

Oral History Interview

with

GEORGIANA RICHARDSON COOPER

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Recollections of early schools

By Mrs. John Burroughs

For the Eastern New Mexico University Library
Oral History Project

BURROUGHS: This is Mrs. John Burroughs. I am visiting with Mrs. M.M. Cooper, Georgiana Cooper, who is known to everyone in Roosevelt County, because she is the women's editor of the Portales News Tribune. In addition she is a long time resident of the county. Mrs. Cooper, it's nice to visit with you. Are you ready to talk about times?

COOPER: Yes, I'm always ready to talk about old times.

BURROUGHS: When did you come to Roosevelt County?

COOPER: In 1910, in the month of March.

BURROUGHS: Let's go back and see, were your grandparents here or did they come with you?

COOPER: My grandparents were all dead before I was born except one grandmother who was . At the time we came here she lived in Texas, but she later moved to Roosevelt County at what is now known as the Causey community, it was then known as Redland.

BURROUGHS: How long did she live down there?

COOPER: She lived down there from about 1911 until she died in 1934,
I believe it was.

BURROUGHS: That's nearly twenty five years, you could call her a resident
of Roosevelt County.

COOPER: Yes, she was a resident of Roosevelt County.

BURROUGHS: When did your parents come to the county?

COOPER: In 1910.

BURROUGHS: Where did you come from?

COOPER: We came to this county from Pecos County, Texas from
by covered wagon.

BURROUGHS: Who is we? Who else besides your parents?

COOPER: My parents, my brother and I, he was a baby seven months old.

BURROUGHS: What was your parents full names?

COOPER: Robert S. Richardson and Lillian Mary Richardson. My father was
a school teacher and a farmer and my mother also taught school,
they both taught in Texas before coming here. My father taught
in Roosevelt County then we went to Arizona for about six years
and came back to the county where again they both taught school.

BURROUGHS: What schools did they teach?

COOPER: My dad taught at Hawkeye, north of Elida and Mother taught at
Roebuck, I guess I started to say a part of Causey but since
Causey district is indistinct, from Dora, I guess it would be
called a part of the Dora district.

BURROUGHS: I've heard of this school Hawkeye and I have heard that there are many schools in each farming community because the children couldn't go very far.

COOPER: They tried to space the schools about six miles apart, they figured that three miles was far enough for a kid to walk to school in the winter time when the days were short, if there were enough to have eight children they could get a school, if they could keep up an attendance of eight children that was enough to get them a one teacher school. There were more than a hundred school districts in Roosevelt County, I don't know whether there were a hundred in existence at any one time because when the district went [indistinct] they didn't give it's number to another school. But the Rosbuck school is number 116, I remember that.

BURROUGHS: So you don't know that there were that many schools. . .

COOPER: There were at least that many in the county, they may not have all been in existence at the same time because some of them would lose their population and be discontinued or combine with another school to get a two teacher schools, something of that kind.

BURROUGHS: Can you tell me the period all of these schools were in existence, what years?

COOPER: I don't know what year the first schools would have been established, there were quite a few schools in 1910.

BURROUGHS: I meant when we had as many as a hundred or more, was that. . .

COOPER: I'd say from 1910 or '12 to the twenties, they were beginning to consolidate considerably.

BURROUGHS: Did you walk or ride to school?

COOPER: The first year I went to school, I went to the school my daddy taught and we drove in a buggy seven miles.

BURROUGHS: You and your brother, then?

COOPER: No, my brother wasn't old enough.

BURROUGHS: Oh, just you and your dad?

COOPER: Just me and my dad.

BURROUGHS: There were no more children in the family then. . .

COOPER: . . .that went to school. By that time I had a baby sister, but my brother still wasn't old enough to go to school.

BURROUGHS: You were lucky to be able to ride to school in a buggy. I heard Jack Greathouse tell me that last night when I was visiting with them, that he had an old mule and sometimes the mule would balk so and he would leave the mule and walk the rest and then when he would come back in the afternoon the mule would still be standing there. (laugh).

COOPER: I remember one time our buggy horse balked and broke the and Daddy had to leave me at home that day and he put a saddle on the horse and rode him to school, and he was a little late that morning.

BURROUGHS: I have had comments on the schools and the way the children got there, the weather and different emergencies kept them from coming and more than now the attendance seems to fluctuate a little bit more.

