The Life of Krem School District

BY KATE JOHNSON

There is a school house that sits at the top of a hill. It is small; it is white; it has a chimney, one door and seven windows. It doesn't look like much to some. Some may even not necessarily know what it is, and others may pass by it and think nothing of it.

However, at one time that little school house on the hill saw knowledge being shared, laughter of children and maybe a few lickings of a ruler here and there.

The Krem School District No. 4 was organized in the fall of 1889. It was given its name of "Krem" because of 90 percent of the settlers in township 14 of Mercer County came from Krem, South Russia. The first school teacher the school house had was Mr. Johnes in 1889, and he was paid $25 a month.

The building itself had been built on land owned by the State School Land Department and was built by Fred Bohrer who would later become one of the Krem School District's school board members. The lumber Bohrer used to build the building was brought up the hill by horse and loaded on to the ground.

The school house was standing for 23 years when it was stricken by a late spring and had to be moved to a new location.

The school house was filled with children from the ages of first grade through eighth grade. The school year varied; in early years the school year term was two months and in later times it became to be nine months. Teacher salaries ranged from $40 per month to $335 per month (which is the amount it was when it closed). Since the school ranged in ages the amount of children enrolled constantly changed. At one point the school was teaching only seven children while at other times there were 21 students. The Krem School House held its last class in 1961 which was taught by Shirley Kremsaas.

Two teachers and three students who have taught and learned at the Krem School House stand inside of it as it has been completely restored to its nearly original state. Picture from left to right; Student, Marcelle Knepp; Teacher, Carol (Baisch) Butts; Teacher, Irma Draut; Student, Arlene Reichenberg; and Student, Darlene Miessell.

The school house students and teacher in the late 50's. Pictured left to right: (Back) Larry Wegerle, Ernest Schramm, Betty Draut, Marian Miller, Sharon Benz and Mary Zabel (teacher); (Middle) George Miller, Tommy Miller, Elaine Schumann, Karey Wegerle, Brant Wiedrich, and Kerney Adolff; (Front) Arlie Schumann, Jocelyn Miller, John Draut, Blake Wiedrich, and Candace Adolff.

I wouldn't trade in my experience that I had in this year at the rural school, it was terrific.

Carol (Baisch) Butts, teacher at Krem from 1954-1955

They would fold over. All lessons would be broken down into increments of time having 10 minutes for spelling, 15 minutes for geography, 10 minutes for reading, and so on. Carol said it seemed lessons didn't have a lot of time but worked out fairly well. During her time as a teacher at the school, her father would drive her out to school on Monday mornings to drop her off. He would also help her get the coal burning stove going to heat the building. During the week she would walk to Irma's farm and spend the week there. On Fridays her father would come and pick her up to take her home for the weekend.

During the week Carol said she would enlist the older boys in the school to help stock the stove to keep the school house warm over night so that she wouldn't have to get up the following day. "It was a bitter cold day, and I thought we better fit this up pretty good. So we did," Carol explained. "I wished for a moonlit night when I came in opened the door and I thought 'Oh my, it's so pretty nice here, so warm. When the first and second graders opened their desks their crayons had all melted," said Carol still horrified at the thought of how the school house had become that night. "We could have burnt this down, that scared me, I never did that again," said Carol.

Carol said starting out teaching in a rural school at 16 was overwhelming and nerve wracking. However, having the guidance of a fellow teacher was something she treasured. "Irma was such a good mentor, and it all worked out," she said.

The teachers

According to the students of Krem School District, there was no such thing as a "snow day" when they went to school. "It was freezing cold, but we still went," said Darlene Miessell, who attended Krem School from 1945-1962.

Darlene said her stand out moment attending a rural school was when she cheated on her spelling test. "She got a spanking, and I sat outside the school house and cried," said Arlene Reichenberg, another previous Krem student.

"I cheated myself. Monday morning was spelling grades 1, 2 and 3. I forgot to take my spelling book home so wrote it real soft. [The teacher] walked around and stood beside me. She said 'School dismissed except first grade,' and that cured me," said Darlene.

"Those were the days," said a fellow classmates listening. "She had a three foot ruler that hit went across our behind," Darlene said.

"I could hear her getting a spanking, and I was bawling," said Arlene. "So when I came in [the teacher] asked 'what are you bawling about?' And I said 'I wasn't and she said 'don't lie.'"

Students of the Krem School house agreed for the most part they would not want that label except for when it come time to take the school book home. That is when brothers and sisters would help the younger ones with a task.

The majority of the students would get to school by foot, bringing their school book and personal belongings, coming from the school. Through the winter months they would ride to school with a team of horses and a cart or sleigh that their families would drop them off in and pick them up in.

Arlene said that her father had the horse and cart ready for them and also that all her father would have to say was "Giddy-Up" without even her asking where they would go. When the horses knew the path they had to take to take them to school. They took us to school, and it was such a beautiful winter day they would turn around and go back to the barn, that's how good the horses were," Arlene said.

During the summer months other students would ride their bicycle to school while carrying a slogging on it well. "Once [my older siblings] were there, then it was me and my youngest brother just went up on the bike...pavement would have been nice," Darlene said with a laugh.

