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Article Summary: Teachers in the small town schools of the West in the early years of the twentieth century were often young and inexperienced. Muirl Dorrough was more capable and devoted than many, and her attendance at the Alliance Junior Normal School increased her motivation and raised her standards.

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Photographs / Images: Muirl Dorrough and students, 1912 or 1913; Harry Shimmin; State Superintendent William K Fowler; school building in Alliance used for sessions of the Alliance Junior Normal School; Alliance, July 3, 1914 (2-page view); Bonnie, Muirl, and Faye Dorrough

“I Am Very Aspiring”

Muirl Dorrough & the Alliance Junior Normal School

By Andrea Radke

While teaching school in Hooker County, Nebraska, in the autumn of 1910, Willo Muirl Dorrough, aged twenty-one, suddenly found herself without a place to board. Muirl was evicted from the home of Robert and Mattie Shimmin when they discovered her growing friendship with their eighteen-year-old son. Harry Shimmin also happened to be one of Muirl's students in District Six. Forced to change residence in the middle of the school year, she continued to communicate secretly with Harry while she finished her tenure at the school.¹ In spite of her personal conflict with the Shimmins, Muirl chose to complete the school year with honor and responsibility. In fact, she cared greatly for her students, four of whom were Harry's brothers and sister.

Muirl Dorrough had come to the Sand Hills of Nebraska in 1909 from Green County, Indiana, where she had finished high school and received her first teacher training. She settled with her parents and sisters on a Kinkaid homestead in Grant County, near Whitman, Nebraska. Almost immediately, she secured her teacher's position in District Six near Mullen in Hooker County for forty-five dollars a month. She taught five of the Shimmin children: Harry, eighteen, George, fifteen, Frank and Jessie, twelve-year-old twins, and Roy, seven. Muirl often expressed her concern for the educational needs of the children and took great pride in providing a quality education.²

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Muirl Dorrough represented the very best kind of teacher in rural, western Nebraska—a kind of teacher that was not uncommon by the early 1910s. As part of this educational excellence, she sought further training at the Alliance Junior Normal School in 1911 and 1912. The junior normal schools had been established in 1903 to provide educational training for schoolteachers in western Nebraska. These institutions established a necessary opportunity for teachers who had little or no access to normal training. The great effect that Alliance Junior Normal School had on Muirl Dorrough serves as a case study for early twentieth century attempts to improve public education in rural Nebraska.

Often seen as young, inexperienced fourteen- and fifteen-year-old girls who had barely completed the eighth grade, many rural schoolteachers, in fact, had developed higher pedagogical standards by the early twentieth century. In an article in *Nebraska History*, Frederick Luebke assessed the impact of Nebraska having numerous counties despite a sparse population: “Loathe to part with the county as a symbol of identity, Nebraskans prefer to retain institutional inefficiency rather than to consolidate or reorganize these relics of frontier optimism.”³ This inefficiency most negatively affected the rural schools. Distance and the small population caused a marked increase in the number of school districts between 1888 and 1920, from 5,664 to 7,000. In 1888 the state superintendent complained about the many small districts, which he believed resulted in “low standards, low wages, and poor teachers, with poor local supervision or none at

all.”⁴ Until 1920, claimed Luebke, this situation only grew worse, giving Nebraska the highest ratio of districts to population in the United States.

Other scholars have presented another problem with teacher quality in the West. By 1888, 63 percent of the teachers in America were women. Some critics asserted that the high number of female teachers perpetuated an atmosphere of “anti-intellectualism” in education. Counter arguments have shown women teachers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as “highly professional.”⁵ Scholarly debate has continued over the quality of western women teachers.

Certainly there was some truth to the verdict of “poor teachers and inefficient rural schools” between 1888 and 1920 in Nebraska. Conditions in the western half of the state, as in much of the rural West, were difficult, but education was a top priority for settlers. Even in areas where no official school district was organized, settlers often took matters into their own hands by using barns, dug-outs, or soddies to hold school. When districts were organized and acquired more money, schools were often the first public buildings erected in a community, paid for with local donations and taxes.

Necessity often required rural teaching positions to be filled by anyone who was willing to teach, even teenage girls who had barely completed the eighth grade. Many were “local mothers, wives, and daughters who were literate and who shared the belief that education would lead to the improvement of self and community.”⁶ These individuals of-

Muirl Dorrrough and the Alliance Junior Normal School



Muirl Dorrrough and students, 1912 or 1913. Courtesy of David E. Radke

Harry Shimmin. Courtesy of David E. Radke

ten had no training at all, but represented the common desire for the beginnings of republican education in the West. As one South Dakota mother remembered about having a young, inexperienced girl for the local school, “The children seem to be learning. Just having a school available made life look a lot better to me.”⁷

The desire for formal public education was important and common among western settlers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most people believed that every community should provide a school at public expense. Western prairie schoolwomen were especially “fired by the idealistic belief that universal public education could lead to self-betterment and to social reforms for themselves, for children, and for the community at large.”⁸ This support for education was appropriately reflected in the high literacy rates in Iowa, Nebraska, and Kansas between 1870 and 1900.

