

RUTH POLAND

Interview 69a

July 10, 1985 at her home in Diboll, Texas

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ABSTRACT: In this interview with Martha Carswell, Ruth Poland reminisces about her life growing up in Burke, Prairie Grove, and Diboll, Texas and returning to Diboll to teach. Mrs. Poland attended Lon Morris College and Stephen F. Austin State University and taught for 40 years, sponsoring many clubs and associations at Diboll High School. She saw many changes in Diboll and education over the years and discusses integration and the differences in teaching and schools from the 1930's to the 1980's.

Martha Carswell (hereafter MC): This is Martha Carswell. I am interviewing Mrs. Ruth Poland at her home in Diboll, Texas. The date is July 13, 1985. Mrs. Poland, will you tell about your early childhood?

Ruth Poland (hereafter RP): I was born near Burke, Texas, October 3, 1913. I was the youngest of three children. My brother was the eldest and he took care of my sister and me while my mother and father worked in the fields, as my father was a farmer. We usually spent the time on a pallet in the field. At the age of three, we moved to the small community of Prairie Grove where my father was a sharecropper. My brother trapped wild animals for their furs and sold them through the mail. He was happy when he caught a mink or otter because he could get a good price for them.

MC: Did your father work other than farming?

RP: Yes, when he was finished with the crops, he found small jobs on the roads and sometimes at the sawmill to supplement our income.

MC: Did your brother make much money from his furs?

RP: Well, yes, it was much money at that time. Of course, it wouldn't amount to much now. He got good prices for his furs, but he had to know how to really cure them and stretch them. He had a book that he read how to put them on a wooden frame and stretch them so they would dry. Sometimes some types of skins he nailed to the barn, stretched them out and nailed them to the barn so they would dry.

MC: Describe the first school you attended.

RP: Prairie Grove was the first school I attended and we went to school in a one-room church building. There was one teacher for all the grades one through eight. We sat on long wooden benches that were used for church pews. We had outdoor restrooms and we

had to bring our lunch from home. We didn't have any way to wash our hands. I remember quite well the cemetery was nearby and when there was a funeral, the teacher would have us line up and march to the funeral. We didn't like to do this. There were no supplies at this little school and few books – no library books at all. We had to share our books. We would pass them around so that everyone could take a book home at night.

MC: How did the teacher teach that many classes?

RP: Well, that was a task, I'm sure. Our day began with his calling the first grade to a long bench at the front where they began their reading lesson and their spelling lesson. In a short time this group was dismissed and he would call the next class. They would go through their lessons as best they could and that's the way our day went. But how he got help was that the older students who already could read and could spell and do math would help the younger ones. So, it wasn't all the teacher's job; he had some help.

MC: Mrs. Poland, would you describe your life on the farm?

RP: Yes, when I was nine years old my father bought a ninety-acre farm three miles east of Diboll. Our life on the farm was hard. We all helped to plant, cultivate and harvest the crops, which were cotton, corn, peanuts, and potatoes. My sister and I had to do the laundry, which was done by using a rub board, a tub and a boiling pot. Homemade lye soap was used to clean the clothes. My sister and I also had to do the milking of the cows – sometimes as many as seven. She often said that her boyfriend had to wait until she finished milking. Our Saturdays were filled with ironing and cleaning the yards. Then, when it turned real cold in the winter we would have a hog-butchering day. My father would kill as many as eight hogs, cut up the meat, stuff the sausage, and hang it in a smokehouse to be cured by hickory smoke. We had no car, so we went in a wagon drawn by mules. I remember how thrilled I was to ride on the wagon filled with cotton that we had picked and go to Burke to the cotton gin. We always ate dinner at Miss Ina McCall's General Store.

For fun on the farm we had what we called play parties, and at these parties we would dance to our singing games. This was very similar to the square dancing of today. Also, we had candy drawings where stick candy with various colored stripes was put into a great big box. Everyone drew a stick of candy and those getting a stick that matched were partners for the evening and they won an extra stick of candy. Then when all our chores were finished, such as gathering the crops and so forth, my father would load up the wagon with supplies for a fishing campout. Neighbors would go also, and we children had fun playing games.

MC: How do you make lye soap?

RP: Oh, this is something my mother was very good at. You had to have the big iron pot and build a fire under the pot. Then you would fill the pot with cut up hog fat, or it could be beef fat or beef suet. Then she would put some water with this and kinda stir it up, then a can or two of lye, according to how much of the fat you had. She would have to stir and stir for an hour or so. Then, or course, she would leave it overnight to cool. Then

it would be hard blocks that you cut. She would put it in cans or wrap it with paper and keep it for the whole year.

