

# Erickson treasures recollections of country school

**By Travis Gulbrandson**

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Everyone remembers their school days, but one Vermillion resident's memories differ from what most people think of when they recall their formative years.

Cleo Erickson's formal education began at Independence School No. 1, a one-room schoolhouse, in 1931.

"There were no kindergartens at that time," she said. "You started when you were six years old, and went right on through to the eighth grade."

Erickson said that much like today, school started each morning with the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance. Unlike today, this was followed by the singing of a patriotic song.

"All the desks were in there, and they had what we called a recitation bench up in front, which was a long bench, and the teacher had her desk up there and she'd call the different classes up," she said.

Having all the classes in one room ended up being beneficial for the younger classes, Erickson said.

"The little kids that sat (in front) were hearing the lessons all the time, and it was amazing what they could remember," she said. "It was in the back of your head, but you still kind of remembered some of it."

All writing was done in pencil, primarily on Big Chief tablets.

"To begin school we always got a new pencil box, a new box of watercolor paints and a new box of colors with seven or eight colors in it. And an eraser, of course. That was the most important," Erickson said.

While the school had one main teacher, the skills of several other educators were utilized, as well.

"The school also had a county music teacher, and she went around to all the different country schools," Erickson said.

"At the end of the year she would put together a program, and she would get a group of schools that were in this part of the county, and they would have some little program or songs that they would sing ... at Slagle Auditorium."

The number of pupils varied from school to school, Erickson said.

"I would say we probably had 15 to 20 kids," she said. "Some of the schools had two rooms, and they would have two

teachers. There were only one or two schools like that. They would, I think, have up to 40 kids at times."

Some schools had much fewer students. Erickson attended grades six through eight at Busy Bend School No. 9, which she said had only six or seven attendees.

Having fewer students made parental involvement easier, she said.

"The whole family would come at night for the PTA meetings," she said. "They'd have coffee and someone would bring dessert. It was kind of a community center for the area."

This "center" also was used for the yearly Christmas programs.

"The little kids would practice and practice, and the dads would come in and build a little platform so we could be up a little higher," Erickson said. "We usually had Santa Claus come in at the end of the program and hand out little sacks with oranges and a few candies and that sort of thing."

Like their parents, the students also were more involved in the day-to-day operation of the school.

"We had a stone Red Wing water cooler in the corner," Erickson said. "The kids would go out every morning and there was a well, and we would have to go out and pump the water and fill the water cooler. We had just a washpan to wash our hands in. An outdoor toilet. Freeze to death out there."

Weather plays a prominent role in many of Erickson's memories. She remembers how cold the school was in the wintertime, and how the teacher would arrive early in the morning to stock the large round stove so the building would be warm enough for the students upon their arrival.

She also remembers one year when the heavy snow made getting to and from school difficult.

"We would pick up all the kids on that little road clear over to the University Road, and then go north," Erickson said. "One year my dad had a bobsled, and he put straw in the sled, and Mother laid a blanket over the top of it and gave us blankets. ..."

"We would pick up kids all the way along, all the way to school. We just had a ball. We thought it was just wonderful,"



Cleo (Collar) Erickson, dressed as "Little Bo Peep" for a special event at Independence School No. 1. This photo appears in the CD compilation "Clay County Rural Schools Scrapbook," provided by the Clay County Historical Society.

she said.

Springtime was also not without its perils.

"The kids would all walk together, and there was a dairy down on the corner where University Road and the bypass is ... and they had this big old bull in the field. And he would follow us right along the fence," Erickson said.

"My dad always said, 'Don't ever look at him. Just keep walking right straight ahead.

Don't run, don't do anything. Just walk? So that's what we did, and he never bothered us, but we were scared. We just couldn't wait to make that turn in the other direction."

Erickson said she treasures these memories.

"It was a fun time in my lifetime," she said. "I thought it was great."

## Did you know ... ?

- Spirit Mound School No. 15 was lost to fire more than once.
- According to "History of Clay County South Dakota," by Herbert S. Schell, the first school building was accidentally burned in 1886 by a traveler who was staying the night there.
- The second building also burned, necessitating classes take temporary refuge in the kitchen of a nearby school officer.
- Shortly after its construction at a different site, the third school building was struck by lightning. Fortunately, it did not burn, sustaining only light damage.

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