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Summary of Oral History Talk by Betty Munson

On November 27, 1989, Betty Munson gave a talk to the Custer-Fremont Historical Society about the history and impact of one-room schoolhouses in Custer County. Her presentation focused on the role of these schools in shaping community values, the challenges teachers faced, and how the curriculum influenced students' moral and civic development.

History of Rural Schools in Custer County

Munson provided an overview of early education in the county. Before 1877, Custer County was part of Fremont County, and the first public school was established in a log cabin southwest of Silver Cliff. By 1881, the county had 20 school districts, with Rosita being the largest, boasting 288 students. Other schools included Querida, Ula, and Wetmore. Enrollment was strong, with over 1,100 of the 1,400 school-aged children attending classes.

Teaching Conditions and Challenges

Munson described the difficult conditions teachers faced, particularly before 1900. Many lived in the homes of local families and sometimes had to share a bed with a child. Some schoolhouses lacked heating, forcing teachers to arrive early to start fires. Water supplies were also scarce, requiring students or teachers to haul water from nearby wells. Salaries varied greatly over time—records from 1885 show teachers earning \$36 a month, while by 1946, some teachers made as much as \$1,350 per year.

Curriculum and Values Education

A key focus of Munson's talk was how school curricula reinforced values such as patriotism, integrity, and work ethic. She argued that one-room schools helped shape good citizens by integrating moral lessons into subjects like reading and social studies. She highlighted how early American readers included patriotic stories, classic literature, and Bible passages, reinforcing a strong moral foundation.

Munson lamented that, beginning in the 1960s, schools moved away from teaching traditional values, emphasizing individualism over civic responsibility. She pointed out that early textbooks encouraged memorization of poetry and historical facts, whereas modern curricula focused on self-esteem and social issues. She also criticized the removal of patriotic themes from textbooks and the decline in memorization exercises.

Cultural Shifts and Decline of One-Room Schools

Munson observed that societal changes led to the decline of one-room schoolhouses by the 1950s, as rural schools were consolidated into larger districts. She discussed how modern education shifted focus away from discipline and traditional learning methods, which she believed contributed to societal decline.

She also spoke about how school buildings were used for other purposes, including church meetings, elections, social events, and dances. Schools played a central role in rural life, strengthening community bonds.

Reflections and Personal Experiences

Munson shared memories of her own education and early teaching years. She recalled walking long distances to school, the impact of strict discipline, and the importance of community involvement. She reflected on how many students from rural schools went on to become productive members of society despite limited resources.

Conclusion

Munson's talk highlighted the vital role of one-room schoolhouses in shaping early American communities. She emphasized their contributions to moral education, civic responsibility, and community cohesion. Her reflections provide valuable insight into the challenges and traditions of rural education in Custer County.

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