In western Nebraska the rapid population growth after 1880 led to a high demand for teachers. This demand often went unfilled and districts either can-

celed school terms or hired local, untrained persons through temporary “emergency” permits until the teachers could receive some kind of training. Rural districts tried to draw teachers with offers of higher wages. One prairie woman remembered the difficulty of obtaining good teachers for the little rural schoolhouse that supported a few families: “That little log house was filled to the rafters and the only teachers we could get were homesteaders’ wives or daughters, and very few had ever taught before. Sometimes the blind led the blind.”⁹ Although this situation occurred in South Dakota, it was representative of conditions in western Nebraska.

Muirl Dorrrough’s letters to Harry Shimmin provide wonderful insights to the life of a rural female schoolteacher in early twentieth-century Nebraska. Between 1910 and 1913 she taught at various schools in Hooker, Grant, and Cherry counties. After finishing the 1910–11 term in District Six, Muirl briefly transferred to District 94 near Pullman in Cherry County. She spent from early April until May 12 with this small school of only eight pupils. Her time in Pull-

man was more difficult than was her Hooker County experience: two of her students were over the age of twenty. One twenty-year-old “boy” quit school because he claimed Muirl was “mean to him.” Whatever punishment she had given him was probably deserved—he had sneakily tied up her horse to keep it from eating his family’s hay. Fortunately, Muirl had few negative encounters with students. She was an attentive and kind educator who took great responsibility for her positions.¹⁰

Miss Dorrrough spent the next school year of 1911–12 in a school nine miles north of Whitman, Nebraska. She was very excited to have received a seven-month school at a salary of fifty dollars per month. Muirl had seventeen students at this school, the oldest being a sixteen-year-old girl. It seems likely that with the difficulties Muirl had experienced the previous year with “adult” students, she must have preferred younger scholars. In October Muirl had a photograph taken of herself with the students. This year was a successful one, and by February, the young teacher expressed further motivation to

excel in teaching: "I am so anxious to do just the very best work possible for my school."¹¹

Muirl was so successful as a teacher that the Grant County superintendent offered her two possible teaching posts for the 1912–13 school year. She chose another school near Whitman, Nebraska, and probably lived at home. It is uncertain which district she taught, but she described the location as "15 miles from home and 11 miles from Lena," somewhere in northeastern Grant County. Fortunately for Muirl, this was an especially long school year that lasted until June 1913. By this time in the late spring of 1913, Muirl's long-distance courtship with Harry had progressed to engagement. She would teach one final segment of school, from August through December of 1913, near Hyannis in Grant County, before marrying Harry Shimmin on February 3, 1914. She never taught professionally again.

Muirl Dorrrough often demonstrated her personal concern for her school and her students. Few teachers could have shown as much dependability as Miss Dorrrough. Like many western schoolteachers, she boarded with local families who lived within a few miles of the schoolhouse. She left for school before seven o'clock in the morning, either walking or riding a horse, and often did not return until after seven in the evening. Her duties included the physical care of the school. In the autumn and spring, she thoroughly cleaned the schoolhouse and kept it tidy during the school year. Once, she arrived at school and found the stovepipe had fallen on the floor, leaving the floor "black as a stack of black cats." Muirl made repairs as necessary and had new bookshelves constructed for her growing supply of books. Like all rural teachers, she had to keep the room heated; she even organized her own little army of fuel-gatherers—sending children outside to gather dried cattle chips for the school stove.¹²

Besides the tedious physical labor involved in caring for a school, Muirl de-

voted a great deal of energy to meeting the educational needs of her students. She worried about consistent attendance, students' achievement, and examinations. At this time in Nebraska, state officers placed much emphasis on encouraging rural students to complete the eighth grade. Muirl often reminded Harry Shimmin to complete his eighth-grade examination; she even wrote to the county superintendent to schedule a time for the exam. Miss Dorrrough might have been considered a "fun" teacher; she organized holiday school programs, field trips, and even spent recess playing schoolyard games with her students. School was not all fun, however: Miss Dorrrough was a stickler for hard work and consistent attendance. She even held school sessions on Saturdays to compensate for days lost to blizzards.¹³

