to the students under a shaded tree on hot days. Roper married one of the school director's sons, whom she knew before she acquired the job, in November of her first year. The school made a special exception to allow her to finish teaching that year even though she was married, but her career ended when school let out in April of 1934.

The interview was taped on a 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 or when indicating a court case title. Particularly animated speech is identified with **bold** lettering. Underlining [     ] indicates a proper title of a publication. 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, Sean Rost.



Narrator: Wilma Roper  
Interviewer: Virginia Laas  
Date: March 21, 2012  
Transcribed by: Teresa Bergen

5

**[Begin Interview.]**

**[Begin Track 1.]**

10

Laas: Okay. We'll see. Okay. I think we're ready now. So this is Virginia Laas conducting an interview for the State Historical Society of Missouri. And I'm here on March 21, 2012, in the home of Wilma Roper, Joplin, Missouri, to interview her about her experiences in a one-room schoolhouse. So I think we should start by you telling me something about you. When you were born, where you grew up, just a little bit on that.

15

Roper: Okay. I was born September 23, 1914 in Reeds, Missouri. With my family. Let's see, I had a sister ten years older than I. And a brother nine years older than I. And then, after I came, then six years after I came, I had another brother. So my mother and dad really had two families, sort of.

20

Laas: Yeah. Yeah. So you were in the middle. What did your dad do?

Roper: He was postmaster in Reeds?

25

Laas: Where is Reeds?

Roper: Reeds is halfway between Sarcoxie and Carthage as the crow flies.

30

Laas: Okay. Okay. I see. I see.

Roper: A little country town. But it was pretty active when I was growing up. Of course, it doesn't amount to much now because of progress.

35

Laas: Right. Did you go to a one-room schoolhouse?

Roper: No. In Reeds there was a two-room school. The first four grades, of course, were in one room. And the fourth, fifth, sixth and—no, the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth grades were in the other room. So there were two teachers. Miss Esther Spencer was my first teacher. And Bertha Reed taught the four, four upper grades.

40

Laas: Uh huh. Uh huh. So you went there. And then how did you get into this—did you graduate from a high school?

45

Roper: I graduated from Carthage High School. We commuted. In a Model T. (Laas laughs) There were about six of us would ride. And the older boy of the family that owned the car drove. And he had, I think he had three people in the front seat and three people in the back seat. (Laas laughs) And sometimes we had the Isinglass side curtain in bad weather. It was—

50

Laas: Well you were packed in there pretty tight.

Roper: We were packed in there. But we weren't big people.

Laas: That's right.

5 Roper: You know, we were kids.

Laas: Right. Right.

Roper: And we didn't have the rules and regulations about kids riding like we do now.

10

Laas: Absolutely. That's true. So then you and Gil, did you teach before you married?

Roper: Yes.

15

Laas: How did you happen to do that? How did you get into that?

Roper: Well it was kind of my sister, who was ten years older, was a teacher. That was about the only thing a woman could do in those days.

20

Laas: Yeah. Right.

Roper: And after, when I graduated from high school, I applied for schools several, all around in the area. Anyway, the first year I didn't get a school. So I just stayed home. I could help some in the post office. Not much, but I could stay for an hour or two and give Dad a relief. But otherwise, I was just home for a year.

25

Laas: At eighteen.

Roper: And we did lots of sewing. We were busy.

30

Laas: So you, then the next year you kept applying?

Roper: The next year, yes, I applied to several schools. And I finally got one. The name of the district was Erie, E-r-i-e. There were three directors, school directors, that hired the teacher. Do you want their names?

35

Laas: Do you have their names? Sure I do!

Roper: Sure. Well, Tom Roper was one.

40

Laas: Oh!

Roper: Who turned out to be my father-in-law. Edwards. Let's see, what was his first name. I don't know. Mr. Edwards, I guess. And Bob Hoofnagle.

45

Laas: Now did you know Gil at this time?

Roper: Yes.

50

Laas: Oh, you did. (laughs)

Roper: Yes, I did. And his father liked me.

Laas: Oh, good. I'm glad. (laughter) I can't imagine why. (laughs)

5 Roper: Anyway, I suppose that's probably the reason I got the school was because he was, he stood up for me. I understand there was another girl that offered—they hired me to teach for \$45 a month. And I understand that there was another girl that offered to take the school for \$35 a month to teach. Now that's how hard it was to get a job.

