

# Blue Earth County Historian

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Blue Earth County Historical Society Quarterly Newsletter  
Spring 1999

## Tales of School Days Gone By

Tom Melchior, the subject of this article, recently spoke at the Heritage Center. This article appeared in the April 16, 1999 edition of *The Land* magazine. It is reprinted with permission.

By TIM KING  
The Land Correspondent

**LONG PRAIRIE** - The country school at Whiteville, five miles west of Long Prairie, stood alongside the Methodist church.

There was nothing else there but the road called the U Trail and the west wind coming off the long prairie that followed the winding river. On bad days in January that west wind shook the school like a disobedient student. One day, after a long blow, school was out but the wind wouldn't allow the students to return home. Even the teacher had to stay after because the wind had frozen the door shut from the outside. It was a few hours before someone came down the hill looking for the students.

The Whiteville story is not included

in the hundreds of country school stories, photos and drawings that Tom Melchior collected for his book "They Called Me Teacher: Stories of Minnesota Country School Teachers and Students from 1915 to 1960."

If it had been included it would have been told, like all of the stories in the book, in richer detail and in the voice of a student or teacher who was kept after school by the west wind.

Minnesota is a motherlode of lore about the country school experience that ended 40 years ago. Melchior spent a couple of years and drove

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### Correction

*In the Winter 1999 issue of the Blue Earth County Historian, the author of the Mt. Kato ski article was misidentified. The author of the article is Rich O'Brien. The editor of the Historian regrets the error.*

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15,000 miles exploring that rich vein of our culture. He calls his introduction to his lovingly assembled school stories "Story Mining."

"Once precious stories scattered themselves among friends, relatives, or casual acquaintances - unprized possessions, forgotten as quickly as the people who told them. Tragic moments that scarred teachers and students, kind words that inspired heroic journeys, embraces that stilled fearful hearts - too many of these stories have been lost in the fog of indifference. Vital stories bursting with the pride of battles won, have withered from want of telling, disintegrated for want of a listener."

Melchior considers the stories and the tellers to be precious treasures. One of the last treasures he discovered in his story mining was Cecile Cowdery. Inspired some 80 years ago by her mother, Ethel DuFrene, Cowdery picked up a drawing pencil and only put it down when life's circumstances forced her to do so.

Cowdery attended District No. 1 on Trout Brook south of Round Prairie. You can see her photograph alongside the school, now a home near Round Prairie, on the page in the book Melchior dedicated to her. At the



urging of Cowdery's granddaughter, a former student of Melchior's, he came to interview Cowdery at her Long Prairie home.

"When he walked in the door I felt as if one of my sons had come home," Cowdery remembered.

"As I was walking out the door, I asked Cecile if she would consider illustrating two of her stories.

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Thankfully she did not stop with those two. Her whimsical characters seem to dance on the paper," Melchior wrote.

Among the nearly 80 stories Cowdery illustrated is this one from Cal Zuehlke who taught in the Elmo School in Otter Tail County from 1930-34:

"I kissed my first girl in a country school. Little Jane was a pretty gal. She was moving out of her seat, leaning way over, and I couldn't help myself. I just had to get over and kiss her on the cheek. Mad, she got mad! She was going to tell the teacher, and I couldn't hide. Her cheeks tasted like soap. Her mother scrubbed her good that day. She had neat clothes and curly hair. I was a clod. What a circus!"

Cowdery's illustration of Cal's kiss, like many others in the book, includes a little joke. The drawing is captioned, "Wishing!" and shows the girl kissing the boy. One wonders whose wish is being fulfilled.

"I wanted the drawings to include a sense of humor but not to be too cute," she said. "I did want to capture a sense of the awkwardness of school children."

Cowdery spent one month steady doing the drawings.

"I had a heart problem and the

doctor gave me some medicine and told me I couldn't do anything for a month. I don't know how I would have survived," she said. "Instead I got to do my favorite thing nonstop for a month and not feel the least bit guilty about it."

Like the west wind at the Whiteville school, Cowdery's heart kept her indoors. For a month she poured all of herself into the drawings and in the end, when the doors to her home were opened and the drawings danced across the pages of Melchior's book, they made it even more delightful.

