

Maureen and Mike

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**Oral History Number: 120-001b**  
**Interviewee: Anne Keeling Woodruff**  
**Interviewer: May Vallance**  
**Date of Interview: circa 1978**  
**Project: Bitterroot Historical Society Oral History Project**

May Vallance: —and the school that you went to and anything interesting that you can remember about the Fairplay school.

Anne Woodruff: My parents came up from Missoula in 1899 to live on the homestead where they had bought at [unintelligible]. It was just a mile west of the school. It sat on the brow of Dutch Hill along [unintelligible] Dutch Hill Road. At that time, it was just a one-room school that was enclosed with a board fence. Just a one-acre playground with two little red outhouses in the back: one for the girls and one for the boys. The entrance to the schoolhouse was over a stile. You went up one side of the fence on steps to a platform and then down the other side on steps. But I was only 22 months old at that time. I just remember the folks talking about it. But Mama had been teaching school in Utah, and she intended to teach school here in the Bitterroot. But the Fairplay was already hired, and she took an examination for a certificate to teach in Montana and she was hired for the Fairview School, south of Victor.

MV: But later did she teach at the—

AW: But after her term at Victor was completed in 1901, she taught summer school at Fairplay. That was the only time that they taught summer school. It seemed that the older children had had to drop out of school to help with the spring farming, so in order to make up the schooling, they had decided to have this summer school. I remember very well going to school, and the older girls would pick me up and play like I was their baby and toss me around. [laughs] For some reason I got out in a part of the yard where the big boys were playing baseball, and the first thing I knew I was hit right in the chest with a baseball. I remember the stars flying around and I fell over, and I guess I must have fainted because I remember everybody gathering around and I couldn't breathe. But I lived through it [laughs] and recovered that for the time being.

MV: How long did your mother teach there?

AW: Well, she just taught that one summer, and that was the end of her teaching. That fall, my brother was born.

MV: When did you start to school?

AW: So I was seven years old before I started to Fairplay School. The first teacher was Miss Janet Wallace (?), and she was a tall, redheaded woman, very strict, but she was a very good teacher. We all learned our lessons and made it past our grades, but she had a big long ruler that she'd whack little hands with. [laughs] The big boys would have to cut willow switches for

her to switch the little boys' legs if they got out of line. She taught for two years. I skipped one grade, and after the second year I was ready to pass into the 4th grade under Miss Nora Smithy (?). Then on the 5th grade we had little lady from Missouri, her name was Miss Frances Higgins (?). She was very dark and had black hair curled on top of her head in a sort of a beehive, but she, too, was very strict. She taught the 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. It took a lot of management for a teacher to take care of so many different grades in one room. Part of us would be studying while the others were reciting, and she had a bell. She'd tap that bell for changing classes. One class would go back to their seats, and the other one would come up front to recite. Then the next year they added another room.

[Break in audio]

Mrs. Sherwin (?) was the new teacher to take over the new room there was built on the south side of the other two rooms. It was very cheerful in there. We had windows all around. Mrs. Sherwin was a wonderful teacher. I was in the sixth grade her first year that she taught. She was a widow, and she had a little girl named Willie May (?) that was in the primary room, and she had a little son named Hirshman Sherwin (?). He was too young to go to school, but sometimes she would bring him up to the school.

There was quite a lot of girls my same age in the sixth grade. We had quite a lot of fun. We had seats with two students sitting side-by-side in one seat. I sat next to Alberta Pierce (?), and behind me was her sister Ruth Pierce (?) and [unintelligible]. Ruth used to get down behind us and give us all the answers if we didn't have them. [laughs] We used to have a spelling bees. I was real good in arithmetic, but I was hopeless in spelling. I was always down at the end of the line in the spelling bee. One day they had a word: faucet. Everybody down the line missed faucet, but I knew how to spell faucet because I had been in Denver where my grandparents had the water coming through the faucets into the kitchen and I had to write and tell my father about it, so I knew how to spell faucet. [laughs]