MC: My aunt had a smokehouse and I've always wondered how you could have a fire inside a house.

RP: Well, you know the smokehouse had a dirt floor and so my father would build up a little mound in the middle of the smokehouse and kinda well it out and make a hole in the mound, and there he would put hickory chips and small twigs and begin his fire. There was no blaze after a while because he would smother it out. You had to smother it so you would have smoke. This smoking would go on day and night. There was no danger of getting a fire started because it was in the dirt and it was smoldering with smoke. Now, the smokehouse was vented so that you could see the smoke when you passed when we were curing the meat.

MC: Tell about the Diboll schools you attended.

RP: I started to school in Diboll in the third grade. Our desks were nailed down so we couldn't move around. There were few supplies and even the textbooks were scarce. There were no bulletin boards and the schoolroom was very dull. We walked to school since there were no buses, and we had outdoor restrooms and no lunchroom. There was no organized P.E. program so we played tag and drop-the-handkerchief most of the time. My most pleasant memory of Diboll Elementary was the weekly assembly where we gathered and sang patriotic songs. My most vivid memory is when our teacher, Mr. Davis, broke his leg. He jumped out the window chasing an older boy who had misbehaved. We were all screaming. In Diboll High School, there was a small enrollment so we were all close and very good friends. The curriculum was just the basics. There were no electives such as homemaking, F.F.A. or typing. We had no organized athletic program, no newspaper or annual. I graduated from Diboll High School in 1930.

MC: You walked three miles to school. What did you do when the weather was bad?

RP: When the weather was bad, we just walked. Sometimes when the weather was bad we wouldn't have sufficient cloaks, umbrellas or boots, whatever it took to protect you from the rain or snow. I know that there's one time, I can remember, I had snow in my hair when I got home from school. The roads were very muddy and we had to pick our spots when it rained. Sometimes we would walk near the fence so we could hold onto the fence. We didn't miss many days of school. Our parents saw that we went.

MC: Would you tell something of your college life?

RP: I'd always wanted to be a teacher, but I didn't think it was possible for me to go to college when the time came. During my senior year, a representative from Lon Morris College in Jacksonville came to our home and talked to my father. To my surprise, he made arrangements for me to attend college in September. Jacksonville seemed as far away as New York does today and I was miserably homesick. I was inexperienced; I didn't know how to study, so I burned midnight oil getting my work done. Lon Morris

was good for me, as it is for other youngsters. The discipline there was very strict. Girls could have dates in the dorm parlor. They could go to town in groups of three; they could go hiking in groups of five and they could go to the movies in groups of three. I lived in Smith Hall which was a cooperative home where girls could help pay room and board by waiting tables, clearing tables and washing dishes. We were real proud of Smith Hall. It was just one big family. The next year, I transferred to S.F.A. [Stephen F. Austin] one year and at that time, 1933 you could get a temporary teaching certificate, so I began to look for a teaching job. This was a very traumatic experience...during the Depression the schools had no money. Everyone was unemployed and people were starving. I walked over plowed fields talking to school trustees and all to no avail.

MC: Mrs. Poland, is Lon Morris a Junior College?

RP: Yes, it is. And that's exactly what I needed. It was small enough and I was so inexperienced and so un-used to being away from home.

MC: Did you stay in the dorm at S.F.A.?

RP: No, not really a dorm. At various times, I stayed at cooperative homes that were designed for keeping sixteen or eighteen girls. Many times I would be in the home where you had kitchen privileges and you did your own cooking.

MC: Did you ever commute?

RP: No, not during the time that I got my first degree. I commuted later when I took my master's degree.

MC: What was your first teaching job?

RP: Actually, my first teaching job was a government job. President Franklin Roosevelt, during the Depression, initiated a number of programs designed to give employment to the millions of unemployed people. I taught an adult literacy class at night for three months, I believe it was three months. It was called W.P.A., which means Work Progress Administration. There were twelve adults in the class who couldn't read or write. At this same time, many young men joined the C.C.C., which meant Civilian Conservation Corps. This was another one of Roosevelt's programs. These young men planted many of the trees that we see today.

MC: What do you remember most about the Depression?

