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This transcript represents the nearly verbatim record of an unrehearsed interview. Please bear in mind that you are reading the spoken word rather than the written word.

Oral History Number: 120-011d
Interviewee: Edna Johnson Thomas
Interviewer: May Vallance
Date of Interview: circa 1978
Project: Bitterroot Historical Society Oral History Project

May Vallance: Good afternoon. I am here to ask you and listen to your stories of...well, they're facts about your teaching experiences in Ravalli County.

Edna Thomas: I am Edna Johnson Thomas. I taught school at the Hamilton Heights school when I was 19 years old. We were in a big room and had a great big pot-bellied stove. There were about 30 people in that room. Their ages were all the way from 5 or 6 years old through 17 or 18. I was kind of a green person then. I didn't know a lot of things, but we got along fine and I taught there for seven years. We had a lot of experiences there. One time when the Chinaman that was up there, there was a cook cooking at the Thatcher place. And my sister was with me, and on a Saturday we had to go to the schoolhouse and make things that we had to use the next week. All of a sudden, why, there was a gunshot and somebody we knew was shooting out the windows. But we think there they didn't know that there was anybody in there. This boy, then, he was in the 6th grade, and when the people found out what was going on, why, they sent him back to California and wouldn't let him go to school there anymore.

MV: Was this the Chinese boy?

ET: Yes. Let's see. Then my folks came to—their grandfather and grandmother came to this valley in about 1864 in a covered wagon and had lived here ever since. The schools that I taught was at Hamilton Heights.

MV: About what year did you—

ET: Oh, that was—

MV: What was your first year there?

ET: The first year there was 1929 and I was 19 years old. I learned more that first year of teaching school than I had all the books that you could read.

MV: Did you have to go to Normal School, then?

ET: Yes. I went to Normal School, two years is what I did. Then later on, I went to Missoula, and I got my degree in—

MV: You got it from the university?

ET: Yes, from the university, but it took me about 10 or 12 years to get that degree.

Let's see, if there's some more things about Hamilton Heights. We had a lot of fun there, too. We had lots of plays and then it was nice because the little kids and the big kids could all work together, but there was some problems. That was kind of hard to take. We had some retarded children in there and another small child would make fun of this boy that was only in the fourth grade. This other boy would make fun of him, the little boy. So one day when I went out on the schoolyard, this big boy had that little boy and was choking him. That was the most frightening thing that I had during that year, and I was smaller in stature than what he was. So I told him, I talked to him and then I said, "Well you'll just be go to jail and you'll be there forever if you are going to act like this." It came to them; the little boy never teased him again.

He had a little—this retarded boy—had a little sister and she would sit there and spit on her papers, and she'd just do everything, but this family, they had other children that were—they weren't retarded at all. But we just had everything in that one room school to take care of. As I say, I learned more lessons, and especially I found out that each person has a different personality, and you have to think that through and teach each child in a way that he can understand other people.

I taught there for seven years, and I could tell you a lot more stories, but then the next time I went, I was out at the Etna School; that was 1943. We had two rooms, and at that time that was in the time when they had the sugar beets, and the Russian-German people came in and the Mexicans came in, and sometimes we'd have maybe 15 or 20 in a class. Then, all of a sudden in the spring, here, one spring there were so many came in that the first four grades had 38 people in there, and the trustees had to build some tables and benches and also share books with the other people that were there. We couldn't do like people—the children and the people that were there then, the trustees, they didn't have money enough to buy all the things that should be had, so we just shared for the rest of the year. In the other room, there was the 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th grades, and that was full up, too. We enjoyed all those, but by that time I had learned to take everything as it comes along, and I really learned more there, too. But I'd already been to this two-room school, so I knew how to take care of it. Then in 1943, I started teaching at Corvallis. I taught 28 years there in the first grade.

MV: Well this has been very fun. We certainly appreciate it. It's very interesting to hear you tell us about your experiences, especially the Hamilton Heights School, and of course, the Hamilton Heights School was a one-room school.

ET: Yes.

MV: Etna was an entirely different school.

ET: Two-room, yes.

MV: We certainly appreciate this very much.

[Break in audio]

MV: This concludes the report of Edna Johnson Thomas, teacher.

[End of Interview]