For her part Cowdery is going to donate the proceeds of the book sales to fund scholarships for a young artist, a young teacher and a young writer from Long Prairie High School. Considering the book she and Melchior produced, Cowdery thinks that makes good sense.

**Melchior's book can be found at the Heritage Center for \$19.95.**

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# Excerpts from Melchior's book

Janet Gustafson taught for a time in Judson.

I'm full-blooded Norwegian, and I had never encountered names like Maldwyn, Llewlyn, Mavaunwe, or Myfanwy. I couldn't pronounce the names, much less say them with the beautiful lilt the Welsh language has. And spell? Shouldn't a name be spelled like it sounds? Shouldn't Maldwyn be spelled Maldwin? One first grader informed me when we were practicing penmanship and spelling using their names that he could already write his first name, so I suggested he use his middle name. "What is it?" I asked.

"Theophilus," Earl replied.

"What?"

"Theophilus," he repeated.

I didn't know how to spell it, but I tried. That day I sent them home with their name-writing assignments. The next morning Earl came running in. "Ma said you spelled it wrong!"

I learned that the Welsh language is not easy to spell or pronounce, and that Theophilus is spelled with a *ph*, not an *f* and ends with *us* and not *is*.

c. 1926

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Mildred Blom began first grade in Rome Township, Faribault County in 1921, at the age of six. She began high school at the age of 11 and graduated when she was 15. She then entered Mankato Teachers College.

I was so homesick while I was at

Mankato. I thought the whole world was Norwegian with a few Germans thrown in. I had been used to my parents telling me what to do. They were too good to us. I did not get home until November. Grace Armstrong (for whom Armstrong Hall is named) was a teacher at Mankato and she was from Bricelyn.

Another woman from Bricelyn, Ora Kingsley, was attending school for some refresher courses. She told me I could ride home with them in her Model T. It was such a cold and rainy day that they bundled me up with blankets because I had to sit in the back seat. Grace drove and Ora sat next to her. As Grace drove, Ora read poetry, dramatically swinging her arms as she read. We barreled along about 35 mph.

I will never forget how I felt as we pulled into our farm driveway. Even to this day, November days with bare trees and the dripping rain are just wonderful for me. I was home. I had been gone since September, a 15-year-old girl thrown into the whirlwind of college. As I went into our house, my two brothers and sister were so glad to see me, but I made short work of that and went right to the piano and played and played and played my heart out because I was so glad to be home.

Even today, 66 years later, on rainy, leafless November days, I can still feel how I felt that day because I was so green, so homesick.

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# Painting the Pages of Time...

by Marian Anderson

In honor of the  
New millenium,  
We celebrate our future  
By preserving our past.

Announcing a new limited edition print series by Marian Anderson. A series of three historic paintings created to celebrate the new millenium, Mankato's sesquicentennial (2002) and bring awareness of the importance of historic preservation.

Marian has chosen three grand historic Mankato homes as each painting's focus. The first print in the series will feature the Schmidt house, which was chosen because it is no longer standing. The historic Schmidt house once stood proudly atop the hill where the YMCA is now located and was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Unfortunately, we have lost this building forever. It is Marian's hope that her new series will bring an awareness of our responsibility to preserve our historic buildings as part of our heritage. For this purpose, a portion of the proceeds from this series will be shared with the Blue Earth County Historical Society and the YWCA of Mankato.

The second and third print in the series will feature the historic Cray house and the R.D. Hubbard house. Each home has it's own elegance, charm and grace and will be beautifully adorned with a cascade of flowers reminiscent of the time. In addition, each print will include a history of the home, the woman that lived there and her families importance to our community.

