

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Rural Schools

Thomas M. Stewart

O. H. 355

MARTHA LESLIE

Interviewed

by

Bernice Mercer

on

March 21, 1976

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Rural Schools

INTERVIEWEE: MARTHA LESLIE
INTERVIEWER: Bernice Mercer
SUBJECT: Thomas Stewart's role as County Superintendent
DATE: March 21, 1976

M: This is an interview with Mrs. Martha Leslie at her home in Enon Valley, Pennsylvania, on March 21, 1976. This interview is being conducted by Bernice Mercer for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program.

Mrs. Leslie, we are interested in your father's job when he was the Lawrence County Superintendent. Can you tell us about your father? Can you remember him when he was working? He taught school a long time too.

L: Yes, he taught school and then he was superintendent for so many years.

M: When was he born?

L: He was born on September 23, 1944. He died September 8, 1928.

M: Was he teaching school when you were a little girl?

L: Yes. I was born in 1892 and I think in 1894 he taught down at Wampum. He taught there for so many years.

M: There was a high school at Wampum at that time?

L: He didn't teach high school; he always taught grade school.

M: There was a high school there though?

L: After years there was, but not while he taught.

He taught all the grades in one-room schools.

M: How did everybody get to school?

L: Horse and buggy.

M: Everyone went that way completely?

L: Yes, there wasn't any other way of going then. My father would drive horse and buggy all the way out. Sometimes he would stay overnight at some friends there and come home the next day. He used to give teachers' examinations in one-room schools. He would test in English, spelling, and writing. They had to take their examinations sitting in those school desks. I remember going along and helping him. He would tell me I could distribute papers, like for grammar and geography. He would stand up front and give them the spelling test and they would write that down. Then he had a writing test. My dad was a great writer. He would have copies, and they would write just like children do today.

M: Do you remember what teachers in Pennsylvania were paid at that time?

L: I wouldn't know that.

M: Did he evaluate a teacher's competence when he visited the different schools? Did he ever find teachers who couldn't control their class?

L: Yes. He would go into schools and find no order at all. He would always talk to the teacher after school was out. If he found a teacher who couldn't keep order, he would tell them how they could improve.

M: He didn't have to copy books, he just used the copy of his own?

L: Yes, he just wrote a copy. They would write their best writing. I don't think there was anything other than spelling, grammar, and physiology, as they called it, and geography. I don't think he ever taught any algebra. No, I don't think algebra was born then.

M: Would the teachers who were taking the examinations have gone to the rural schools?

L: Yes.

M: And some of them would have had further education?

L: Yes, they had that; however, there weren't any high schools to graduate from. My father would award certificates to those who passed the teacher's examination. There were two types of certificates, but I can't recall their names. Special schools were designated for the examinations. I remember him being in Edinburg. I can

remember going out to that old school.

I remember how the examination process worked. I would collect the exams and put them on his desk. He would gather them up, take them all home, look over them, write out their grades, and send them to them. He would grade them and then they would take them to their school directors. Their school directors would look it over and see if they were smart enough to teach school. Some of the teachers would stop with one test. Others would seek a higher certificate.

M: Was this around 1916?

L: I started school when I was six years old. That would be 1898. I just can't tell you what year he was elected superintendent.

M: Was he kind of a teacher-trainer?

L: I would say he was.

M: He helped them to improve?

L: Sure he did. In some of the schools he would go to, he said the schoolteachers were perfect. He considered himself to be a good teacher, and many of his pupils considered him to be the best teacher they had ever had.

M: If a teacher continued to have very poor order year after year, could they continue to teach?

L: Well, he wouldn't have anything to do with that; that was up to the school board.

One time I can remember him visiting a school where a young woman had very poor order. When the children were out on the playground he told her her problem. He went back to see her a few months after that and he said there was an awful difference.

M: He must have been helpful.

L: I'm sure he was. He was pretty harsh with the children when he taught school. Different people who are living today who went to school under him would testify to his sternness. Student's couldn't get away with anything when he taught school .