Muirl often expressed a desire to be the best possible teacher. As a veritable "workaholic," Muirl loved longer school terms and even declared: "I wish I did work that lasted all the year." She worked hard to improve the quality of her skills and the learning environment of her classroom. Miss Dorrrough had high standards of excellence and encouraged literacy among her students. Her schools received books for their libraries and Muirl kept abreast of the latest literature, including educational books and journals. She listed among her reading material, *Ethics for Children*; she also subscribed to *Pathfinder*, *Primary Plans*, and *Normal Instructor*. As a member of a "Literary Club," with other schoolteachers, she read constantly and encouraged her students to do the same. Muirl's reading list included a book of Longfellow poems (a copy of which she gave to Harry's sister, Jessie), *Lady of the Lake*, *The Long Roll*, *The Virginian*, *Ben Hur*, *Last of the Mohicans*, *Audrey*, *Rosary*, *Girl of the Limberlost*, and *Queen and Kate*. She also read works by George Elliott, Daniel Deronda, and J. M. Barrie.¹⁴

Muirl Dorrrough's experiences as a schoolteacher are an adequate depiction of the life of a rural, western

teacher. Contrary to the image of frontier teachers as uneducated girls with little experience, Muirl represented a highly qualified professional who took great care in her teaching duties. She sought supportive contact with other schoolteachers, including her sisters, cousins, and local colleagues. They often visited each other's schools and held regular reading clubs. Muirl Dorrrough's goals for personal teaching excellence led her, along with many others in western Nebraska, to take advantage of new opportunities for further training. This she found at the Alliance Junior Normal School in Alliance, Nebraska, during the summer sessions of 1911 and 1912.

Normal schools began in the United States in 1839, but grew so slowly that by 1860, there were only about twenty normal schools in the country because they "were considered an expensive experiment." After the Civil War, the idea and the need for normal schools grew, as they taught prospective educators how to teach. In 1867 the first (and until 1903 the only) normal school in Nebraska was established as the Nebraska State Normal School at Peru. It began an important tradition of teacher training in the state, but because of distance from the western Nebraska counties, it was available only to a handful of potential teachers.¹⁵

Geography was the defining "thorn in the side" for State Superintendent William K. Fowler. The unique length of the state of Nebraska invited constant comparisons: the distance between Peru and Kimball was the same as that between Peru and Little Rock, Arkansas; Peru to Alliance equaled the distance between Peru and Bloomington, Illinois. "Or," he said, "If we swing the State of Nebraska around Peru as a pivot, the northwest corner of the state will touch Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Chicago, Illinois; Clinton, Kentucky; Tipton, Tennessee; and Denison, Texas." The situation needed to be remedied soon and Fowler cried to the rooftops of Lincoln, "The day has come for Nebraska to wake

Muir Dorrough and the Alliance Junior Normal School

up and make better provision for the professional training of her teachers."¹⁶

In order to expand the opportunities for normal training to more students in northern and western Nebraska, the first six-week summer normal training session began in 1873 at St. Mary's Academy in O'Neill. Summer normal programs were vital as "the means of bringing the advantages of the school to a number of teachers who could not attend the school as regular students."¹⁷ Normal institute training was relatively available in eastern Nebraska through the end of the century. Further, the growth of the teachers' colleges at Nebraska universities only broadened training opportunities.

Normal training in eastern Nebraska was a vital step in the direction of having qualified teachers, but the educational opportunities in Nebraska were becoming tragically unbalanced. The state normal school did not benefit western counties. By 1890, however, most counties in the West had already begun to establish local training programs called county institutes. These were held for two to six weeks every summer in western county seats, and offered sessions in basic instruction methods. The purpose of the county institutes was clearly stated: in distant locations where teachers did not have education available to them, a six-week course was useful to improve their qualifications.¹⁸

In 1891 Hemingford in Box Butte County began holding yearly institutes, but by 1899, the county superintendent reported that these institutes had never lasted for more than two weeks. Local county institutes had become inadequate to meet the growing certification demands. In order to consolidate the county institutes into more efficient training factories, the state recommended that multiple counties combine their institute into "union normal institutes." As many as five counties could have joint normal sessions each summer. The results were desirable: "The merging of funds place within reach of

their teachers the advantages of a first class normal school, if only for six weeks." Hence, increased funds, better resources, longer sessions, more certifications, and better teachers were an appealing outcome.¹⁹

The first union normal was held in 1890 for Johnson and Nemaha counties. By 1902 union normals had been established throughout Nebraska: in



State Superintendent William K. Fowler.
Nebraskans, 1854-1904 (Omaha: Bee Publishing Co., 1904)

Culbertson (for Chase, Hayes, Hitchcock and Red Willow counties), Holdrege (for Frontier, Gosper, Harlan and Phelps counties), Sidney (for Banner, Cheyenne, Kimball, and Scottsbluff counties), Hyannis (for Grant, Hooker and McPherson counties), Tekamah (for Burt and Thurston counties) and Creighton (for Knox and Pierce counties). The success of these normals eclipsed the earlier and less efficient county institutes, and they set the stage for the later establishment of the state junior normal schools in western Nebraska. Union normal institutes were not state supported; they were funded with a combination of moneys from the counties that sponsored them. Because these institutes lacked the benefits of state sup-

port, union normals also proved inadequate to meet growing educational demands in western Nebraska.²⁰

