

# The One Room Nicol School

One of the first considerations of pioneer parents, beyond food and shelter, was education. In



many instances the first schoolroom was set up in the home with the mother as

teacher and perhaps just the children in that one home as pupils. Later as more people came to the county and neighbors were not so far away, other children came and the little home schools grew.

The first public school was organized in Thomas County in 1882. Miss Anna Colby, the daughter of J.R. Colby for whom the town of Colby was named, was the first teacher and the school was located south of the present site of Colby. In 1883, Mary Hay was appointed as deputy superintendent in Thomas County. After that the schools of the county multiplied rapidly. Many sod schoolhouses were built and in 1888 there were about 80 organized

districts in the county with terms of school from 3 to 9 months each. These first schools were poorly equipped, most of them with dirt floors.

As more people came to Thomas County, schools were organized in every community and white frame schoolhouses dotted the countryside. There were two small buildings in the rear, one marked GIRLS and the other BOYS and a coal bin usually attached to the side or rear of the schoolhouse. A water bucket with a tin dipper from which everyone drank stood in the corner, and often the water was hauled to school each morning by a pupil who lived not too far away. The schoolhouse was used many times as a community center for literaries, box suppers, debates and programs of many kinds were held there. It was also used as a voting place and very often for revival meeting, church and Sunday School.

The one room country school provided an elementary education for many children living on the prairie. Since transportation



was limited, the required that schools be located within walking distance of every child. Often, whole school buildings were picked up and moved when children moved to different areas. These "school movings" make determining the exact location of a school at a particular point in time difficult.

In 1897, the legislature passed a special act providing for the organization of the Thomas County High School. This was the first, and only high school in the county at this time. Students came from all over the county and even some came from adjoining counties to attend. Money was scarce in those days and it wasn't always easy for a farm boy or girl to get a high school education. Some found places in Colby homes to work for their room and board; others rented rooms and did their own cooking. Many times a student would have to stay out of school a year or two and work in order to raise money to live on while going to high school. The high school besides being fully accredited, offered a normal training course designed especially to prepare teachers for the rural schools and these graduated are upon examination granted a two years teachers' certificate." For many years the Normal Institute was held every summer for a month in the county seat with all the teachers who planned who planned to teach in the county attending. It was one of the bright spots in a teacher's life, a place to meet old friends and make new ones as well as a chance to study new methods of teaching. The best teachers available were in charge and the results were comparable to summer school of today.



The first school in Colby was held in a small frame building 40 by 60 feet in size, located on School between 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> streets, hence the name School Street.

In 1887, having outgrown this building, the school was held in the upper room of the courthouse. A new school building was completed on the corner of 3<sup>rd</sup> and Grant where the school complex is located today. When the 1887 building was outgrown a new Thomas County High School was built on South Range in 1907. (The 1907 building is to the left of



photo below.) It served as the high school until 1936. The building on South Range was eventually torn down to build the St. Thomas Hospital Building.



In 1936 Colby High School was moved to the new building at 710 W. 3<sup>rd</sup>. It served as the High School until 1996 and it is now the Colby Intermediate School.



## The Nicol School

The one-room Nicol School building at the Prairie Museum of Art & History is a symbol of the cultural and social importance of education to the pioneers. It is representative of the 94 one-room rural schools that once graced the landscape in Thomas County.

The Nicol Rural School, District 15, was located in Wendall Township of Thomas County, Kansas, northeast of Colby. It was generally believed that the school got its name from the Nicol family on whose property it may have stood. But according



to records at the Thomas County Court House the original patent to the land was issued to Arthur E. Nye in 1888 and filed in 1889. The land changed hands several times in the next ten years and since 1899 has been in the Roy Ziegelmeier family. These records then indicate that the Nicol family never owned the property. The Nicols did live near the school and though they did not ever have any children of their

own, they were supportive and served on the school board. The name may have been given in their honor.



### Box Suppers

*When neighbors around Tully in Rawlins County, Kansas, got together in the early days, one of their favorite pastimes was to hold a basket supper. James L. Curtin recalled this story. "Each girl in the township would bring a basket filled with food. These baskets would be taken into a back room so no one would know which basket belonged to which girl. Then the baskets would be brought out and auctioned off. The man buying a basket would get to eat supper with the girl who had prepared the basket. Naturally, the competition would run pretty high at times. Before the auction started, the men would try to find out which girl had brought which basket. They'd do this by talking to small brothers, and probably many a young lad was somewhat richer after the sale of this important information. Any fellow who wanted to eat with a certain girl was in for trouble if his "friends" found out about it and were able to discover the identity of his girl's basket. His friends would then pool their resources and bid him up as high as he would go. It was tough on the young man, but the profit went to a good cause--- usually to purchase books and equipment for the school. In order to prevent his friends from finding out which basket he really wanted, a man would get one of his close friends to bid on the basket he wanted. This would sometimes throw the wolves off the trail."*

The Nicol School held its first term in 1887-1888. Dea Munn was the teacher, and she was paid \$25 a month for her services to the school. These services probably

included hauling wood, starting the morning fire in the stove, sweeping, cleaning, and seeing to necessary repairs as well as teaching.