*Advance orders are now being taken with  
a no obligation \$25.00 deposit.  
Return the order form on the back of this flyer.  
Don't miss out on this exciting and  
memorable new series!*

## Plan for Release of Prints

### Historic Home Series

#### Fall 1999 - First Print

#### The Schmidt House

#### Fall 2000 - Second Print

#### The Cray House

#### Fall 2001 - Third Print

#### The R.D. Hubbard House

650 Main Edition Prints - \$75.00

65 Artist Proof Prints - \$150.00

Image Size - 20" x 16"

**M**arian Anderson has been a professional artist in the art business for over thirty years and is well-known in her home area as well as nationally and abroad. She is a self-taught artist, holding many award credits to her name including the prestigious Artist of the Year Award, at which time she was inducted into the Hall of Fame for her wildlife and western art. In 1998 Marian received special recognition in Washington D.C. for her diversity painting and in 1999 she received state acclamation from the Minnesota State House of Representatives. Marian is versatile in subject but consistent for her well recognized ability to capture emotion and mood within her paintings. Painting in oil on canvas, Marian goes to great lengths to gather important research material.



*Advance orders can be placed by  
returning the order form below.*

*If you would like to request a specific print number,  
you may indicate this request on the order form.  
We will do our best to honor your request.*

**PLEASE RETURN THIS PORTION WITH YOUR ORDER**

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**First in Series - The Schmidt House**

Please reserve \_\_\_\_\_ limited edition prints

\_\_\_\_\_ Enclosed is \$25 deposit for each print reserved

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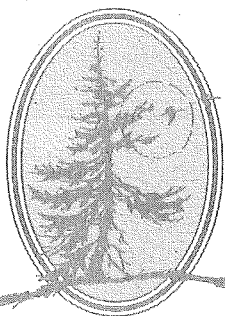
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*Or FAX your order to:*

**507-388-4059**

E-mail: [marian@mariananderson.com](mailto:marian@mariananderson.com)



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**Gail Palmer taught for 41 years, 15 in the rural schools of Lyon and Blue Earth counties.**

In 1934 when I arrived for my second year at District 2, the chairman of the board informed me that the mother of some of my students had passed away. She had left behind her husband and four children. The youngest, Annabelle, was a year and a half old. The father asked the school board if Annabelle could come to school with the boys if they took care of her.

I asked the board what they thought about that plan. They said, "It's not up to us. It comes down to whether you are willing to let her come. You already have 28 kids in the school."

The board chairman said, "We've thought about the boys taking turns taking care of her, but it seems a shame they would have to lose their education because of Annabelle. They might not keep up."

I said, "Well, why don't we try it." I'll never forget that first day. Annabelle came down the road with her three brothers, carrying her little Karo lunch bucket in one hand and her rag doll in the other. She was going to school and she was happy. The community was very closely united. I think the parents had talked over the situation with their children because when she arrived at the school, the children all gathered around her and said, "Come on. Let's do this or that." They were so kind to her.

She was as happy as a lark and all the other kids were so excited about having her in the school. They said, "We'll help! We'll help!" The girls said, "If she needs to go to the outhouse, we'll take her."

When she got tired of sitting with one of us,

she went to sit with someone else. She was far too tiny to reach the top of the desk, so we placed the thick unabridged dictionary under her to boost her high enough. When she moved from one person to another, the kids just moved the dictionary.

She loved reading most of all. When I had class for the first graders, she always sat on my lap. She listened to what we read and pointed at the pictures and told us what the picture was all about.

The next year her father asked if she could come again. I said, "School wouldn't be school without Annabelle." I stayed there for three more years. When I left, Annabelle was four and a half. She could read, draw and color, write and name the letters and numerals, and sing all the songs.

She had had 29 teachers. How much richer our lives were for having Annabelle in class with us! Many of the students did not have brothers or sisters. They treated her as their sister. When we played ball, they didn't wait until the end to choose her. They chose her early in the game. She worked like a trooper for her team. If she touched the ball, they yelled for her to run to first base. They always let her get there. Her presence carried over to the parents. I'm certain the children went home and told what they had done for Annabelle. When Annabelle had a birthday, it was a riot. Everyone had a little cake or gift. They really fussed over her.

I think the brothers did not suffer the pain of losing their mother quite so much when they saw all the children caring for their sister.



**Gail Palmer**

# News from...

## Mary McGrew, Museum Assistant

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We have had a lot of help from our members with their support through memberships and donations. Thank you!

**Monetary donations:** Jo Schultz, Jane Tarjeson, Glenn Bartsch, G.W. and E.E. Fischer Family Trust, Cambria Township, F.B. Clements Foundation and Luverne Dobie Memorial.

