

<< Alumni Profiles

Little Schoolhouse on the Prairie

BY CHUCK GREEN ('93)

AS THE SUN INTERMITTENTLY PEEKS OUT FROM behind some clouds on the mid-May morning, the children begin arriving. Adorned in pioneer clothing and carrying metal lunch pails, they talk and laugh, expending some youthful energy before the school day begins.

A few hundred yards away, a pair of bison graze in the glistening, tall grass sprouting from the rolling hills. Geese at a nearby pond honk incessantly and a few western meadowlarks — Nebraska's state bird, as any of the arriving students will eagerly tell you — flit past from a nearby field.

Teacher Mary Lou Henn ('88) stands at the doorway of the one-room schoolhouse, welcoming the children to another school day in 1892 Nebraska.

As the children prepare to enter the classroom, they divide into single-file, boys' and girls' lines. The girls enter first, through the coat room, where they hang coats and store their lunches before tak-

ing their seats. The boys follow, and soon, each student has taken his or her seat — girls on one side of the classroom, boys on the other.

The students sit at their desks quietly, hands folded, obeying the maxim displayed on the wall at the front of the class: "Silence is Golden."

The only out-of-place oddity of this 19th century Great Plains setting is the big, yellow school bus driving away after delivering the children.

It's actually May 2017, and the fourth-graders are visiting from Lincoln's Roper Elementary. They have come to spend the day in the one-room Heritage School at Lincoln's Pioneers Park, culminating their social studies unit on Nebraska history.

As class begins, the bison continue to graze off in the distance, unconcerned with the date.

A PASSION FOR THE PAST

For as long as she can remember, Henn has loved

history — particularly Nebraska history. As a young girl, she enjoyed a steady diet of Laura Ingalls Wilder's "Little House on the Prairie" novels, complemented by the popular namesake TV series which ran from 1974-83.

Growing up on her family's farm near Brainard, Neb., with all the daily chores that came with it — yes, she rose before dawn to milk the cows — helped fuel Henn's fascination with early prairie life.

"Even then, I knew I wanted to teach," she said. "History and farm life were interests, and everything just flowed from there."

After high school, Henn studied education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her teaching career, which began in 1988, eventually led her to Heritage School.

Built in the late 1800s, the schoolhouse stood for decades as the Cunningham School, seven miles north of Valparaiso, Neb., before a fire severely damaged it in the 1930s. It was rebuilt to its original specs and character, and has not changed much since.

The building was brought to Lincoln's State Fair Park in the mid-1970s, when the first fourth-graders began visiting. In 2009, after UNL acquired the land that would become Nebraska Innovation Campus, the schoolhouse was moved to its new location near the Pioneers Park Nature Center, where it was officially dedicated Oct. 5, 2010.

This fall, Henn will begin her ninth year of temporarily transporting fourth-graders back to a different time. She conducts her classes in 1890s-era garb, donning a bonnet and a long pioneer skirt, explaining to her wide-eyed students what life was like on the Great Plains 125 years ago.

"I want students to value the past, and to realize that we couldn't get to where we are today without that past," she said. "I want them to know what people had to go through to get here. For the day they're here, they get a small taste of what life was like for those pioneers."

While each student's personal experience at Heritage School is unique, Henn said, the lack of luxury seems to resonate the most.

"They realize that some of the things they take for granted in their modern lives — TV, their computers and phones, and other conveniences — weren't around back then," she said.

A TRIP TO ANOTHER TIME

Students begin the day by standing to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, which is written on the chalkboard at the front of the class. They then face the flag, which features 44 stars — the 37th of which is



Nebraska's, which became a state March 1, 1867 — and sing "America" ("My Country 'Tis of Thee").

Henn addresses each student with a "miss" or "mister" before their name. As students raise their hands, they are told to stand to give their answers. Within two or three answers, reminders are no longer needed.

Later, students read aloud from their iconic McGuffey Readers. Each student takes a turn at hand-grinding corn and gets to write with an ink-dipped feather quill. Games, songs and outdoor recess after lunch provide fun distractions.

Occasionally, someone notices the wooden paddle leaning against the wall by the front door. In today's class, it's merely for looks, not punishment.

"Every student has different questions, is fascinated by different things and gets his or her own favorite thing out of it," Henn said.

The students aren't the only ones who enjoy the experience. Parents frequently tell Henn they wish modern classrooms were run more the same way — the courtesy, discipline, respect for elders and work ethic of the time definitely had its advantages.

The day's lessons from Mary Lou Henn, above, include penmanship with quill and ink pots, followed by spelling — "orthography," as it was known in 1892.

AT A GLANCE

MARY LOU HENN

DEGREE
BACHELOR OF
SCIENCE
1988

"One of my favorite things is to see the light in their eyes. They're living something they don't otherwise get to experience."



DAVID WILDER JR./EIDER IMAGING (3)

The Heritage School building was originally located at State Fair Park in Lincoln in the 1970s, but was moved to Pioneers Park in 2010.