MV: Well, that was very interesting. You know, I went to Mrs. Sherwin in the fourth grade. Now, that was after you were in sixth grade, and Mary Schultz (?) and I sat together. I remember one time, we were looking through the geography book, and there was a picture of the people who lived in India. They had white clothing on and the man had white trousers and a white shirt, and we laughed because we were sure they were in their underwear. Speaking of spelling made me think of this because Mary always got 100 and I was always striving to get that 100. I would come along with maybe a 90, even a 95 once in a while, but very seldom did I get 100 in spelling. I just had to tell you about that. [unintelligible]

[Break in audio]

AW: We were so fond of Mrs. Sherwin that we wanted to do something real nice for her, so one afternoon in the spring and all of the flowers were blooming, we thought wouldn't it be nice if we went out and picked some flowers and gave Mrs. Sherwin a shower. So we did; she gave us

permission to leave the schoolyard to go out and pick flowers. We came in with a whole water bucket full of bluebells and yellow bells and shooting stars, and we tied them into little bouquets. Then at the time when we were to be dismissed at school, why, we brought that bucket of flowers in and started distributing little bouquets around so the children could all take them up to her. But some of the big boys in the class, they had other ideas. Instead of offering them lovingly the way we girls intended, they started pelting her with the flowers. [laughs]

She says, "Children, children, stop." We got them all quieted down by that time all of our lovely blossoms were strewn on the floor, and we girls had the job of cleaning it up. [laughs] So that ended our beautiful idea of honoring our teacher.

But the next year we had a man teacher, and he was a German. He was a tall, lanky man with a vacant look in his eyes, and he reminded me so much of Ichabod Crane that I was always stifling a giggle in his class. We struggled through the 7th grade under him. At that time, we also had the 9th grade, so he had three classes in his room. The next year following that, I think most of the 8th grade pupils that year passed their 8th grade examination. We had to go to Hamilton to take the state exams. We had to go in the 7th grade and take a state exam in geography I believe. Also in physiology, didn't we? It seemed to me like we had so many subjects. We had agriculture and so many things that they don't have in grade school anymore.

The next year we had some Eastern teachers. They all came up from the Middle West. There was a Mr. Culp (?). He had come up from someplace in the Middle West for his health. He was in very delicate condition, but he was a nice-looking man who dressed immaculately. Some of the boys that wore clodhoppers and overalls and checkered shirts to school, it was quite a contrast. There was resentment from the very first day. Boys, rather than applying themselves to their studies, were always thinking up tricks to play on Mr. Culp. They put live [gun] cartridges in the heating system [laughs] that'd go bang when school was in session and various things. I don't recall, but they just kept something going all the time.

MV: Wasn't there something about them going up into the attic?

AW: That was another time. That was under...that was the year before that, and the teacher was ill. Mr. Mull (?) had to stay home, and Bethel Irwin (?) came out as a substitute teacher. She couldn't get out in time for the school to be called, and so there was a period there that there was no teacher. Four of the boys climbed up on top of the library and opened a vent into the attic over the library and managed to get up in the attic. So these four boys were up in the attic when Miss Irwin arrived. They started coming down feet-first and she saw them, and she took her big long pointer and she started whacking their legs. So they promptly got back up in the attic again, and she wouldn't let them come down. She held them up there. Pretty soon there was a note came inching down through the ceiling. One of the boys picked it up and they passed it all around, and it said, "For goodness sake, put the fire out, we're burning to death up here." [laughs] The boy that was in charge of keeping the stove going, he managed to shut it off

as much as he could, but pretty soon the boys managed to take a pocket knife and carve a hole in the roof and get out and come down over the porch and go home. [laughs]

MV: [laughs] I remember one time Bethel Guy...well, Bethel Irwin, and then she was later Bethel Guyman, came to substitute. They had one of those chairs that would tip back and had a spring back there, and it would tip back and forward and it would revolve around. Of course, the teacher sat up on a platform that was six or eight inches higher than the rest of the room. During recess, while she was outside, one of the boys unfastened that that big...well, I guess it would be a big, sort of like a screw and took it out. She came in and sat down on that chair, and over she went with her heels higher than her head. Her skirts flew up, and of course, they were long skirts in those days. She was so embarrassed. I remember how red her face was. Boys will be boys.