10 Laas: Yeah. What year was this? Would have been—

Roper: 1933. '33, I believe. I graduated from high school in '32. And didn't get a school that year.

Laas: '33.

15

Roper: '33, '34, probably.

Laas: Forty-five dollars. But they took you instead of her.

20 Roper: Yes.

Laas: Thank you, Tom Roper.

Roper: Right. (laughter) He was a wonderful man. He only had a third grade formal education.

25

Laas: Really.

Roper: But he was the wisest man I think I ever knew.

30 Laas: Uh huh. Uh huh. Gil was a lot like him?

Roper: No.

Laas: No? (laughter)

35

Roper: No. Gil was his own man.

Laas: So how many students did you have?

40 Roper: I was trying to think of that this morning and I can't remember for sure. Fifteen or sixteen. I had three in the first grade. And three in the second or third grade, I don't know which it was. And then I had two, I think, in the fifth grade. And then I had six who graduated.

Laas: In the sixth—

45

Roper: No. Who graduated from the eighth grade.

Laas: From the eighth grade.

50 Roper: Mm hmm.

Laas: Wow.

Roper: I didn't have all the grades.

5 Laas: Yeah. But you covered pretty much everything from first through eighth.

Roper: Sure.

Laas: Yes.

10

Roper: Sure. (laughs) We had a course of study which was a book about this thick.

Laas: About three inches thick? Two inches thick?

15

Roper: Two inches thick. Uh huh.

Laas: Two inches thick.

20

Roper: A paper-bound. And Mr. Culley was the county superintendent. So he's the one we—

Laas: Answered to?

Roper: Answered to, I guess you would say. And not really. He was not, he was just there. So—

25

Laas: So you were maybe nineteen years, well I can figure that out. Nineteen. Nineteen.

Roper: Yeah. I was nineteen.

30

Laas: And where was this school? Was it outside of town? Or was it in the country?

Roper: Oh, yes. It was a country school. Mm hmm. These kids were all, they had to get up and milk cows and feed the hogs and all that before they came to school.

35

Laas: How did they get to school, then?

Roper: They walked.

Laas: And how did you get to school?

40

Roper: I walked most of the time. If it was bad weather, the Ropers would take me some, Gilbert or, well, someone.

Laas: Someone.

45

**[End Track 1. Begin Track 2.]**

Roper: But not often. And they lived a mile and a quarter from the school. So I walked that morning and night.

50

Laas: Then were you staying at the Ropers' now?

Roper: We were living with the Ropers. Mm hmm.

Laas: Okay. And you had gotten married in the meantime, or—

5 Roper: Yes. We got married in November.

Laas: After you started.

Roper: After I started teaching.

10 Laas: And they allowed a married woman to continue teaching.

Roper: They really didn't—(laughs)

15 Laas: Didn't know?

Roper: Mr. Hoofnagle did not think, probably, that I should. But he didn't, he was quiet. But he was a little bit—

20 Laas: Thank you, Tom Roper, again, huh?

Roper: I guess. (laughter)

Laas: What was the school like? I mean, physically, what did it look like?

25 Roper: There were many—

Laas: The school you were in.

30 Roper: —many grade schools that had the same, what do I want to say? Floor plan. It was just a straight building.

Laas: One room.

35 Roper: One room. It was about twice as long as it was wide. The teacher's desk was at one end. And there were probably four rows of desks down—

Laas: Mm hmm. So the little ones sat in front?

40 Roper: The little ones sat on one side.

Laas: Okay.

Roper: And then as the grades grew, the kids grew. And of course the boys wanted to move to the

45 back, which they did.

Laas: Of course. (laughter) And you know, I didn't count up when you were naming how many kids you had in each grade.

50 Roper: Well, I would say, let's see, six, eight—

Laas: Oh, I can go back and listen and figure that out.

Roper: I thought fifteen or sixteen. But maybe it may not add up to that. Anyway.

5 Laas: What about bathroom facilities?

Roper: Oh!

Laas: Oh!

10

Roper: I thought you might ask about that. Well, it was a toilet. We called it a toilet. And it was at the very farthest corner of the schoolyard.

Laas: Okay.