- COOPER: It seems to me like the weather is lots colder then, than it is now. I might get just as cold driving seven miles in a buggy in December as I did then. The nightmare of the whole thing was that drive in the early morning, we had to start a little after sunup to make that drive?
- BURROUGHS: Oh, you would, wouldn't you? How long did it take?
- COOPER: We would drive up in quilts. Momma would put a bucket of beans that she had started cooking on the stove, down under the quilts by my feet and then when we got to school Daddy would put them on the stove and we had hot lunches at Hawkeye School.
- BURROUGHS: That was ingenious, it surely was. There was no cover or way to enclose the buggy properly, was there?
- COOPER: Ours wasn't, but some buggy's had curtain assemblies that you could put up and little windows but it was just where you could look out and a little slot to put the lines through but they were very inconvenient both for driving and for seeing and nobody used them unless we just had too and we didn't have curtains for our buggy.
- BURROUGHS: What did you do in sand storm weather?
- COOPER: Sand storms we didn't pay much attention too. I remember the first one I experienced, it nearly scared me to death it was just a little while after we had arrived in Elida in March, and you know how the wind can blow here, and I had it confused in my mind with a cyclone, the twister that carried people away up into the clouds, and I was scared to death.

BURROUGHS: Had you been reading Wizard of Oz, you suppose?

COOPER: I hardly think the Wizard of Oz had been published at that time, but I had read scarey tales and heard them told, and that was a very frightening experience for me, that first sand storm. My daddy was gone from home and that was what made it worse, he was out in it. I didn't feel so alarmed for the rest of us, I thought we would make it but I just knew he was going to be blown away.

BURROUGHS: That he wouldn't be able to come back. Did your dad have any other means of lively hood besides teaching school, did he farm too?

COOPER: He farmed more than he taught, really. He didn't depend on teaching entirely.

BURROUGHS: Nearly everybody had to have some means of supplementing income, even the homesteaders.

COOPER: When he taught at Hawkeye he got fourty dollars a month and I think we only had a four months term, it might have been six, I don't remember for sure.

BURROUGHS: I think that it was customary space the term at each school in a vicinity three or four months and then the children could go there for awhile and then go to another school.

COOPER: Yes, I think they did that too.

BURROUGHS: That managed and stretched out the money some, didn't it? Now, was this state supported?

COOPER: Yes, it was, I think. I don't think it was a prescription school where each patron paid according to the number that were in school or what they could afford.

BURROUGHS: Were any of the classmates that you had in this Hawkeye School, did they become citizens of Portales, did they remain in the county?

COOPER: Do you know Fanny Walker?

BURROUGHS: No, I'm not sure. . . .

COOPER: Do you know Barbara Shafer?

BURROUGHS: Yes, I do.

COOPER: Fanny Walker. . . .

BURROUGHS: Oh, yes, she's our neighbor. I didn't know her by that name.

COOPER: Fanny and I were, I'm not too sure if Fanny was going to school or whether she was too little, but her older sister and brother went with me. I think she went too but she was a beginner and I was in the third reader when I started school.

BURROUGHS: So your dad taught you ahead of time?

COOPER: I was seven years old when I started and I was able to read and read third grade, so I went with the third grade class.

BURROUGHS: How was one teacher able to teach in a room full of children, how did he differentiate the subject matter for the different grades? Since it's your daddy you probably have an inside view of that.

COOPER: Each grade would be seated together as nearly as possible and of course we had to use physical size in the seating to get each one in a seat that would fit him. We had a bench up front that was a recitation bench and when it was time for the third grade reading class we all went up to the front, sat on that bench and read our lesson, if it was for arithmetic he would put the lesson on the board or let each one of us go to the board and work a problem and we would talk about it and things of that sort. The people in the back were not supposed to be listening to us, but I really learned more listening to the class ahead of me than I did in my own class.

BURROUGHS: I have heard people make that comment. What were you supposed to be doing if you weren't listening?

COOPER: Studying your next lesson or for the next day or something of that sort. We had no books except our texts, there was no such thing as a library, there just wasn't any outside reading available at a child level. People had books in their homes, some of them had quite a few, but as for children's books there just weren't any.

BURROUGHS: How did your dad teach English, for instance and the stories of literature, how did he manage that and some of the classics that children usually are exposed to?

COOPER: He liked to read from classics to the whole school, read aloud, he loved to read aloud and he was a good reader and he had

quite a few of the books at home and he would pick out some classics to read to the school as a whole. Some of it was above the primary level, by a great deal, but they wouldn't be interested in it, but I think they did get something out of it at that. He read Hiawatha a lot of it and the kids, everybody liked the rhythms. Sir Walter Scott's books he read them for the older ones and I doubt if the younger ones paid much attention, now I liked the rhythm especially when he read poetry, and he loved to read poetry too.

BURROUGHS: Don't you think students of present day schools are missing a little something in that they are not taught to read aloud?

COOPER: Yes, I do. I think it is too bad that people don't put as much emphasis on reading aloud as they used to. It slows you down, you can't get over nearly as much territory as you can if you read to yourself and all of that, there is something about it that makes for better communication, I think.

BURROUGHS: I have noticed younger women in club work sometimes when they are anxious to read or report do not read nearly as well or as easily as the older women, they stumble over words and they don't seem at ease and I suppose it's because of that lack of reading aloud in school. Would you comment on the spelling bees, I know those early day schools had spelling bees?