Complaints about teacher scarcity, the inability to meet professional certification demands, distance from the state normal school, and lack of financial support arrived swiftly and vocally from the highest office. "Each fall we have in the schools of this state over 2,000 new, inexperienced teachers. Of the 9,000 teachers employed every year . . . less than 16% have anything like professional training."²¹

Moreover, a comparison of the county institute enrollments of 1902 showed that of the eastern institute enrollees, 46 percent had received some kind of normal training, whereas in the western counties, only 22 percent had received similar training. This obvious imbalance in teacher qualification between eastern and western Nebraska necessitated immediate action.²²

In 1902 the state superintendent recommended that a state normal school be established at the more centrally-located Kearney, and that junior normal schools be established at Alliance and McCook. Kearney received its designation as the site of a new state normal school in 1903. It would be important as a state school, but not adequate to handle the teacher-training load for western Nebraska. That burden fell upon the junior normal schools. This was a new concept, but Superintendent Fowler explained that "by a junior normal I mean a normal school conducted at the expense of the state ten or twelve weeks each year during the summer months."²³ The school sessions would begin in June and end in August. Four terms at a junior normal would be the equivalent of one year at a state normal school.

The junior normal for far-western Nebraska would be located at Alliance, because of its location as the "geographical and railroad center of what may be termed the panhandle of the state," and because of its centrality to the teachers in fifteen western counties. True, these counties were very sparsely settled, but

more than 500 teachers were still required for their districts. It was expected that a junior normal at Alliance would enroll at least 250 teachers for a summer session. The McCook site would provide similar conveniences for eight counties in southwestern Nebraska. Valentine was added to this initial list for northern Nebraska counties. Together the three locations would service nearly 1,750 teachers in western Nebraska.²⁴

Coinciding with Superintendent Fowler's suggestion for junior normal schools were his recommendations for higher teacher qualification standards. For city schools, he called for teachers with "at least a three-year high school education and one year's normal school training." The rural school standards were not as strict: teachers only had to maintain an equivalent high school-level knowledge of common subjects and also have one year's drill in a teachers' training course. Fowler was a realist. "These demands are as high as conditions will warrant," he claimed. Even with the new junior normals in western Nebraska, the rural school districts would still suffer from teacher scarcity and high turnover. Nevertheless, he was optimistic that the junior normal schools would significantly expand teacher qualifications and raise the motivation level of young teachers.²⁵

Superintendent Fowler issued his official announcement of the formation of the junior normal schools on April 20, 1903, to the county superintendents in western Nebraska: "House Roll No. 100 establishes Junior Normal Schools at Alliance, McCook and Valentine." The law allowed the superintendent to expand the number of junior normals by two and Fowler announced Holdrege and North Platte as the locations of the fourth and fifth schools. The law required that attendees be no younger than fourteen years of age, have "good moral character," and "good physical health." Finally they needed a general knowledge of "common school branches."²⁶

The junior normal schools in western Nebraska carried a distinguishing birth-

right: they would receive state funds, appropriated according to numbers of students enrolled; and admission would be completely free. Put simply, "The Junior Normal Schools are for those who cannot afford to take a complete course elsewhere." Again, distance was the most significant cost factor, because a majority of western Nebraska teachers could not afford to attend the state normal schools, both of which were located in the eastern half of the state.²⁷

To further alleviate travel costs, the law even provided subsidies for those teachers having to travel to and from the junior normals by train. Not even institute fees would be charged. This was truly tax-supported, republican education at its very best. A main reason for the low cost of the junior normals was that no buildings would be constructed—the normals would use local high schools in the chosen cities. The county institute program would be unnecessary, unless distance or inconvenience precluded a teacher's attendance at a junior normal.

The law provided that each county in western Nebraska incorporate itself within the "territory" of a junior normal school. The territory of the Alliance Junior Normal School included Sioux, Dawes, Box Butte, Sheridan, Cheyenne, Scottsbluff, Banner, Kimball, Deuel, Grant, and Hooker counties. Fowler asked each county superintendent to respond in writing with his or her opinion about the junior normal. He also wanted to know which counties intended to incorporate under the junior normal law.²⁸

Responses to his request arrived quickly and enthusiastically. Letters from county school superintendents flowed into the state office in Lincoln as, one-by-one, western counties accepted incorporation. From Banner County: "I am elated over the passage of House Roll No. 100. I will use every effort possible to secure a good attendance." From Sioux County: "I am glad the Junior Normal bill has become a law. It is what we need in western Ne-

braska. I will do all in my power to make the school at Alliance a success." From Kimball County, a superintendent expressed his happiness that the state was doing away with the county institutes. Dawes, Sheridan, and Cheyenne counties followed with statements of complete support and their intention to "get as many teachers to attend the entire time as possible." With encouragement from their supervisors, schoolteachers were even more likely to participate in this opportunity.²⁹