Candace Krems, who attended Krem School from 1957 to 1960 had the opinion that the rural school is something she loved experiencing. Candace also cherished her favorite recent memory while attending Krem. The wonderful memory was when she sat down in the ditch, which fit the entire classroom. "They had got some potatoes and just sat in the ditch, and it was big enough to fit the whole class," Candace said.

She said something rural school teachers didn't have to worry about students doing was taking their time going to the bathroom and coming back. "Bad part about [a rural school] was outdoor bathrooms, that's what I liked when we went to town for school - indoor plumbing," said Candace.

All the students that attend the rural school were the same. All farm kids, living on the country side and attending the same church on Sunday. "We all knew each other before we even went to school and knew each other's family. However, like school in town, the rural school kids had their own spots with each other too. Candace said that an eighth grade boy had caught a mouse and was going to put it down his friend's back. "She blacked his eye with a lunch pale and took care of it," said Candace with a giggle at the memory.

LANGUAGE BARRIERS

One common struggle that rang true through many of...
the students of Krem was that English was a struggle. Attending school was the first time they had been asked to speak English. "When these Germans came to the U.S., they were going to keep their heritage and language," explained Candace. "So most of these people did not know how to speak English."

It was common for these rural families to only speak German in their homes. However, when they came to school, it was only English that was spoken and to be learned in. "We spoke German at home so going to first grade was tough," said Marcelle. "Krem School in 1943 to 1951, "We were brought up to be proud to be German, and I still am," she said.

German is something that these students continued to speak at home and even when they began to have their own children to keep the heritage alive. All agreed that not knowing English held some students back, which came with a learning curve. In some of the students' homes German faded, and English started to be spoken more regularly so that children wouldn't have that potential obstacle when they entered into school.

**Closure**

In 1961 the Krem School House closed its doors, and the building became a shell of what it once was.

The Revival of the School House

The School house began to be a beacon of history, however, history that was on the verge of extinction.

"The building's condition, Lani and Rick approached the land owner at the time, Roger Rasch, and asked if he furnished them with paint, then they would re-paint the school house. So, that is exactly what happened. However, one thing led to another and the next thing they know they are standing inside the school house holding a shovel."

Rick explained that when these buildings were closed up, farmers used them as oats storage. The windows were boarded up so the oats wouldn't push out and break the windows and the building was filled from top to bottom with oats. In addition, there were cables stretched across the inside to hold the walls up.

Being filled with oats, you can almost imagine what creatures played house in the school. Rick said that there were mice and raccoons that they had to clear out as well as the oats.

So Lani and Rick went to work shoveling out all the oats and the other junk that came with years of wet oats.

Years passed again, letting the school house sit at the top of the hill with Lani leaving things inside of the school house that were historically fitting. However, 15 years after

Inside the Krem School House, which is always open, people can sign the chalk board to show that they have visited.

their first paint job it was time to paint it again. Once again the project got away from just being about paint and more so about the school’s revival.

This time they would call on Rick's sister Susan Haged and her husband Gary for some more helping hands, as well as Rasch to once again help with painting.

Lani told her husband she wanted to sand the floors of the school house down because they are original. "When she said she wanted to sand the floor, I thought she was crazy. But we sanded, and we sanded, and we sanded," said Rick. As they sanded they were pulling the smell of rotted oats from the floor in an attempt to rid the building of it.

The foursome scraped the paint off and re-painted the whole building, they re-did the floors and began to bring items in that would best suit an authentic school house.

The painting was donated by Hardware Hank in Hazen and J&M Hardware in Beulah. Lani, being involved with the Mercer County Museum, came into contact with people who wanted to donate the museum. In some cases Lani said the museum may already have something that someone is trying to donate, which then she would ask if she could have it placed inside the Krem School House.

The School House is now equipped with a dozen desks, chalk boards, maps, books, and other miscellaneous items that would be fitting to that time.

Because of the time period of the school house's original build, the windows it had were very specific. And they were having a hard time finding windows that would match their shape and size.

Thankfully, Lani said that Russ Duppung of Beulah was instrumental in donating windows that were a near perfect match for their project. Rick said that they had spent a lot of time working on the school house and trying to get it back to its original state, as well as preserving a piece of Mercer County history all at the same time. Rick and Lani are both avid history lovers, so the time spent working on the space, thankfully, never felt like "work."

"As far as I'm concerned we don't want to make this work, this was something we like to do, because if it gets to be work then the meaning is gone," said Rick. It was something that their heart was in, and that's why they continued to work on the school house.

The Krem School House located northeast of Beulah on Hwy 1906 is always open to anyone and all who wish to take a step back in time.

Lani said people have been great about closing the door and closing the latch when they leave and nothing has been damaged since they have started this project. She said seeing the signatures on the chalk board of all who have visited is one of the neatest things.

Lani hosted a gathering of two teachers and half a dozen students within the school house to help them complete, and she said she was in awe of how great it felt to give those individuals the ability to see their school house in its original condition.

"We're local people, and all these people that came here today it meant so much to me they were able to come in here and see their school again," said Lani.

People will be surprised that the little white house on the hill is a piece of history that holds a true depiction of the four walls rural students used to learn inside.

Thanks to the donations of local businesses, people, and the time and effort put in by the Meyers and Hagedes, the Krem School House has been revived and given life once again.

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