COOPER: Spelling bees were a regular Friday afternoon exercise, I guess you'd call it. We didn't manage to get another school to visit us or go visit another school we just chose up sides and had

a spelling bee in our own room.

BURROUGHS: Now wait a minute, let's pause. How did the children get there from the other schools? Did they dismiss and come on horse-back to the schools?

COOPER: Sometimes someone would bring the whole school in a wagon, sometimes they would walk. Edna Whitmeir, Edna Johnston she used to be was teaching at the next school, it was about six or seven miles from the school my mother taught at Roebuck. One morning about eleven o'clock here came the whole school on foot down to Roebuck one Friday to spend the rest of the day with us and we hadn't known they were coming so they just dismissed our regular classes and we had spelling bees and arithmetic matches and foot races and anything you can imagine, the rest of the day until it was mid-afternoon and time for them to start back so they could get to school in time to dismiss..

BURROUGHS: I think that was making the best of an opportunity. The competition was stimulating.

COOPER: We had lots of fun at those things.

BURROUGHS: What kind of games did you play? With a small group and varied ages what could you play outside?

COOPER: We played stealing sticks, red rover, , the boys played marbles continually and the girls, I guess they were made in the beginning the womens' lib, we played us a marble game too. It was different from the boy's marble game and the boy's wouldn't be caught dead playing with us, but we played marbles too.

BURROUGHS: How did that differ?

COOPER: We used a bigger marble, it was nearly as big as a golf ball and instead of shooting in and out of a ring, we would start off by throwing them at a design of holes, we got them into the first hole, it might have been a little bit like golf, I don't know, I don't play golf. If you got it in the first hole with one shot that counted so many points, to every extra shot we had to take it took more off of our score, our possible score. Then when we got the first hole made we started for the next one and we had to just roll it, we didn't try to shoot it with our thumb, like the boys did and roll the marbles into the holes.

BURROUGHS: That's a great game that I have never heard of anybody playing.

COOPER: We called it roly-poly.

BURROUGHS: Roly-poly. What was stealing sticks like, what did you do?

COOPER: We drew a line across the playground, chose up sides, half of us on one side with a little pile of sticks and half of us got on the other side with the same number of sticks. We would try to get across the line and get over and steal a stick from the other base and if anyone from the other base touched us while we were making that run, we had to stay on their side and steal sticks for them. The first one that ran out of sticks and players either or sticks or players, was the loser.

BURROUGHS: Was there any kind of prize or was that just team spirit?

COOPER: No, it was just for fun.

BURROUGHS: I know there ^{are} many things in the early day schools that supplied a child's need for entertainment and energetic exercise without all of the organized games we have now.

COOPER: Yes, there was.

BURROUGHS: Kids are kids no matter what age.

COOPER: Indoors we would play games on the blackboard like tic-tac-toe, the box game, where you make dots on the board and then connect them up with lines and we'd have to find out how many lines we got to draw, we would have some little rocks or beans in our hand, we would shake them up and the opposing player had to guess how many we were holding in our closed hand. If we were holding three and he guessed three he got to make three marks, if he missed he didn't get to make any.

BURROUGHS: That's another game I never heard of. What did you call that?

COOPER: Box is what we called it.

BURROUGHS: Box.

COOPER: Box could go on for a half a day or you could make a little box and it be over in fifteen minutes so that we could play it during recess.

BURROUGHS: You had to get enough marks to fill the box?

COOPER: Yes. Each time you completed a box, see these dots were made in squares so it took four lines to complete a box, you put your initials in it and then when the diagram was all filled in you counted how many boxes were yours and if you had the most you were the winner.

BURROUGHS: That was a great game too, wasn't it? What about your school programs on holidays?

COOPER: They were lots of fun too. We would usually invite another school to come over if it was to be in the afternoon, if it was to be at night everyone in the community came. The Christmas program was a community affair and the different schools would colaborate so they wouldn't have their programs on the same night, during the Christmas season.

BURROUGHS: So if you had eight schools you had eight programs? That was quite a celebration.

COOPER: Unless perhaps two decided to go in together and have a really big program. The houses were so small it didn't pay to get too big a program because there wouldn't be room for everybody to get in the house to see.

BURROUGHS: I was just wondering if you had a one room school house. . .

COOPER: You'd be surprised how many people could get in to one of those.

BURROUGHS: All of the families come in wagons and stack up in the school room? What did you burn for fuel?

COOPER: Coal mostly.

BURROUGHS: Was that hauled in from town?

COOPER: It was hauled from town. The Roebuck School where my mother taught had a big bin built at one end of the school house that we filled with coal in the fall and hoped it would do until spring and usually it did. It also had a built in stage at one end of the school. One one end of the stage was a box that