Not only did county superintendents heartily cheer the junior normal schools, but they requested that normal attendance become mandatory for county certification and that salaries be distributed according to how much junior normal training a teacher had received. The law itself anticipated a raise in teachers' wages, and Superintendent Fowler hoped that "every teacher who attends any one of these schools for the full term of ten weeks will be worth at least \$10 per month more to her school."³⁰

Besides the obvious benefit of a wage increase, perhaps the most appealing aspect of the new law for prospective teachers was that they could receive the same training and certification at the junior normal schools as if they had gone to a state normal school. Excitement over the new law spread rapidly throughout western Nebraska as teachers prepared to spend summers in training and as five communities prepared to give their new summer citizens "a hearty welcome and royal entertainment."³¹

In 1903 Alliance, Nebraska, was a growing railroad center for the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad, with the largest railroad stockyards in the state. This growth was encouraged by the agitation for Alliance to become an educational center in western Nebraska. The movement to establish a state normal school in the west had received great support by Alliance boosters and newspapers. Before Kearney was selected as the new state normal school, Alliance newspapers carried frequent

Muir Dorrough and the Alliance Junior Normal School



School buildings and churches in Alliance were used for sessions of the Alliance Junior Normal School. Courtesy Knight Museum, Alliance.

items encouraging Box Butte County citizens to fight for the school. Even without the new state normal school, Alliance would certainly receive benefits by hosting the junior normal school, especially to those who planned to rent rooms, furnish board, or provide goods to the incoming students and teachers.³²

Alliance newspapers soon began their announcements for the start of the new term, and the call for enrollees, most of whom would come from Box Butte County. Newspapers announced significant information, including the selection of the principal and teachers, and the listing of the "Course of Study" and "Board and Room" for all incoming students. The principal of the Alliance Junior Normal publicly requested that

the citizens of the community provide room and board at reasonable rates.³³

On June 12, 1903, one local paper announced, "The Junior Normal opened Monday morning under very promising circumstances and with a bright outlook for a profitable session . . . the pupils are entering the work with a will." Throughout the summer of 1903, newspapers continued to carry weekly information about the activities of the junior normal. Both newspapers even offered the school its own weekly column, which shared gossip, tidbits, social, and school activities with the community. Weekly lectures at the junior normal by visiting professors were announced to the public, as citizens could benefit from speeches ranging from the "Physiology

of Nebraska" to "The Peculiar Physical Growth of Youth."³⁴

Newspapers provided updates on the progress of coursework in model school training (hands-on practical teaching), literature, physics, geometry, algebra, agriculture, and the literary society. Music programs, art shows, field trips, and club news were shared freely with the attentive Alliance public. Students' arrivals and departures were also announced throughout the summer. By July 17, enrollment had peaked at 157 from just over 100 a month and a half earlier.³⁵

A visiting state deputy superintendent of education praised the school's success and also complimented the teachers and pupils for their efforts. Other important visitors showed the obvious

statewide interest in the junior normal experiment; the president of the state normal school at Peru visited the junior normals at Alliance and Valentine. Teachers and superintendents from Box Butte and surrounding counties made regular visits to classrooms and lectures. In later weeks and years, congressmen, senators, Box Butte County Superintendent of Education J. W. Baumgardner, and even Governor John H. Mickey would visit the junior normal school at Alliance. The school was obviously an important experiment in republican higher education, and many wished to observe its influence and assess its results. The county superintendents from Dawes, Sheridan, Box Butte, Sioux, Grant, Banner, Kimball, and Scottsbluff counties all spent the last week of the term with the student teachers.³⁶

The *Pioneer Grip* of August 14, 1903, announced the end of the first junior normal session and heralded its great success: "The Normal is over. An excellent course of study has been completed and stronger teachers will return to the schools in the different counties. It has been a success in every way." Not only had new friendships been formed, but the educational quality of western Nebraska was lifted up "to that broader level where it belongs."³⁷

Total enrollment in the 1903 Alliance Junior Normal School session capped at 236. This number was only fourteen fewer than Superintendent Fowler had predicted (or hoped) would attend. Students from nine western Nebraska counties attended, along with four students from outside the area. Each county had at least ten teachers represented, except for Grant County, with one, and Kimball County with six. Box Butte provided eighty-three teachers; Dawes and Sheridan counties had between thirty-five and forty-five attending.³⁸

Who better to assess the impact of the Alliance Junior Normal School than the student teachers themselves? In "Resolutions" adopted by the first-year veterans, they collectively declared, "We, the teachers of [western] counties, having derived great benefit from the Alliance Junior Normal . . . wish to express our appreciation and gratitude," to the state office of education, principal, teachers, county superintendents, and the people of Alliance. So great were the advantages of the junior normal that they demanded a "permanent Normal" in northwestern Nebraska.³⁹ Western Nebraska teachers benefitted not only from the quality normal training, but also from the social interaction, cultural activities, and communication with edu-

cators from the rest of the state.