From the opening of the school until 1908, the school saw many different teachers who taught for varying lengths of time and varying salaries. The school's shortest term was two months, and the longest was six months. In 1892-1893, the highest salary was paid to a teacher in the amount of \$50 a month for a five-month term. In the years 1908-1923 all but one of the terms held were seven months long and from 1923-1931 all of the terms were eight months in length. During the 1920's salaries for teachers ranged between \$80 and \$100, however, in one year, teacher Esther Mohler received the amazing sum of \$110 a month.

School consolidation in the 1930's closed many of the country schools in Thomas County. The Nicol School was closed in 1931 when Peggy Ryan taught four students during the first semester and then only one student in the second semester. After 1943, the building was no longer used as a school. It served as a voting precinct for rural families until the precinct was moved to the county seats. By 1949, the Wendall Workers, a Home Demonstration Unit used

the building as a meeting place. They furnished the entry room for a kitchen and they served meals to hunters during pheasant season as a moneymaking project.

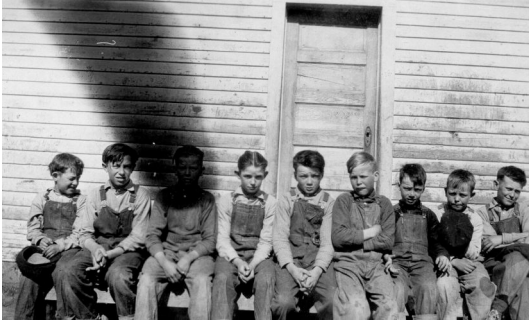
Eventually, the school was simply used for storage. The school was given to the Thomas County Historical Society by the Wendall Township in the mid 1980's, and was moved from District 15 to the museum site and restored by volunteers. Painting, stripping the floors, and walls, and reshingling the roof were all part of the restoration. The preservation of the Nicol School serves as a symbol of the pioneer spirit of Thomas County.



The one-room country school provided an elementary education for many children living on the prairie. Children from the first grade through eighth grade were taught in the same classroom. Since reliable and consistent transportation to and from the school buildings was difficult for the students and their hardworking parents to arrange, the law required that schools be located within walking distance of every child. Often, whole school buildings were picked up and moved when children moved to different areas. These "school movings" make determining the exact location of a school at a particular point in time extremely difficult.

## The Teacher

Country schoolteachers, such as the ones who would have served at the Nicol School, were certified to teach based on their own



educational backgrounds and examinations administered by the county or state. Teachers could receive third grade, second grade, or first grade certificates. A third grade certificate allowed a teacher to teach in the county for six months, and a second grade certificate allowed him or her to teach in the county for an entire year. A first grade certificate at the county level allowed a person to teach for two years within that county. A one-year certificate at the state level allowed a teacher to teach anywhere in the state. Most of the teachers at the Nicol School taught on the county certificates, but two of them had one-year state certificates.

*"We had no school for several years after we came out here. Our first schoolhouse was a little sod house without any windowpanes, and the door had no hinges. Our seats were piles of sod built up with a board laid on them. We had no desks."*

Viola Byars Chelf, who came to the county with her parents, brothers and sisters in 1879.

The linchpin of the one-room school was its teacher. The teacher was almost always a female, and if a female, invariably single (the unmarried state frequently being a stipulation in the teaching contract). She often had been raised in the very school district in which she taught. Even if the teacher initially were new to the area, she made it her duty to get to know all the families in the district, and they all took turns inviting her into their homes for a meal or to spend the night.

The teacher held a respected position in the community. Next to parents and the preacher, the teacher probably had more influence on her charges than anyone else. Whether she liked it or not, she was a role model and had to remain aware of that at all times. Therefore a teacher caught smoking; drinking, and sometimes even dancing was greatly frowned upon by the community.

Every morning the teacher arrived at the schoolhouse between 7:30 and 8:00. School "took up" at 9:00, and in that hour or so beforehand, she had to sweep out the school, clean the blackboards, build up a fire in the coal stove, and make sure she was ready to teach ten different subjects to fifteen different children in eight different grades.

The children who attended rural schools came in all ages, from five to seventeen. The little ones came as soon as they could because often there were even smaller ones at home, and mother sent all the children she could to school, along with older

brothers and sisters, to divide up the work of looking after so many. The big boys, really men, came in the winter months or between harvests, squeezing in two or three months of schooling before going back to work on the farm. Thus it often took boys longer than girls to complete eight grades.