Could you tell about the family that moved in on the Lyle (?) place, and when the boys came to school and the teacher was a little bit unhappy with the odor of his clothes and so forth?

AW: Yes, that was the following year after that they had [unintelligible], she was one of the teachers that came from the Middle West. She was from Oklahoma. Her name was Claire Gleason (?), and she had a wonderful sense of humor. She had the 4th, 5th, and 6th grade. One of the little boys, he was the youngest of a large family. The children in the room go to complaining about little Teddy not smelling very good. So she wrote a note and sent Teddy home to his mother to get a bath and a change of clothes. Pretty soon, here came little Teddy, poking back, same clothes that he went home with, and he had a note for the teacher. The note said, "Teddy's no rose. Don't smell him. Teach him, that's what you're paid for." [laughs] Later on, we had a school picture taken. Ms. Gleason cut little Teddy's picture out and pasted it on a postcard and wrote on it, "Teddy's no rose, don't smell him," and mailed it to her folks for a Christmas card. [laughs]

That same year, we had another teacher from Iowa: Dixie Wilson (?). She was a little bird-like woman. She's very talented. She put on several musicals for all of us, and we had a recital at the [unintelligible] at Woodside to raise money to buy equipment for the play yard. We had crude toys and games that we played in the yard, but she thought they needed to have some merry-go-rounds and slides and things of that sort. She did, she got them. I guess the younger children enjoyed them. She wrote the whole play herself. It was a sort of a Japanese musical.

MV: I remember it very well because I was with a group of girls and we did a Japanese dance, and I was Yokyo San (?).

AW: Yokyo San from the isle of Japan.

MV: That's right.

AW: A little Japanese. I was in it too.

MV: Were you?

AW: Yes.

MV: I had forgotten that.

AW: [laughs] I didn't know that you were. We had fans and kimonos—

MV: Oh yes.

AW: —and it was quite a bit different from anything that we'd ever had previously. But Miss Wilson had a room at the [unintelligible] hotel in Hamilton, and she went back and forth on the train. She wore stout boots, and she had pleated skirts that just came to the top of her boots because she had to wade through the snow to get from the train up to the schoolhouse. Some of the trustees objected to her short skirts. She was teaching on a permit; she didn't have a certificate. Every time they would come to give her an examination, she'd be sick, so she got through the whole school term without taking an examination at all. They didn't hire her the second time, but she had a picture of her 17-year-old brother on her desk, and the brother was Meredith Wilson who later became famous as the author of that musical, *The Music Man*.

MV: I certainly remember her very well; however, I was in the fourth grade at that time. But I do remember her, and I've always been under the impression that the main reason they fired her was because she wore such short skirts.

AW: Yes, I was told that. [laughs] She was a good teacher, though.

MV: Very! Very good.

AW: I learned afterwards that she had been dismissed from that teacher's college in Iowa for a little infraction that really didn't amount to anything, but she was determined to teach anyways so she came out to Montana to pursue her career without even finishing college. [laughs]

MV: Then after she left here, a number of years ago, I found that she joined a circus.

AW: Yes, she did.

MV: Then, in later years, the *Ladies Home Journal* would have little poems in the back of the magazine and I ran across two or three poems that were written by Dixie Wilson.

AW: She had a serial running, too, in the *Ladies Home Journal*.

MV: Oh, did she?

AW: I don't know what became of her. I don't know if she's still living. But Mr. Culp couldn't cope. They picked him up off of the side of the road on morning where he had passed out on his way to school. I suppose he'd had a heart attack. Then they had a Miss Kramer (?) come and finish the term for him, but there had been so much dilly-dallying in the school, the 8th grade students were in danger of not being able to pass. Miss Kramer took ahold, and she even came back and taught in the evenings. The children would bring their lamps to school so that they could study by lamplight. Everybody passed, but it was a struggle.

Then the following year, that was when they had the women took over the trustees, and they were involved with the school and they hired three local teachers from the university. I think they were all teaching on permits, too. They hadn't really finished school.

[End of Interview]