School Days by Ben Gross

* Editor’s Note: Ben submitted this article 3/1/18 and I failed to include it in the 2018 newsletter. Sincere apologies to all!

In my old age now (age 87) I will try to recall my school days starting with school in our one room rural school house in the southwest corner of Logan County. In fact our farm, which used to be John M. Gross farm and is now the Isadore Gross Farm, is only about three miles from the Emmons County line to the southwest and the McIntosh County line to the southeast. The school (School #4) which I and all my brothers and sisters attended was just one mile to the southwest of our farm.

By the way, with permission from my brother (Brother Placid) I am taking some information and some pictures from his book which he wrote in January of 2003. Brother Placid’s book is titled: “Mannheim School #4 HISTORY and MEMORIES of one COUNTRY SCHOOL”

My parents, John M. & Magdalena Gross, had sixteen children. Three died as infants and of the thirteen that grew up, I was number six from the top. Our rural school was Mannheim School #4 in Schell Butte Township. While the school was called Mannheim #4, it was located in Mannheim School District #3. There were actually four rural country schools in Mannheim School District #3. Our school, #4, was in the very southwest corner of Logan County.

I started first grade in the fall of 1936 after my sixth birthday.

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which was on the first of September. We had all 8 grades in a one-room school house, which was 20 feet by 24 feet on the inside with an entry cloak room. That was made into two rooms each 6x7 feet: one for girls and one for boys. In the cloakroom is where we kept our coats, over-shoes, lunch buckets or lunch pails and the drinking water we carried to school.

Most of us carried our lunch in empty syrup cans. The syrup cans were usually the gallon size. Some students had half-gallon size. These cans were from the Dust Bowl period of the 1930s when there was very little or no rain for several years. This meant there were no crops and not even enough to feed the cattle and other farm animals, so all the farm families in our area were on what was called “RELIEF”. Syrup and peanut butter were some of the relief foods (commodities) that came in cans. Most of the time our noon lunch was plain bread with syrup on the bread that we carried to school in these cans. The syrup was often soaked through the bread. Sometimes when we had enough peanut butter, my mother would mix syrup and peanut butter which actually tasted pretty good and was better on the bread than just plain syrup.

My very first teacher in the first grade was John Kambeitz and second grade teacher was Joe Welder. I want to add here that the average number of students in one room (all 8 grades) during my eight years was between 15 and 30 students. All the families spoke German at home; therefore, I and all the other students could not speak English when we entered school in the first grade.

It so happens that my first two teachers also were brought up speaking German, and I don’t ever remember them emphasizing the importance of learning English. I do remember learning basic arithmetic, memorizing the ABCs, some poems and some simple words. The third grade teacher was August Klemin and I don’t remember learning anything that year and part of the next when we had Rachel Hanson for a few weeks in the beginning of my fourth grade.

Then in November of 1939, after Rachel Hanson left, we got a very dynamic teacher, the best teacher I ever had. Her name was Miss Azell Anderson and she required us to speak English. This requirement applied not only in the schoolhouse, but also out on the playground. She came out and played with us, and boy if I, or anyone, said something in German, she would grab whoever it was by the shoulder, helped us say it in English, and she made us repeat it. She even played with us outdoors and when we made holes in the snowbanks and crawled under the snow she was right with us.

From her I also learned to read for the first time more than just simple words like, cat, dog, cow and such that I had memorized. Miss Anderson used the phonics method and she drilled us and drilled us, and so, like I said, it was from her that I first learned how to pronounce words. To this day, 70 years later, I still use the phonics method she taught me.

I am still thankful that Miss Azell Anderson was my teacher. Until she came I spelled my name “Bendict” (with just one “e”) but Miss Anderson spelled it “Benedict.” To make sure, however, she
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helped my parents write to the appropriate State Department in Bismarck to request a birth certificate. Sure enough, when the certificate arrived, my name was spelled “Benedict.” Even my parents were surprised to see that second “e” in my name. After that she had me practice to both spell and pronounce my name correctly. But in German my parents and relatives kept pronouncing my name “Bendik.”

For the next two years, my sixth and seventh grade, we had Mrs. Adam Kroeber, and then for my last (eighth grade) we had Agnes Bowen. The length of our school year averaged only about seven and one half months. Usually from somewhere in the middle of September to the end of April. That varied from year to year, depending if there was a teacher available in the fall when it was time to start school. Also, there were times when I and others had to stay home to help with farm work. For example, in the fall when threshing was not completed yet, we had to stay home and watch the cattle. Since the wheat was cut and put on stacks, the cows were allowed to go into the fields, but not to the wheat stacks until the threshers came. Then again, if spring field work started before school was out, we stayed home to help. Then there were other special days like when we butchered pigs or there was some other specific need for one or more of us to stay home to help. So it was not unusual for us, during the sixth & seventh grades, to miss 30 or more days during one school year.

However, once we were in the eighth grade, folks tried to have us not miss any school days because we had to pass the State required exams at the end of the 8th grade. Here a little side story:

Every fall it was necessary for somebody to clean the school to get it ready for opening day. That included cleaning the windows, washing the chalkboard (blackboard), scrubbing the floor and walls and other essential cleaning details. Well, one fall (about 1937) Elizabeth Wald (daughter of Conrad and Margaret Wald who was about age 18) got the bid (job) for cleaning the school. Because my father was chairman of the school board or perhaps because we (Gross family) lived close to the school, Elizabeth came to our house to get water and necessary cleaning supplies to clean the school. She had Adam and Francis (her younger brothers) with her. Adam was the same age as my brother Andy and Francis was my (Ben’s) age.