RP: I remember so well that food was rationed. We had to have stamps, ration stamps, to buy coffee and sugar and some other products. I remember that the children in many families were underfed. The farms fared very well because they could raise their food at home. It was so amazing. At certain times during the Depression that one family would kill a beef and they would put various cuts of beef on the wagon and they would go to their next door neighbor which would be miles away, and they would give them a piece of meat. They did this weekly or every two weeks. Then that afforded everybody some

beef. They didn't have any refrigeration, so that was one way that they didn't have to save or cure the beef. Another thing they did was to can a whole beef. There would be two families usually that killed a beef, and they would spend all day putting it in cans.

But, back to my first teaching, my real classroom teaching began at Concord near Zavalla in 1934. This was a four-teacher school with grades one through nine. I taught second, third, and fourth grades. The school was poor as was everyone at this time. There were no supplies, hardly enough textbooks, and no library books. There were outdoor restrooms, and we drew water from a cistern and drank from a bucket. The room was heated by a big potbellied wood stove. The teacher had to build the fires and the children bring in the wood. We had no playground equipment, and we had our school programs in the nearby church, which had a stage. The children were eager to learn, however, and school was the greatest thing in their lives. They just adored the teacher. My salary was seventy dollars a month and sometimes this was by a voucher. Teachers were required to ride the two Model A buses to keep discipline. The roads were long and bumpy. I remember when W. Lee O'Daniel was inaugurated Governor of Texas. We carried some students on one of the Model A buses to Austin. Imagine, from Zavalla to Austin. When we were returning the bus broke down, but our driver was a mechanic, so he fixed it. Imagine a busload of noisy, tired, and sleepy kids.

MC: What could you do with a salary of seventy dollars?

RP: Well, seventy dollars was like a hundred and seventy or more that we have today. I didn't drive a car; I didn't have to have a lot of fine clothes and I only paid twenty dollars a month for board and room. Really, I didn't have too many expenses.

MC: I understand you taught in Diboll High School.

RP: Yes, I went back to college and got my degree. I got a job at Diboll High School. Mr. Pate was the superintendent. I taught English to all the classes except the freshmen. I was the senior sponsor. I sponsored the paper, the annual, and all the senior activities including chaperoning the senior class trips. I also taught two Spanish classes and sponsored the Spanish Club. I taught high school six years.

MC: How could you do all of those things?

RP: Well, my husband was in the Air Force at that time, and I didn't have any home responsibilities. I was young and enthusiastic, and we did some of the work that had to be done on the newspaper and the annual at night. I had such a cooperative group of seniors that worked on these things. Bob Bowman was one of them. We would meet at the school or at somebody's house and work out all these things. Sponsoring the senior trips was not that good. It was quite a bit of responsibility, but we had good children at those times and the discipline problems were not there. You had no worries about that. I look back on my high school teaching as one of the greatest parts of my life. This was because of the attitude of the students. They loved me with a passion, and when they had an activity, I could not miss. I remember one time that I had the flu and had gone to bed.

They were having their Christmas party and they would not do it without me. They came in a car and carried me back to the gym where the party was. So, if you're young, enthusiastic, and don't have many responsibilities at home, then you can do those things.

MC: Tell about your husband and family.

RP: I married Coy Poland in 1936. He had been in the C.C.C. and was then working with his father at their sawmill. Coy joined the Air Force in 1942 and served three years. In 1945, our son, Joe, was born. When Joe married in 1964, I re-entered S.F.A. and got my master's degree. Coy and I were married thirty-nine years when he passed away in 1975.

MC: Was getting a master's degree hard?

RP: Well, at my age, I felt like it was going to be terrible. And the idea that you had to maintain an A average kindly threw me for a loop. However, I found the professors were so human, so cooperative, and so anxious to help you in every way you just felt at home. No, it wasn't hard. In fact, I enjoyed it. I think that the main thing that kept me going was that four of the teachers from Diboll were going at the same time, and so we shared our thoughts, shared our rides, and we were just like a family. In fact, one of the professors called Mrs. Rogers and me the "Gold Dust Twins". We took the same subjects and we finished at the same time.

MC: What year did you finish?

RP: 1966, I believe.

MC: Just how did you teach and go to S.F.A. at the same time?

RP: Well, that was a problem but we went at night, mostly. There was a Saturday class. So it didn't interfere with our teaching. In fact, it enhanced our teaching. The ideas that we got from our master's degree courses we carried over to our teaching.

MC: How would you compare the schools of today to those when you began teaching? The changes made and how would you evaluate the teaching profession?