Almost everyone who attended school came on foot. School districts were organized and schoolhouses placed so that no child would be more than two-and-a-half or three miles from school. Usually, however, students lived no more than a mile from school. With several brothers, sisters, and friends making up the group, it was a pleasant trip down the dusty roads or through pastures that in the fall might sport bluestem grass taller than the budding scholars. On cold winter days, however, sharp winds and snow made the trip seem longer and less appealing. On these days luckier children made the trip on horses or in horse-drawn wagons.

The school bell rang at 9:00 a.m., and the school day began with opening exercises of singing, prayer, saluting the flag, and maybe a reading by the teacher. The pupils were divided by age and ability into eight grades. Subjects studied included spelling, reading, penmanship, grammar, geography, mathematics, physiology and hygiene "with special reference to the effects of alcoholic stimulants and narcotics" American and Kansas history, literature, agriculture, and sometimes art and music. Each class would be called forward to the recitation benches in front of the room, and the teacher would ask each pupil a few questions to make sure they had their lessons prepared. Not only were older children asked to help younger children, but

in hearing what the other classes were learning, a youngster often picked up more advanced school work.



Thomas County was first surveyed in 1869 and the first settlers arrived in 1879. **Mary Amelia Hay** was born in Pottsville, Pennsylvania on February 2, 1832. In 1879, Mary, her foster nephew and niece, Isaac and Ona, and her father moved to Thomas County. They homesteaded on the South Fork of the Sappa Creek and laid out the first town in Thomas County, Otterbourne. "Auntie May Hay" as she was known, was a doctor, minister, farmer, and first superintendent of schools.

## Women and Settlement

Women were important partners in the settlement of the land. Along with their child rearing and domestic duties they also helped with farming chores. Women were the guardians of



cultural values within the family and it extended into the rural community. They were instrumental in organizing schools and churches. Many contributed to the general improvement of society on the prairie by controlling gambling and drinking and lesser offences. Entertainment included literary societies, spelling bees, 4<sup>th</sup> of July picnics and dances. Socialization also centered around births, weddings and funerals.

## VOTES FOR WOMEN

**1859** Women seeking equal suffrage inclusion in the Kansas constitution attended the Wyandotte Constitutional Convention. They were not allowed to speak, but were granted the unprecedented right to **acquire and possess property** and to **retain the equal custody of their children**.

**1861** The first state legislature gave women the right to **vote in school elections**.

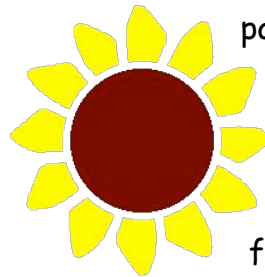
**1867** Kansas was the first state in the Union to consider woman's suffrage, although it was defeated.

**1887** Women were granted the right to vote in **municipal elections** and Susannah Medora Salter was elected mayor in Argonia (Sumner Co.), the first woman mayor in the nation.

**1912** The **suffrage amendment** passed and gave Kansas women the vote.

**1920** The Nineteenth Amendment is adopted and the women of the United States are finally enfranchised.

In honor of the early and strong participation in suffrage in Kansas, the National American Women's Suffrage Association adopted the Kansas state flower, the sunflower, as its emblem.



NICOL SCHOOL DISTRICT #15

<u>TEACHER</u>	<u>YEAR</u>
Dea Munn . . . . .	1887-1888
. . . . .	1888-1889
Vella Munn . . . . .	1889-1890
Alice Gordy . . . . .	1890-1891
. . . . .	1891-1892
Sadie Armstrong . . . . .	1892-1893
Mrs. H. Menge . . . . .	1892-1893
Lillian Ward . . . . .	1892-1893
Janice Englehardt . . . . .	1893-1894
Joseph Watson . . . . .	1895-1896
C.S. Marsh . . . . .	1896-1897
Anna Franklin . . . . .	1897-1898
Mary Blue . . . . .	1898-1899
Elva Ketchum . . . . .	1899-1900
Callie Maghasson . . . . .	1900-1901
Mabel Harper . . . . .	1901-1902
Joseph Watson . . . . .	1902-1903
Jesse Boyce . . . . .	1903-1904
. . . . .	1904-1905
Jno. (Johnathan) ViVallas . . . . .	1905-1906
Mae Bently . . . . .	1906-1907
Ella Bartlett . . . . .	1907-1908
Grace Kelley . . . . .	1908-1909
Walter Riblett . . . . .	1909-1910
Claude Hershey . . . . .	1910-1911
. . . . .	1911-1912
Adele Leefers . . . . .	1912-1913
William Beedy . . . . .	1913-1914
Georgia Lanning . . . . .	1914-1915
Martha Claar . . . . .	1915-1916
. . . . .	1916-1917
Mrs. J.L. Elliott . . . . .	1917-1918
Bertha Shelton . . . . .	1918-1919
Lucinda Badgley . . . . .	1919-1920
Lavilla Smith . . . . .	1920-1921
Chas. Bridges . . . . .	1921-1922
Esther Mohler . . . . .	1922-1923
Lulu Claar . . . . .	1923-1924
Georgia Taylor . . . . .	1924-1925
Faye Zoberst . . . . .	1925-1926
Lucille Dechert . . . . .	1926-1927
Elizabeth Archer . . . . .	1927-1928
Ruby Rogers . . . . .	1928-1929
Edna Zoberst . . . . .	1929-1930
Edith Ziegelmeier . . . . .	1930-1931
Peggy Ryan . . . . .	1943-1944