The Alliance Junior Normal School had been a marked success and once again, the letters from county superintendents flowed into the state offices in Lincoln. From Box Butte County: "The Junior Normal at Alliance was a grand success . . . [it] materially increased our supply of teachers, inducing more of our young people to make teaching their profession." From Dawes County: "The Junior Normal has passed the experimental stage. It has proven a success without a doubt to the most skeptical." From Grant County: "I am well satisfied that money expended for Junior Normal Schools in Western Nebraska is casting bread upon the waters." From Kimball County: "The Alliance Junior Normal has been a success in every way." The Scottsbluff County superintendent gave the most hopeful results: the number of junior normal attendees from his county almost equaled the total number of teachers needed there. Also, all teachers showed greater determination to better their certification status.⁴⁰

Similar accolades followed from Principal W. H. Bartz at Alliance and from Governor Mickey and Congressman E. J. Burkett, both of whom had visited Alliance during the term. Because of the enthusiastic response to the five junior



Alliance, Nebraska, July 3, 1914. NSHS-RG4152-1-27

Muirl Dorrrough and the Alliance Junior Normal School

normal schools, the success and interest continued to increase. Although in 1904 enrollment actually decreased at four of the junior normals—only McCook attendance increased—in all five of the schools, the number of students who stayed the entire eight weeks actually rose. After the 1904 session, the county superintendent of Box Butte County announced the happiest results of the improved teacher training. School boards had agreed to pay teachers an average of \$5 more a month. Wages went from \$30 to \$35 in one year. This he credited to the “preparation the teachers have made in the summers of 1903 and 1904 [in] attending the Junior Normal at Alliance.”⁴¹

Superintendent Fowler must have felt even greater satisfaction when he received the report from Sioux County in 1904: “At no period in the history of Sioux County has there been greater interest in educational matters than at the present time. By the thorough preparation and professional training received at the Junior Normal Schools, the past two years, the teachers are enabled to do better work in the schools than ever before.”⁴²

The junior normal schools had such a marked impact on western Nebraska education that in 1905, the State Board

of Education increased funding by \$3,000 to the junior normals. They also improved certification standards to demand that all teachers of lower grades in the state of Nebraska be required to hold at least a second-grade certificate. More than 6,000 students had attended summer normal training throughout the state, and these credits could be applied to renewed certificates. In 1907 the Nebraska State Legislature amended the 1903 law to increase the number of junior normal schools to eight. Junior normals were then reestablished at Alliance, McCook, North Platte and Valentine and opened at Alma, Broken Bow, Geneva and O’Neill. After two years with eight junior normal schools in Nebraska, the state superintendent proudly declared that “never did the state do so much good with so little money in the professional training of its teachers.”⁴³

By 1910 the Alliance Junior Normal School had become known as the educational center of northwestern Nebraska. Alliance continued to lobby for the establishment of a third state normal school for northwestern Nebraska. This ferment increased heatedly until Chadron was chosen over Alliance in 1911. The presence of seven saloons in Alliance had disqualified it as a “permanent school town.” With the founding of

the Chadron State Teacher’s College in 1911, the Alliance Junior Normal School was to be discontinued. However, its popularity, low cost, and closer proximity to Sand Hills counties prompted the Nebraska State Legislature to extend its charter through 1914.⁴⁴

Muirl Dorrrough received her junior normal training during the final years of the Alliance school’s charter. In February 1911 she was still teaching in District Six of Hooker County. Her pay was fair for 1911: she received forty-five dollars per month. Muirl wanted to take advantage of the inexpensive teacher training in western Nebraska. Because the Chadron State Teacher’s College had been established, rumors circulated that the Alliance school would be discontinued. Muirl wrote to Harry that “there will be no Normal at Alliance next summer. So Bonnie [Dorrrough—her sister] and I will have to go to Broken Bow. My I dread it, the going to the Normal I mean.” Perhaps she dreaded the workload, or more likely she dreaded the distance, as Broken Bow was farther than Alliance. At any rate, Muirl showed willingness to make the sacrifice for her education. She wrote again that “I don’t know where we will go to school this summer.”⁴⁵

Fortunately for Muirl and Bonnie, Alliance did have its junior normal session





(Left to right): **Bonnie, Muirl, and Fay Dorrrough.** Courtesy of David E. Radke

that year. In June she wrote from Alliance that they had divided responsibilities for their new living arrangements. Bonnie would buy the food and cook for both women. Muirl expected to work hard scholastically that summer, because while weighing 140 pounds at the summer's start, she foresaw that "I won't be likely to be quite so 'hefty' when school closes."⁴⁶