15

Roper: Just as far away as it could be. It was built like this, sort of, a rectangle, I think. The boys on one side and the girls on the other. But there was a protection wall, so that the, you know, you couldn't see.

20 Laas: Right. Right. So that was a cold walk in the wintertime.

Roper: Well—better than when you lived at home, it was a cold walk.

Laas: Well, that's true. (laughter)

25

Roper: Because we didn't have indoor plumbing at my home, either, until after I left. And then Mother and Dad finally, finally got it fixed.

Laas: Can you kind of describe what a typical day would be like in that school?

30

Roper: Well, we would ring the bell at nine o'clock. We, the children would come in and stand and pledge allegiance. I don't know whether we had any other opening exercise or not. I think that was it. Then we would begin with the small ones, the little ones, teaching them. (coughing) Like hat, cat, bat, sat. (coughs) [pause] All right. What was I saying? Oh. The little. Then I would give the little girls, we had a Big Chief tablet. You know what—

35

Laas: Yes, I do.

Roper: And their little pencil. Well, just a regular pencil. And I would give them some letters or something to work on. Then I would go to the next, third grade. And we'd do whatever we were doing in there. And I don't remember what we were doing in there. And then we had the fifth grade. And those kids were beginning to catch on and do some things. And then I had my six, five kids, in the eighth. And we would have, we'd probably have arithmetic. Not math. Arithmetic.

40

45 Laas: Yes. (laughs)

Roper: For the first. And then I would go back to, you know, after I'd go through that, then I'd go back to the little ones. And go through with whatever the subject was, whether it was reading—oftentimes, when we had reading, they would line up and take their readers. And we'd read, you know, we'd read probably a sentence. And if they made a mistake, then the person there got to go in front of them. And if they got to—so we had some people that learned to read real well.

50

Laas: Mm hmm. A little competition.

Roper: Uh huh. And it was fun.

5

Laas: How did you keep discipline in that? Weren't those—

Roper: Kids were better then than they are now. [phone interruption] We would go through that with different subjects. It would be reading. It might be history. It might be geography. Usually geography was the last thing before four o'clock.

10

Laas: Were you just exhausted at the end of the day?

Roper: No.

15

Laas: No. (laughs)

Roper: It was routine. And I had lived in that kind of atmosphere. I had grown up that way. Of course, it wasn't eight grades all at one time. But it was the same program. And as I said, we had a course of study of the things we were supposed to cover in each grade.

20

Laas: And your children didn't give you any problems of discipline. They just did their work, pretty much?

25

Roper: Pretty much. Pretty much. They knew they, yeah. They knew that was what they were supposed to do.

Laas: Yeah. Did you have Christmas parties or special activities that they did?

30

Roper: Yes. We had a pie supper.

Laas: A pie supper.

Roper: Do you know what a pie supper is?

35

Laas: Well, I'm not sure. But you know, that's exactly one of the things that's mentioned on my list here. Tell me about pie suppers.

Roper: Well all the women that cared to, and everybody did, I think. I don't think anybody refused to—would decorate a box that would hold a pie. And then they would bring them to the school. And we had an auctioneer. And he would sell these pies. And sometimes the men would get to—

40

Laas: Bidding against each other?

45

Roper: Bidding against each other. Yes. And would run them to way up.

Laas: Did they know who baked the pie?

Roper: Sometimes. Not always. That was part of the, that was part of the program was not to know. But sometimes, you know, if there was a couple that they wanted to be sure, they'd know.

50

Laas: Right. Right. Now did they look at the pie or just the box?

Roper: Just at the box. They had no idea what kind of pie was in there. (laughs) But they were always good. Because they were all good cooks.

5

Laas: Right. Right.

Roper: Yeah. They were used to that—

10 Laas: And then what was that money used for?

Roper: I was afraid you might ask me that.

**[End Track 2. Begin Track 3.]**

15

Roper: For playground equipment or something needed, that was needed like that.

Laas: Right.

20 Roper: Maybe, or maybe a new flag. Or maybe a map that you would, or a book of maps that you would hang and could, could, you know, flip the page and study.

Laas: Right. What kind of playground equipment did you have?

25 Roper: Black man.

Laas: What?

30 Roper: You don't know black man. Black man was a game with a base across one end of the yard and another base on the other end of the yard. And I've forgotten how we got started. But there was some kind of signal. And there would be kids on each line. There was some sort of signal and they would run. And there was one person out here in the middle. And he had to catch somebody.