Francis and I were about age seven. Andy & Adam were one and one half years older. Mother gave permission for Andy and me (Ben) to go along to help carry the water, soap and other cleaning supplies to the school.

John J. Gross climbs the flag pole and several students do headstands in April of 1940. Teacher Azell Anderson is behind students on right side. She is both supervising and encouraging the whole affair. She was not only the very best and most effective teacher, but she was also a lot of fun. Also see part of the school house, the girls’ toilet, and part of the coal shed. Boys’ toilet is to the right of the shed (not pictured).
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(Note: Elizabeth and her brothers walked from their home, which was about two miles southwest of the school to our farm, which was one mile northeast of the school – so by the time we got to school, Elizabeth & her brothers had walked four miles).

While Elizabeth was cleaning us four boys played hide and seek. During one round Andy hid inside the coal stove. Elizabeth even helped to hide him by closing the door after he crawled inside. (The door could not be opened from the inside.) Well the seek guy couldn’t find him. Finally all three of us were looking for Andy, and none of us could find him. In the meantime Elizabeth kept cleaning and pretending not to pay any attention to us boys. Finally Andy started pounding inside the stove. So Elizabeth opened the stove door. To all our surprise Andy was solid black from soot (coal filth). (There was not that much room inside the stove and Andy apparently turned around a few times while he was waiting to be found). I think Elizabeth got worried and helped to clean his face and hands, but his shirt and pants were black from soot.

Then we became afraid of our parents if they found out that Andy hid in the furnace. Elizabeth suggested that Andy turn his shirt inside out so our parents wouldn’t notice it when we got home. His pants were already dark so it was not as noticeable on the pants. We were very lucky that dad wasn’t home when we got home. Ma of course noticed it right away. When Andy took his shirt off, all his skin was full of soot. Of course now days that would not be a problem because he could go into the shower. With no running water, it was a different problem. This was in the fall and the water in the creek was already too cold. Also the soot did not wash off with just plain cold water. Ma had to heat water and do some extensive cleaning on him.

I might add that we also had a school barn that had room or stalls for ten horses. Sometimes, especially in the cold of the winter, we drove to school with horse and sled, but most often we walked. Sometimes too if my older brothers or my dad needed the horses during the day, we would drive to school and then tell the horses to go and they would go home by themselves and stop by the barn. It was also not uncommon for my dad, at 4:00 p.m. when it was time for school to let out, to hitch the horses on the sled and put them on the road and tell them to go and they would, on their own, come to the school and stop in front of the school until we all climbed on and drove home. Sometimes, like other stu-

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students, we kept the horses in the school barn during the day.

Besides the school and the barn, there was one other small building. That building had the girl’s toilet (outdoor) on one end and the boy’s toilet on the other end. Between the two toilets was the coal shed. Usually we boys carried the coal in for the teacher, but it was her or his job to get the fire started each morning to get the school warm. On some very cold & windy days, the school didn’t warm up until about 11:00 a.m.. Because it was so cold, we were allowed to keep our coats on and stand close to the stove until it warmed up some.

In a very recent discussion with my brother Isadore, he told me that in all the area that used to be Mannheim School District # 3, in which there were four rural schools, there are now (March 2018) only three elementary students. Just one of those three is from the area that covered our school area (school # 4). Back in my days each of those four schools had an average of between fifteen and thirty students per year.

At our school every morning, we raised the flag and together said the Pledge of Allegiance and had about fifteen minutes of singing. We always had two fifteen-minute recesses and between forty five and sixty minutes for noon lunch & play. This is all the space I allowed myself, so my story ends here.

Note: The spring thaw from the winter snow, slush and water we had each year. Sometimes when it froze again we had a nice skating ring. This picture is Ben Gross at age 19, visiting school and showing the students that he can still climb the flag pole. In the background is the school barn and two wagons. The horses that belong to those wagons are in the barn and the students are in school. The school house is to the left of the flag pole and is not visible on this picture.

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School Days Then and Now by Vangie Schell

With the exception of a country school west of Moffit, ND, I believe country schools in our area are a thing of the past.

My brother and I attended country school in Kidder County, located to the north of Logan County. My brother, Bill Hoffer and I grew up in Peace Township of Kidder County. Our school district was Grant School Dist. #2. The population of our school was generally between 10 to 13 students with one teacher for all grades 1st through 8th. One of our teachers was a young lady named Gladys Geist (Now Marquart). She only taught about half a year. Then she a better offer – she and Felix Marquart got married!

Another of our teachers was Bert Spitzer, also from this area. This story has a picture of some students and our teacher Gladys Geist-Marquart. Teachers usually boarded at our parents’ home because we lived very close to our school house.

Potbellied stoves were a must! Ours was located at the back left of the room. The teachers were responsible for getting to school at least a half hour before the children, so as to have a warm room for all.

I would certainly love to tell you that the children in Peace Twp. Were well behaved and “peaceful.” However, that would be a real stretch of the imagination. Maybe we could say that we were “normal kids” – okay?

Transportation to and from school was dependent on distance from school. Some of us walked in the summer and others were transported by car. In winter, Bill and I walked and most of the rest were driven by parents. One student Gertrude Lang, however, rode horseback

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