**Donations of supplies and services:** Jo Schultz, office supplies; Jane Tarjeson, filing cabinets, used books, decorating supplies; Jo-an Lavitschke, gift shop items; Mary Dooley, archival supplies for gift shop; Elmer Goodrich, cleaning of saddle; members of BPO and DOES for cleaning of the Hubbard House: Vera Perkins, Jo Thomas, Pam McCorath, Lucy Weimert and Beth Zimmer.

**Memberships, new and renewals, from January through April 1999:** Thomas Bohan, John and Kathy Dorn, Todd Smith, Donna Resner, Pat Fryman, Glenn Bartsch, Bert and Diane Anderson, Marlyss Johnson, Sylvan and Rosalin Thiesse, H.R. Smith, Darell and Lucy Apitz, John and Carolyn Kanyusik, Mary McComb, C.W. Pennington, Tire Associates, John and Eleanor Wittrock, Jane Tarjeson, Tim Smith, Ora Ohlenkamp, Mary Honetschlager, Norman Holte, Crysteel Truck Equipment, Inc., Carmelia Doring, Mrs. Claire Faust, Kathryn Hanson, Mr. and Mrs. Randall Lamb, Richard Huettl, Tom Salsbery, Verle and Caroline Salsbery, Orv and Mary Ann Jensen, Michael Scullin, Karl, Steve and Dan Sassenberg, Willard Vetter, Francis Hodapp, Linda

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**Membership total: 520.**



# From the desk of.....

Kandi Demaray, Interim Director

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It's kind of exciting around here lately, so let me start with the most recent news. The new Rainbow Foods in Mankato asked the BECHS if we would like to use some space in their store for a display. We, of course, replied YES! We pulled out some artifacts from the collections room and some old photographs which were blown up and they are now in place in our area at the front of the store. We'll also be able to distribute BECHS information on our membership, programs, etc. It should be a wonderful opportunity to show off some of our fabulous properties and hopefully, create some interest in our Society and what we have to offer. Hope you will enjoy it too...we think there are some things you may not have seen for a while, so it should be fun! Thanks to Win Grundmeier, Orv Jensen, Harley Goff, Jo and Bob Schultz and the BECHS staff for their efforts in getting this together on such short notice.

On April 18 we participated in the River Hills Mall Community Bazaar for non-profits. Marion Anderson was the main attraction, as she was working on her painting of the Schmidt House. This was the public's first opportunity to see this work in progress and to make advance orders. BECHS and the YWCA will share in the profits of all three of the historic home series called, "Painting the Pages of Time." The Cray House will be her second painting and our Hubbard House will be the third. Please take a minute to read the insert in this newsletter about Marion's exciting new project. Thanks to the following volunteers and staff

who worked at our table: Mary McGrew, Cres Bisch, Jane Tarjeson, Jean Lindquist, Joan Lavitschke and Jo Schultz.

Tom Melchior, author of "They Call Me Teacher," was the guest speaker at a program on April 8 at the Heritage Center. It was a good evening, with Tom featuring the anecdotes from his research on the one-room schoolhouse. We were lucky to have Gail Palmer, a teacher that he had interviewed, in our audience, so she told us a story in her own words. Tom's book is now on sale in the gift shop.

Our annual meeting was held March 23. After the meeting, Society member (former board member and volunteer extraordinaire) Jo Schultz, presented an entertaining program called "Believe It or Not, It Happened Here in Blue Earth County." Everyone had a chance to chat over refreshments in the kitchen conference room.

On March 18 the BECHS hosted a preservation meeting for the Minnesota Historical Society at the historic Cray House (YWCA). Before the meeting, preservation staff members toured the Hubbard House and History Museum. It was a wonderful opportunity for the public to hear about preservation plans and accomplishments, and to ask questions about local preservation concerns. Prior to the program, refreshments were served and Marion Anderson introduced her new series.

Thanks to Board Members, Harley Goff and Jeff Walker from the Dotson Co. and the Coughlan brothers for personally leading these tours.

