

SCHOOL ON A RANCH
Gerry Biram

My sister and I grew up on a Wyoming ranch 40 miles from Laramie. We had as many as sixteen schools in our district. Because ranches were very far apart and roads were never plowed in winter, there was no chance of consolidation, so each family had their own school. Our teacher stayed in our home paying a part of her \$80 a month salary for board and room. Our classroom was the bunk house. It was big enough for two pupil desks, a teacher desk, a supply cupboard and a pot bellied stove. My sister became 6 in 1927 and her first teacher was our mother's sister. She was excellent really stressing a phonetic approach in reading so Dorothy learned to read very quickly. How I envied her this ability and hated being alone in our house all day while she was having fun at school!

Each summer after that my mother would go to the county superintendent's office in Laramie and secure names of qualified teachers. She would interview several and choose one she thought would be best for us.

Two years later when I turned 6 in May, my mother decided to spend the entire summer teaching me the phonetic approach so I could read well when school actually started. She was afraid that the new teacher might not do a thorough job!

I still remember that first teacher of mine, Mary Shover! She was young, pretty and had gorgeous auburn hair that hung in curls. She wrapped it with rags each evening before bed. She was a jewel. She stressed hard work, drill and fun! She had my father make a sand table so we could make three dimensional dioramas combining social studies and art, create holiday scenes, and illustrate books. She taught an appreciation of poetry and how to write our own as we tapped out meter and rhythm. I kept track of her until she died in the late 1970s.

Occasionally we would get together with other neighbors children for an afternoon of games and fun at one of the schools. Sometimes we would have a program to entertain parents.

All schools followed the state course of study in all subjects. Diagraming sentences, creative writing and doing research was part of our English curriculum. Health, agriculture, history, geography, arithmetic, spelling and literature were all studied. From fifth grade on, we took state examinations. All tests were graded by a county board and pupils in each county were ranked according to the test results. How my sister and I drilled with our teacher to help us memorize facts in every area so we could do well!

At the close of the eight month school term in mid-May, all pupils in grades six through eight in each county gathered in their county seat for an all day event. In the morning there was a spelling contest. After lunch, graduation exercises for the eight graders took place. The chorus sang several of the songs learned during the past winter prescribed by the course of study. Some pupils gave readings. My sister and I always sang a duet.

It was a great day but when my time came to graduate, there was a little sadness. Going to school in town with many students

in a class was going to be a challenge. I hoped to be ready for it.