I never went to school to him. My older brother and sister both went to him when he taught down at our own school, Coal Ridge. It's right near Hubbard. It's not there now.

M: We've made a terrible mistake here; we haven't given your father's name.

L: Thomas M. Stewart.

My fathers' job, as superintendent, was to go and visit the schools under jurisdiction, and he was supposed to correct the teachers if they weren't doing right. There were superintendents after him who didn't visit the schools half as much as he did.

M: His job, as he saw it, was to help the teachers. This is interesting because it is now changed.

L: I know that. There were later superintendents who didn't visit the schools half as much as he did.

M: There aren't very many country schools anymore, is that right?

L: No, they have consolidated. Only the Amish . . . I think they have a school over there in Little Beaver Township. The Amish have a school and a teacher.

M: Most of these schools went to the eighth grade?

L: There would be eight grades in one school then.

M: They wouldn't attempt to go any farther than eighth grade?

L: That was all, what they got in eighth grade. In those towns, there weren't high schools like there are now. They either dropped out or were out of school, unless they decided they wanted to go someplace higher like Mt. Jackson.

Our district town is just called Mohawk; it takes in Little Beaver Township and New Beaver Township. It is next to Bessemer, the Mohawk district. It used to be Big Beaver down here, but they call it New Beaver. Mahoning Township is in it too, that's up north next to Lowellville. That's where Mohawk is now; it's all a big consolidation. I don't think they get much use of the one-room school.

M: Did your father go to New Castle?

L: No, he wasn't in the city schools.

M: He did not have supervision over New Castle?

L: No, no, that's county.

M: Are there any other schools in Lawrence County that he

did not go to besides New Castle?

L: He didn't go to Ellwood either.

M: Ellwood City was large enough to have its own school system?

L: Yes, he didn't go there. Of course, Enon Valley is a little place.

M: Yes, it had just the one school.

L: I don't know of any other places.

M: There are several other towns around now, but at that time New Castle and Ellwood City were the only cities that he did not go visit?

L: No, he had nothing to do with them; it was county. You might say he was only involved in the rural district.

M: Were these towns big a long time ago?

L: Yes, but this was just in the really old districts. I would say these townships had three, one-room schools. North Beaver, I think, had four or five. Little Beaver had three or four. I would say that at the time he went around to visit the schools in New Beaver, Little Beaver, and North Beaver, each had around four, one-room schools. In the northern part of the county, I don't know how many there were. I know he went to Plain Grove and Hollingsburg, but I don't know how many rural districts there were. Of course, Hollingsburg was just a little town, and so was Plain Grove. That's way far north, next to Mercer County. He drove clear up there.

M: If he didn't go clear up there, those teachers would have no help or supervision or anything else?

L: No, they belonged to North County.

M: They depended on him?

L: He was the county superintendent of the schools.

M: What we are establishing here is the importance of the county superintendent. He was the teacher's college and the certificating agency. He took all this burden and responsibility that is now done by several other people. I hadn't realized that, really, up to this time.

L: One was a provisional certificate, is that the right name? There were two. I think the provisional was the higher certificate you could give.

M: There were two levels, anyway.

L: Yes, I think the other one was the lower level. They wouldn't write their answers on the paper as good as a high school freshman would; it wouldn't be as good as that.

M: They probably didn't have too much choice.

L: Yes, that's it; they didn't have much choice.

M: They were doing the best they could with what they had.

Do you happen to remember any details of the type of things that happened in schools that caused this discipline problem?

L: There were big boys who wanted to make trouble. When he taught school, he had some bad ones. He taught one at Wampum. He taught there and had some bad, big boys, like you called them, in the eighth grade. They gave him an awful lot of trouble.

M: They wouldn't come for learning?

L: No, they came just to talk. They didn't care whether they went to school or not, but they were in eighth grade, and they didn't want to study. You know how hard eighth graders can be.

It was my father's responsibility to see that the school was a place capable for people to work. He wanted to have good conduct in the school. He liked to have a teacher straightened out.

M: I can imagine, if it was a challenge to some male teachers, how difficult it was for some women teachers.

