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Summary of Oral History Interview with Dorothea Cress

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Interviewed by Irene Francis

Dorothea "Dot" Cress was born on August 7, 1910, in Jennings, Kansas, and later moved to Colorado. She attended Canon City High School, graduating in 1929, and then studied at Greeley Teachers College. Financial constraints led her to begin teaching in 1930 after earning a temporary teaching certificate. Her first position was at the Greenleaf School in Wet Mountain Valley, a one-room schoolhouse where she taught multiple grades, including children who spoke little English and older students who had never learned to read.

Dorothea boarded with local families and was responsible for janitorial work, maintaining the fire, and carrying water. Students often rode horses or came by buggy. She later taught at the Ilse School, where she had up to 20 students and encountered similar teaching conditions. During her career, she saw firsthand the impact of the Great Depression on rural families, who relied on subsistence farming and ranching.

She married Earl Cress in 1933 after meeting him while boarding with his family. They later moved to Westcliffe, where she resumed teaching in 1956 at the newly consolidated school. She primarily taught fourth and fifth grades until her retirement.

Dorothea fondly recalled community events at rural schools, including music programs, taffy pulls, and spelling bees. She detailed the discipline of the time, including an instance where she had to spank a student for nearly striking his sister with an axe. Schools also had strict rules for teachers, including a requirement for female teachers to remain unmarried.

Throughout her 24-year career, Dorothea saw significant changes in education but maintained that small rural schools provided valuable individual attention to students. She emphasized the strong community ties, self-sufficiency, and discipline that defined early education in Custer County.

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