## Thomas County School Districts 1886-1960

Anna Colby Dist #1	1882-1885	Lone Star Dist #50	1887-1920
Otterbourne Dist. #2	1883-1946	Dist #51	1887-1904
Cumberland Dist #3	1884-1940	Sunflower Dist #52	1887-1933
Colby Dist #4	1885-	Prairie Bell Dist #53	1887-1939
Holly Glade Dist #5	1885-1920	Dist #54	1887-1921
Center View Dist #6	1885-1947	East View Dist #55	1887-1957
Copeland Dist #7	1888-1895	Pleasant Ridge Dist #56	1887-1905
Garfield Dist #8	1886-1936	Riverdale Dist #57	1887-1894
Hopewell Dist #9	1886-1946	Pretty Prairie Dist #58	1887-1921
Georgetown Dist #10	1886-1923	Hills Dale Dist #59	1887-1921
Prairie Union Dist #11	1888-1909	Sunnyside Dist #60	1887-1922
Goin Dist #12	1888-1918	Prairie Star Dist #61	1887-1925
Dist #13	1888-1921	McGinley Dist #62	1888-1921
McPherson Dist #14	1888-1923	Prairie Gem Dist #63	1887-1937
Nicol Dist #15	1886-1932	Dist #64	1887-1922
Mt. Olive Dist #16	1886-1937	Fairland Dist #65	1887-1937
North Solomon Dist #17	1886-1932	Lone Valley Dist #66	1887-1923
Victory Dist #18	1886-1940	Dist #67	1887-1919
Monticello Dist #19	1886-1921	Dist #68	1887-1897
Dist #20	1886-1894	Independence Dist #69	1887-1934
Calico Dist #21	1886-1919	Abilene Dist #70	1887-1938
Soddy Dist #22	1886-1943	Dist #71	1888-1893
Garden Plains Dist #23	1886-1939	Dist #72	1888-1917
Levant Dist #24	1886-1958	Quickville Dist #73	1888-1926
Union Dist #25	1886-1939	Quickville Dist #73	1940-1946
Dist #26	1886-1897	Excelsior Dist #74	1888-1921
Pleasant Ridge Dist #27	1886-1937	Dist #75	1888-1898
Lone Willow Dist #28	1886-1925	Riverdale Dist #76	1888-1926
Interprise Dist #29	1887-1942	Dist #77	1888-1911
Antelope Dist #30	1886-1944	Pleasant Hill Dist #78	1888-1946
Morning Star Dist #31	1886-1921	Lone Prairie Dist #79	1888-1921
Prairie Rose Dist #32	1886-1944	Brewster Dist #80	1888-
Dist #34 Highland	1886-1921	Star Dist #81	1888-1943
Dist #35	1886-1920	Dist #82	1888-1891
Bunker Hill Dist #36	1886-1946	Bell View Dist #83	1888-1897
Brownville Dist #37	1886-1921	Halford Dist #84	1888-1958
Highland Dist #38	1887-1950	Green Plains Dist #85	1888-1938
Fair Dale Dist #39	1887-1922	Union Dist #86	1888-1895
Center Dist #40	1887-1946	Liberty Dist #87	1889-1921
Bell Prairie Dist #41	1887-1921	Rexford Dist #88	1889-
Dist #42	1887-1911	Dist #89	1889-1907
White Dist #43	1887-1931	Saline Dist #90	1889-1934
Crescent Dist #44	1887-1935	Kuka Dist #91	1890-1921
Dist #45	1887-1901	Olive Branch Dist #92	1890-1943
Menlo Dist #46	1887-1963	Fair View Dist #93	1913-1921
Mingo Dist #47	1887-1957	Winner Dist #94	1917-1925
Dible Dist #48	1887-1935		
Fair Dale Dist #49	1887-1939		