L: I remember him saying that he didn't know why some male teachers were in the school.

M: Of course, that continues today.

L: Sure.

M: On the whole, his teachers were trying to do their best?

L: I think they were, yes.

M: He was superintendent for a lot of years?

L: Yes.

M: Would you say at least twenty?

L: I think so, yes.

M: What time would he start out in the morning?

L: Well, if he went to the northern part of the county, he would start early in the morning.

M: Did he go ahead with his travels even if it got snowy?

L: I don't think he would start out on a bad day. If it had started to snow after he had left, my mother would worry. She would say, "Well, I thought you were never coming home."

He could inspect the schools in Little Beaver Township by visiting an hour or so in each one. He might have been able to do this in Beaver Township, I don't know. It just depended on how much he talked. He could do half of the school in one day. I think at one time, there were five in Little Beaver Township. I don't think he would do them all in one day, he might take two days for that. I suppose that he would take his dinner along, and the children would eat their lunch while he sat there, ate his lunch, and talked to the schoolteacher.

M: Did the schools have coal stoves ?

L: Yes, a big potbelly stove. In our school, Coal Ridge, it had a grate too. It had a grate as you came in the two front doors on the porch. In the middle of the room there was a potbelly stove. They didn't all have that. The teacher generally did her own firing, unless she lived too far away, and then she would have to get an older boy to come and start the fire with her in the morning. I know that's the way it was.

Then you carried your water and set it in the open fire. Down at Coal Ridge, there was a spring near the road. We used to go out and get open buckets and bring it in-- no sanitation about that. Everybody would reach in and take a drink and set it down. They didn't have paper cups or anything. Everyone used the same cup. After awhile they got a spigot. It was a tall thing that maybe held five gallons. That was a little bit more sanitary because the dust couldn't get in. Yet, that same cup was used.

M: Do you remember those individual cups that would fold?

L: Yes.

M: If you really wanted to have your own cup . . .

- L: Somebody said one time that they were all right as long as they worked. Sometimes they collapsed. I remember just having a tin cup. Everybody came and got a drink, set it down, and the next person came. There was no rinsing out or anything.
- M: Who bought the books?
- L: The township bought the books. Years ago, before I was in school, I think you had to buy your own books. I remember my dad had to buy books.
- M: By the time he was teaching, the township bought books? I think Pennsylvania was ahead of Ohio in that.
- L: Yes.
- M: I understand that Ohio had to buy their own books.
- L: That's right. I don't remember anybody in Little Beaver Township buying their own books.
- M: Did teachers stay in their profession for a long time? Were some of those teachers beginning to get elderly? About how long did they stay in the business?
- L: I don't know. Teachers didn't seem to stay as long in one place as they do now. Is that what you mean?
- M: Yes.
- L: I never had a really young teacher.
- M: Were they in their thirties and forties?
- L: Yes. I never had a really young teacher, or what you would call a starting out teacher. I don't remember Coal Ridge having one in my day. I would say that they were probably old enough to be married.
- M: Did they board with someone else mostly, or did they live alone?
- L: They generally boarded around. There wasn't anybody locally who stayed at home.
- M: Would they always stay at the same place or would they move? Did they regularly stay a week here and a week there?
- L: No, they would stay over the week, and then they would go to their own homes over the weekend.
- M: Okay, Martha, you can read that section about your father.

L: Thomas M. Stewart was born on the farm in Little Beaver Township where he makes his home. He was born September 23, 1844, and was reared to a noble manhood there. He attended the district schools until he was seventeen and later became a pupil in the Haysville Lillian Academy in Ohio to complete his school education.

His life work has been teaching, and he has a very important, remarkable record. He began at 22 years of age, and taught 11 years in Enon Valley, 4 in Wampum, and the remaining 7 in Little Beaver Township, all within driving distance of his home.

To his labors as county superintendent, Mr. Stewart brings a high order of intelligence which, with his excellent judgment and integrity, had made him a man of more than ordinary influence in the community.

M: Thank you, Mrs. Leslie.

END OF INTERVIEW