# News from.... Carol Oney

Archival Librarian

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Greeting from the Archives....happy spring! With the coming of nice weather, we are now entering our busy season when out-of-town as well as local researchers and genealogists start coming out of the woodwork. One never knows what the day will bring. People are becoming more and more aware of this facility and its excellent resources. In particular, patrons who come in are getting younger. Just recently, a group of students from Dakota Meadows Middle School came in to use our subject files, photos and artifacts, and to learn more about the Dakota Uprising of 1862. Material gathered was edited for use on the Internet. We congratulate them for all their hard work!

Another exciting event came with the grand opening of the new Rainbow store. Earlier, the management had contacted the Society for ideas in decorating an area which would celebrate the rich history of Blue Earth County. At their request, reprints were made from at least two dozen of our old photographs. The results are stupendous: 8x10 prints were enlarged to 3x4 feet. Among the selections were the Old Central Fire Station, R.J. Thomas' Grocery Store and downtown Mankato in the 1950s. Accompanying the photos are artifacts from our collection. The Surrey (minus the horses) has been a big hit with the public. Other historic items are Buck Weaver's saddle and a contraption that "permanently" curled hair with electricity.

A recent donation of photos taken by H. Roger Smith has caused quite a stir in the community. H. Roger had the foresight to take black and white photos of downtown Mankato before urban renewal had its way with the wrecking ball. For local baby boomers and their parents, it is a delightful stroll down memory lane. Each strip of photos detail different city street blocks with stores/businesses arranged in exact order. H. Roger's collection was featured in the April 17 issue of the Mankato Free Press. We will let you know when this display will make its appearance in the Exhibit Gallery.

During March, the Mankato Free Press published a special series titled "The Chronicles of the Century." Our research library was quite busy from January to March 1. Some days, it seemed as though the entire news staff had descended upon us. We all got to know each other pretty well with the wide variety of subjects requested. Again, many of our photos were used to illustrate the articles. The public noticed them and in some cases, we had phone calls from readers who gave possible identifying notes. The resulting publication is a great keepsake and our organization appreciates the attention. Thank you!

As a last note, please do not forget us when starting your spring cleaning. Many of your discarded treasures may become welcome additions to our artifact collection.

# News from...

## Jane Tarjeson, BECHS Board president

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Volunteer Recognition Week was April 18-24.

"A volunteer is a person who believes that people can make a difference and is willing to prove it." --Anonymous.

Blue Earth County Historical Society is very fortunate to have volunteers that give freely and often of their time and talents. They do a variety of duties: tour guide, programs, research, artifact collections, exhibits, committees, publications, Hubbard House maintenance, newspaper clippings and filing. Each is an important and integral part of the day to day operations of the Society. Without volunteers, the Blue Earth County Historical Society could not operate on the scale it does. The time you give is greatly appreciated. Thanks for all you do!

Wish list: Small paper shredder, aluminum platform ladder, unlined 3" x 5" index cards, 2-1/2" and 3" three-ring binders, scissors, 3.5" formatted diskettes, king size sheets.

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## Now at the Museum store

Cookbooks: "Food on the Frontier," by Marjorie Kreidberg. This unique cookbook combines lively social history with more than 275 mouth-watering recipes. \$10.95

"Minnesota Centennial Cookbook," by Virginia Huck and Ann H. Anderson. Features nearly 300 old and new recipes from all over Minnesota. \$7.95

"St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Anniversary Cookbook." \$9.50

Books: "The History of North Mankato, 1898-1998." \$12.50

"They Call Me Teacher," by Tom Melchior. \$19.95

"Harvest of Grief," by Annette Atkins. This book portrays the hardships of Minnesota farmers during the grasshopper plagues of the 1870s. \$12.95.

"The Red River Trails," by Rhoda Gilman, Carolyn Gilman and Deborah Stultz. This book highlights the difficulties and rewards of early travel and transportation in Minnesota. \$11.95.

Maps: Map of the Territory of Minnesota, 1849. \$6.95

Map of Minnesota and Dakota in 1860. \$6.95.

For a unique birthday or special occasion, why not give a gift membership to the historical society?

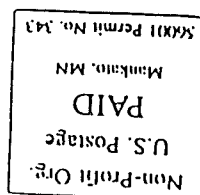
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