Laas: As they ran past.

35

Roper: As they ran past. And then they would be the one that would stay there. And he could go and run.

Laas: Mm hmm. So did you have any swings or anything?

40

Roper: No.

Laas: Okay, so—

45 Roper: No, I don't believe we had, they came, there were some, but I don't believe we had any in our school at all.

Laas: Baseball bats?

50 Roper: No!

Laas: No?

Roper: Oh, goodness, no. (laughs) They might find a two by four someplace. There were, we didn't play baseball.

5

Laas: Yeah. Any kind of games with balls?

Roper: Not that I, nope, I don't think so. No.

10

Laas: And then you were out there with them at recess.

Roper: Oh, yes. Mm hmm.

Laas: Supervising.

15

Roper: Mm hmm.

Laas: I'm sure they didn't have any arguments or anything.

20

Roper: Not bad ones.

Laas: Not bad ones.

Roper: No, not serious. Uh uh.

25

Laas: Nobody got in fights or anything?

Roper: Maybe. One or two that was a little scrappy. But not serious.

30

Laas: Now were you responsible for keeping the schoolhouse clean?

Roper: Yes. It was, it didn't amount to much. You just had a broom and a dustpan.

Laas: Did you have a blackboard in there?

35

Roper: Yes, we had a blackboard.

Laas: Did kids, was that a chore that the kids did?

40

Roper: No.

Laas: No?

Roper: No. Well, maybe. Maybe some of the time.

45

Laas: But the kids didn't have regular chores in the school?

Roper: No, I don't think so.

50

Laas: So you cleaned and washed? (laughs)

Roper: Oh, it wasn't as clean as we live now. (laughs)

Laas: Well, that's true, isn't it? Yeah. What about heating this place in the wintertime?

5 Roper: Well, we had a potbellied stove. And we had the directors hauled in or provided coal. Bought the coal and brought it. And one of the boys was, I think I paid him some, to build the fire in the morning, early in the morning. Preferably before the other kids got there.

Laas: This would have been one of your eighth grade boys, maybe?

10

Roper: Yes. Uh huh.

Laas: You paid him to do that?

15

Roper: Yeah. Mm hmm.

Laas: The school district didn't pay him.

Roper: No, it was my job.

20

Laas: I see.

Roper: And I did it some of the time.

25

Laas: Yeah. Yeah. And you took your lunch to school with you?

Roper: Yes. And we had a pump out in the yard. And had a bucket to bring, a bucket and a bench to put the water on. And everybody had their own drinking cup. We had a little, most of them had a little drinking cup that kind of folded in each other.

30

Laas: Mm hmm. I remember those.

Roper: And some of them didn't. They had, just had a plain tin cup. But everybody had his own. Oh, yeah. One of the things that I asked at the beginning was if everybody had brushed their teeth. That was one of the things they were supposed to do before they came to school. Sometimes they didn't.

35

Laas: And if they hadn't, what—

Roper: Well, they just hadn't. (laughs)

40

Laas: But knowing they were going to be asked.

Roper: They just knew they would be embarrassed.

45

Laas: Uh huh. Uh huh. So there was not a minute of the day you were not with those children.

Roper: Oh, no. No. We were there from eight to four, or a little before eight, usually. Four was when we were supposed to quit. And Gilbert came to pick me up. And I kept the kids about ten minutes too long, and he scolded me. He said, "You're supposed to let them go at four o'clock." So I had a lot of learning to do, too.

50

Laas: Now what kind of conveyance did he pick you up in? Or did he just walk?

Roper: His father's—

5 Laas: His father's—

Roper: —car. Chevrolet.

Laas: Did the parents give you a lot of support of the children? Of the students? Or?

10 Roper: I had a couple of mothers that were very—

Laas: Helpful?

15 Roper: Very helpful, mm hmm. But yeah, they didn't, you know, they would just—

Laas: Didn't interfere with what you were doing.

Roper: No. They just liked me. (laughter)

20 Laas: I can't imagine why. (laughs) Did you keep in contact with any of those students?

Roper: One of the, one of the eighth graders called me a few years ago.

25 Laas: Really.

Roper: Uh huh. And wanted to know if I remembered him. Of course I did.

Laas: Of course you did. Yeah. Yeah.

