

My Sister, the Country Schoolmarm

By Harold Piehler

Oh, I got the job! I got the job!” my sister, Marceline, cried joyfully that day in April 1943. “The school board at Pollard offered me an eight-month contract to teach at Fairplay School for \$80 a month.”

I vividly recall my older sister’s excitement upon returning home to tell her family about her teaching position at a little one-room country school in south-central Kansas. Marceline was not yet 20 years of age and had only a 60-hour teaching certificate from Sterling College when she began her career.

As her younger teenage brother, I was somewhat skeptical. Pollard, a small, churchless community with a reputation for having some tough characters, was only 20 miles from our home. However, Marceline would stay with a kindhearted widow who had given room and board to the previous teacher.

The little one-room country schoolhouse had no indoor plumbing—just two small outhouses. A small hand pump outside would provide water, which had to be brought inside with a bucket and dipper. A small coal furnace, which my sister would have to keep going, would provide the only heat during cold weather.

Marceline would have to serve as teacher, coach, janitor and nurse for the seven students, all boys, in five grades. She would have to walk or ride her bicycle the three miles to and from school in all kinds of weather. She had no sick leave, let alone any health or insurance plan. For her services she would receive all of \$640.

Undaunted, my sister began her teaching career that September. Something of a tomboy, she played football and baseball with her seven protégés. They were not supposed to tackle the teacher, but once a little fourth-grader forgot, and

she fell down flatter and harder than she had ever fallen before. The other boys were horrified, but she pulled herself together and gently squeezed the little fellow as he apologized over and over.

Another time, a youngster politely asked her to keep a three-foot snakeskin in her jacket pocket

for him while he helped the other boys gather wood during lunch hour. She said later that she carefully avoided putting her hand in her jacket.

In warm weather, Marceline and her students ate their lunch from their little containers or lunch boxes on the cement steps of the school. She soon learned that boys could giggle as much as girls. Often my sister and her boys would spend the rest of the noon hour riding their bicycles around the section, viewing nature firsthand.

One third-grade boy was very embarrassed when he split his pants on the slippery slide during recess. The six other

grinning boys escorted him inside to a closet, where he took off his pants. They were handed over to their schoolmarm, who repaired them as best she could with some thread and a needle that she had in her desk. Then the pants were returned to the grateful but embarrassed boy who was once again decent enough to take part in the day’s activities.

Halloween was a major celebration at Fairplay. My sister and her willing helpers decorated the building with cornstalks and pumpkins and prepared a little program. Bobbing for apples was a must, and the boys persisted in their efforts to get their new teacher to take part.

She thought she was safe competing against an elderly man, the clerk of the school board. They knelt on opposite sides of a large washtub filled with water with one apple floating on top.



Marceline Piehler, 1944.

At a signal, they both ducked their heads into the tub.

My sister was lucky to get the apple between her teeth. With her hair dripping about her face, she came up with it. Her opponent raised his head about the same time, but to her surprise, he took a quick breath and quickly ducked down a second time. He had lost his false teeth in his attempt to get the apple, and he had to bob a second time to retrieve them!

Some of the older boys in the community were not as polite to the new schoolmarm as her students were. For a Halloween trick, they hoisted her new bicycle to the very top of the silo on the farm where she was staying and tied it there. It hung there for the entire neighborhood to see.

Perhaps the rowdies expected the new schoolmarm to beg them to take it down, but they did not know my sister's spunk. Without complaining to anyone, she walked the three miles to and from school as if nothing had happened.

When we went to get my sister the next weekend, we were shocked, for there was no way we could safely get the bicycle down from its lofty perch without help. My father was furious and threatened to call the sheriff if the bicycle was not taken down. That put an end to the nonsense, and my

sister soon had her bike to ride to school as usual.

Most of the community was very kind and good to my sister, especially the parents of the seven boys. One parent insisted on taking his son and her to school in their car in the worst weather. Another parent surprised my sister and most of the students during a wintry "hot-lunch" period by bringing to school a complete roast beef dinner, including a huge three-layer chocolate cake, which was quite a treat.

The school's Christmas program was a big success. It included a play in which one of the older students played Santa Claus. He did quite well, even when a preschooler loudly interrupted the play to ask "Santa" what he was going to give him for Christmas. He answered the child in good humor and the play continued without a hitch.

At the end, the school board provided shiny red apples for everyone and a \$5 bonus check for the schoolmarm, which she put in her hope chest.

My sister was then dating a young man, a private in the Army. She managed, however, to keep his identity secret from her curious boys, who persisted in calling him "the general." She was even able to keep her date with him a secret when he was home on leave one week. Her boys howled with disappointment

when they learned that he had been home and they had not seen him. My sister and "the general" were happily married a year later.

Marceline was never sick, but one weekend when she was home with us, a reckless driver struck our car. No one was hospitalized, but my sister suffered a back injury that kept her from teaching for two weeks. The school was simply closed until she recovered.

The county superintendent unexpectedly visited my sister at school one day. She was up to the challenge, however, and he gave her a high evaluation for her efforts. By the end of April, her students had completed their work so well that she never had to make up for the two weeks they had missed.

On the last day, my sister had a musical program of popular war music, and the parents provided a covered-dish dinner. "Those farm ladies were as good at cooking as they were good at heart," my sister later wrote. "I knew that this had been a good first year, with the teacher undoubtedly learning more than anyone else. I was grateful to those patient, warm-hearted farm people whom I would never forget." ❖

(Written in memory of my sister, who died in 1997.)