By mid-July, Muirl and Bonnie were fully acclimated to Alliance Junior Normal life. Besides schoolwork, the sisters had socialized and participated in local cultural events, including music entertainment, which Muirl pronounced as "sure fine," including a piece called "Birds and the Brook . . . the best piece of music I ever heard." Surely the girls did not receive this much exposure to cultural events back in Whitman. Light entertainment provided diversion and opportunities to gain culture in the "big city." However, the summer heat did not make studying too easy for the women. In spite

of the stifling heat, instructors and students alike admitted excitement for the quality of the junior normal for 1911, because the "school work this year is better, quite a bit more than last year."⁴⁷

After returning home, Muirl saw immediate benefits to her summer training. She received her Whitman post with a delightful new salary of \$50 per month. "Isn't that great?" she asked Harry. Flying high from her successful term in Alliance, Muirl remembered fondly that "I enjoyed myself so much at school this summer. I am planning to go again next term. Oh! Harry, I made such good grades. I am so glad that I did. Bonnie did fine too."⁴⁸ Truly, Muirl's reaction fulfilled Superintendent Fowler's original dream that, from attending a junior normal school, rural schoolteachers would have greater motivation to improve their teaching skills and certification.

After her school term north of Whitman, Muirl reconsidered her decision to attend the Alliance session in the

summer of 1912. Her younger sister, Faye, had been ill and at home. Muirl disliked being away from her for so long and felt obligated to spend the summer with her family. As much as she wanted to be at home with Faye, Muirl was torn over the decision and longed to go to Alliance to improve her credentials: "I have my two-year certificate as I told you I believe. But I would like to go. The Normals do so much good." She really wished to take advantage of the 1912 term because she feared it would be the last.⁴⁹

Muirl's teaching skills were of utmost importance to her. The new school law of 1905 had stated that a second grade certification was sufficient for teaching in the grade schools. Muirl had obtained this level, but she wanted to improve. She decided once again to attend the Alliance Junior Normal School in 1912 and informed Harry of her intentions: "I am going to work for a county first certificate this summer. 'I am very aspiring' for a certainty."⁵⁰

By June, Muirl and Bonnie were once again in Alliance, living at 210 Yellowstone Avenue. The first two weeks of school progressed smoothly: "I like the Normal work real well. The teachers are excellent." Enrollment was higher than it had been in years, with 141 students. She and Bonnie again spent time socializing, attending art exhibits and concerts, and even found a little time to study for "Primary Methods" and "Algebra" exams. Both had decided to return home after the midterm exams on June 21 and 22 to be with Faye, who was still ill. That summer the Dorrroughs' cousin, Ansley Cowan, had accompanied the women to the junior normal, but he stayed for the remainder of the summer.⁵¹

The sisters' work, although brief, paid off. In October 1912 Muirl's county second grade certificate in Grant County was renewed. Bonnie's salary increased the following year to \$55 a month. Muirl never returned to the Alliance Junior Normal School, but continued teaching in Grant County through late 1913.⁵²

Muirl Dorrrough's experiences as a

Muirl Dorrough and the Alliance Junior Normal School

schoolteacher in rural Nebraska fly in the face of scholarly criticisms of teacher quality in Nebraska between 1880 and 1920. Certainly, the rapid growth rate of the western counties after 1880 perpetuated the problems of teacher scarcity, lack of training, and difficult rural travel. However, the state of Nebraska responded to these problems with creativity and farsightedness. The establishment of the junior normal schools in 1903 was a significant turning point in teacher training for rural western Nebraska. The very desires Superintendent Fowler had expressed of “elevating” teacher motivation and standards through the junior normal system was certainly achieved.

The Alliance Junior Normal School promoted an educational fervor in far western Nebraska that effected a majority of school teachers in that region. Institutional and personal standards for teaching increased greatly. The success of these schools caused a larger number of county second and first grade certificates to be issued, teacher wages went up in many counties, and the state of Nebraska raised the certification standards throughout the state as normal training became more available to all teachers. Muirl Dorrough represented the type of teacher in western Nebraska who was profoundly effected by the Alliance Junior Normal School. She brought with her already-existing qualities of care and responsibility for her students and added higher levels of motivation and a stronger desire to seek self-improvement in her teaching.

Notes

¹ Louise Radke, Savanna, Illinois, oral interview with David E. Radke, Oct. 10, 1998, David E. Radke private collection, Elizabeth, Illinois (hereafter cited as Radke Collection).

² William Dorrough homestead entry, v. 45:143, U.S. General Land Office Tract Books, Nebraska State Historical Society; Muirl Dorrough’s teacher’s contract, Oct. 3, 1910, Radke Collection.

³ Frederick C. Luebke, “Time, Place, and Culture in Nebraska History,” *Nebraska History* 69 (Winter 1988): 157.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Courtney Ann Vaughn-Roberson, “Having a Purpose in Life: Western Women Teachers in the Twentieth Century,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 5 (Spring 1985): 107.