30 Roper: I think he had been drinking when he called me. (Laas laughs) You know, and he may have done this because somebody wanted him to. But anyway, it was nice to hear from him.

Laas: It was nice. Yeah.

35 Roper: It was nice to hear from him. Yes and then the girls, one of them, especially, I knew.

Laas: Well you continued to live in the same area.

40 Roper: Yes. Uh huh. Mm hmm.

Laas: You had a good time doing that that year.

Roper: Yeah. Yes, it was enjoyable.

45 Laas: Was what you did pretty much the same experiences you had had when you were in the one-room schoolhouse? Or did you do things differently from—

Roper: Pretty much the same, I think. On a much smaller scale, because I didn't have as many pupils

50 as there were in the school that I went to.

Laas: Yeah. Well that was a two-room.

Roper: Yeah. Mm hmm.

5 Laas: What are, you know, I'm not sure how this is going, there doesn't seem to be that much time.

Roper: One thing we did for fun that you might like to know, on a very hot afternoon, you know, after they had been out playing at their lunchtime, they'd come in, it would just smell like a schoolhouse. And I read a book, you know, every, to them, whenever. Certain times. And would take, we'd all go out and sit under the big shade tree and read the book sometimes. Some days, when it was 10 beastly hot in the high school, or in the grade school. Because all we could do was open the window.

Laas: How many months did school, when did school start and stop?

15 Roper: Eight months.

Laas: Eight months. Oh, that was really good for a country school.

Roper: Mm hmm.

20

Laas: It started in September—

**[End Track 3. Begin Track 4.]**

25 Roper: September. Uh huh. September.

Laas: Yeah. That's a nice long school year.

Roper: April, and we were out in April. Would that be eight months?

30

Laas: I think so. Yeah. Yeah. You've got any good stories that you remember, or incidents from that? Or anything particular that happened that you'd like to—

Roper: Not necessarily. I had one little girl, this is not really a fun story. You may want to erase this. 35 But she had boils, or carbuncles. And she would come to school and they'd be the awfulest mess. And I'd try to clean her up.

Laas: Oh, boy.

40 Roper: And she would feel so, she just thought that was great for me to do that.

Laas: Yeah. Did most of those children then go on to Carthage to high school? Or?

Roper: I don't know whether I can say most of them.

45

Laas: But some of them did.

Roper: But some of them did.

50 Laas: And they would have gone to Carthage.

Roper: If they went to high school. Or Sarcoxie.

Laas: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

5 Roper: Gilbert went to Sarcoxie. So see, as I said a while ago, we were halfway between. So—  
whichever was more convenient.

Laas: Let's see. I think maybe, I think maybe those are all the questions I have. Thank you very  
much for talking about this. I really appreciate it. I'm going to—

10

Roper: Kids took care of each other. The older ones took care of the little ones, you know—

Laas: Do you think—

15

Roper: —and the little ones learned by, because they were there when those other kids were talking  
about what they were learning.

Laas: Right. So do you think in some ways that was an even better way to educate children? The  
little ones learned from the big ones, the big ones took responsibility?

20

Roper: Well, that's the way we grew up.

Laas: Yeah. Yeah.

25

Roper: Those were the good old days. (laughs)

Laas: The good old, the middle of the Depression were the good old days. (laughs)

30

Roper: You know, that's true. People talk about the Depression. We didn't have such an awful time  
during the Depression. You know? We made our dresses out of flour, or feed sacks, some of them.  
Not all of them. But—

Laas: And was Gilbert farming then?

35

Roper: Yes. Mm hmm.

Laas: So you never went without food.

40

Roper: No! No.

Laas: And you were young and first married.

45

Roper: Yeah. But even when I was at home, Mother and Dad had a garden. They had a lot of food.  
And Mother preserved the food.

Laas: So why did you just teach one year?

Roper: I got married.

50

Laas: Oh, that's right. So then they wouldn't have you stay that second year. You started unmarried,  
so Tom Roper helped you keep the job for the year.

Roper: Right. (laughs)

Laas: Okay. But then that was—

5

Roper: And then we started farming.

Laas: Yeah. Yeah. And they weren't going to have a married teacher start the year like that. Yeah.  
Okay. Well, interesting. Thank you very much, Wilma. I—

10

**[End Track 4. End Interview.]**