RP: There's not much comparison with the schools when I started teaching and today's schools. For instance, when I began teaching in 1934, this was during the Depression. Schools were poor and hard pressed to pay teachers. There was no money for supplies and facilities. However, the children were more attentive and motivated. With not television or other things to claim their attention, school was the greatest thing in their lives. The teacher was greatly admired. I believe the children of today are better informed than ever before. The problem is the teacher must compete with so much that claims the student's attention. The curriculum is greatly improved and there is much educational material, such as computers and audio-visual material. The students of today seem to lack discipline, and they have no respect for the teachers. They seem to lack a goal in life and

they have no desire to learn. Also, they seem to think school is all fun and games. Many parents of today don't cooperate with the teachers in many instances. Today, the opportunity is great with all the modern equipment. How do I evaluate the profession? Next to preaching, I think it's the greatest. You don't make much money but there is some kind of satisfaction in it. Surely, one has to be dedicated. The salaries are coming into their own, too.

MC: What about the changes brought about by integration?

RP: Well, this was a big deal. I think it was just as frustrating for the blacks as it was for the whites. They were not used to being with white people that much, and the white people were not used to being with them that much, so there had to be an adjustment made there in order for them to cooperate in class work or in the classroom. It took a while for that adjustment to take place. We received some very good students that were black and certainly good athletes, which helped our school. It added to it greatly. Integration took place I think, in about 1967.

MC: Have you experienced good support from the administration?

RP: Oh yes, I've often said that I've never had a bad principal, and I've certainly never had a bad superintendent. I've had the greatest inter-relationship with the administration. We've always had conscientious school board members and a conscientious administration, always ready to empathize with the problems that you had and always ready to help.

MC: You've lived in Diboll most of your life, haven't you? What changes in the City of Diboll have you seen?

RP: Oh yes, I've lived in Diboll except one teaching job and then college years that I spent. The changes I've seen are many. I remember in Diboll when there were no paved streets, of course; and there were no brick homes and there was what we called the quarters where the blacks lived. These were more or less huts with no modern conveniences. No houses had the indoor plumbing as we know it today. They all had the outdoor restrooms. There was not more than two grocery stores and I can remember when they had the Angler's Hotel but that was all because there was no motel and no cafes. There was one near the theater that was run by Mr. Daniel. The hotel was famous. It had very good food, so we had people stopping and coming from every where to eat there. There were a couple of gas stations that I can remember. Of course, we had no football stadium. There was only one school campus. The high school and elementary school were on the same campus. The old buildings were moved. Some people bought them and made their homes from them. Now the city is very proud of what it has. It has a beautiful park. The city is very well kept. They're always planting trees. The garden clubs are planting the trees to beautify the city, and it is one of the cleanest, nicest places you can find.

MC: Have you retired and what are your hobbies?

RP: Yes, I retired in 1979 after teaching forty years, but I stay active since I substitute each year and I stay busy with the Retired Teachers Association. As president of the Angelina County Retired Teachers, I worked hard with the Legislature to get better benefits for our active and retired teachers. My hobbies are gardening and fishing. I can many jellies and vegetables. I also share my vegetables with friends. I like to spend the day on the lake and catch fish for a fish fry for my grandsons.

MC: What do you miss the most about teaching?

RP: I miss the association with my co-workers a great deal. It was hard for me to adjust after forty years of getting up and getting dressed and going to school. I think it's hard for any working person to change from the day's routine to something new. It's always "sorta" sad the opening day of school. You feel like you can almost hear the bells ringing. The school bell calls us back, so to speak. I miss the salary, of course. I also miss the children. That's one of the reasons I like to substitute. It's because you keep in touch with the children. After you've been out of the school for a few years, the children in the school won't know you. If you keep substituting, they will still be saying when you see them out in town or at the grocery store or at the ball game, "Hi, Mrs. Poland." So that makes you feel good. Then I feel good when I find out a former student is doing well or has really made something of his life. So, it is rewarding and you miss that sort of thing.

MC: If you had your life to live over, would you be a teacher?

RP: By all means, I don't think I would have been happy with any other profession. My sister wanted to be a nurse and I considered that at one time, but our father vetoed that. I think though, that a nurse would be the next thing because they're dedicated to help suffering people. It would be a great calling. There are a lot of things about teaching that are not very happy to think about, such as the discipline problems that you have and the salary that you get. But, all in all, I don't believe there is a greater calling except preaching, probably.

MC: Mrs. Poland, you have certainly had a great life. You have touched the lives of so many people.

END OF INTERVIEW