⁶ Mary Hurlbut Cordier, “Prairie Schoolwomen, Mid-1850s to 1920s in Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 8 (Spring 1988): 104.

⁷ Walker D. Wyman, *Frontier Woman: The Life of a Woman Homesteader on the Dakota Frontier* (River Falls, Wis.: University of Wisconsin-River Falls Press, 1972), 31.

⁸ Cordier, “Prairie Schoolwomen,” 102, 107–8.

⁹ Wyman, *Frontier Woman*, 32.

¹⁰ Muirl Dorrough, Pullman, Nebraska, to Harry Shimmin, Dunwell, Nebraska, Apr. 10, 1911, Radke Collection. The Dorrough letters and documents cited hereafter are from the Radke Collection.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Aug. 31 and Oct. 13, 1911; Feb. 26, 1912.

¹² Dorrough, Elva, Nebraska, to Shimmin, Dec. 17, 1912; Dorrough, Hyannis, Nebraska, to Shimmin, Nov. 12, 1913.

¹³ Dorrough, Whitman, Nebraska, to Shimmin, Jan. 29, 1912.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*; “Dorrough, Muriel [*sic*]—Examination Record, Grant County, Nebraska, 1912,” Grant County Historical Society, copy in possession of author.

¹⁵ Nebraska Department of Education, *State Superintendent’s Report*, 32 (1907–8): 605; 28 (1901–2): 175.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 28 (1901–2): 181 and 147.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 32 (1907–8): 608.

¹⁸ “Union Normal Institutes,” *ibid.*, 28 (1901–2): 144.

¹⁹ J. W. Baumgardner, “Box Butte County,” *ibid.*, 27 (1899–1900): 227; 28 (1901–2): 147.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 28 (1901–2): 146.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 147.

²² *Ibid.*, 30 (1903–4): 62.

²³ *Ibid.*, 28 (1901–2): 180 and 182.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 30 (1903–4): 62–63.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 28 (1901–2): 185–86.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 30 (1903–4): 86–87. See also *Laws of Nebraska*, 1903, 543–44.

²⁷ *State Superintendent’s Report* 30 (1903–4): 284–85.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 290–91.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 286.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 293.

³² *Pioneer Grip* (Alliance, Nebraska), Mar. 27 and Apr. 3, 1903; *Alliance Herald*, Apr. 3, 1903.

³³ *Alliance Herald*, Apr. 4, 1903; *Pioneer Grip*, Apr. 17, 1903.

³⁴ *Pioneer Grip*, June 12 and 26, 1903; *Alliance Herald*, July 10, 1903.

³⁵ *Pioneer Grip*, July 17, 1903.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, July 14, 17 and 24, 1903; Aug. 7, 1903; *Alliance Herald*, Aug. 14, 1903.

³⁷ *Pioneer Grip*, Aug. 14, 1903.

³⁸ *State Superintendent’s Report*, 30 (1903–4): 300.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 302.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 314–16.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 335, 362.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 425.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 32 (1907–8): 68–69; 33 (1909–10): viii.

⁴⁴ Anna N. Phillips and Vilma D. Ball, *History of Box Butte County, Nebraska* (Privately published, n.d.), 72.

⁴⁵ Dorrough to Shimmin, Feb. 24, 1911; Dorrough, Pullman, Nebraska, to Shimmin, Apr. 30, 1911.

⁴⁶ Dorrough, Alliance, to Shimmin, June 2, 1911.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, and July 14, 1911.

⁴⁸ Dorrough, Whitman, Nebraska, to Shimmin, Aug. 31, 1911.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, Jan. 29, 1912.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, Apr. 12, 1912. The 1905 school law provided for three classes of county certificates: third grade, second grade, and first grade (the term “grade” here is synonymous with rank). The holder of a third grade county certificate met the minimum qualifications to teach, and with additional education and training, could be examined for the higher grade certificates. The third grade county certificate required passage of an examination covering orthography, reading, penmanship, geography, arithmetic, physiology and hygiene, English composition, English grammar, and U.S. history. The examination for the second grade certificate added civil government, bookkeeping, blackboard drawing, theory and art of teaching, and the elements of agriculture. To achieve a first grade certificate, applicants had to pass examination covering algebra, botany, geometry, and physics. Applicants for the two higher grade certificates were required to have a certain number of weeks of normal training, or the equivalent in successful teaching experience. Nebraska State Department of Public Instruction, “Rules Governing Issuance of County Certificates Under the New Law for the Certification of Teachers in Effect October 1, 1905,” undated pamphlet, NSHS Library.

⁵¹ Dorrough, Whitman, Nebraska, to Shimmin, June 16, 1912.

⁵² Muirl Dorrough, “Second Grade Teacher’s Certificate,” Oct. 1, 1912, copy in possession of the author.