

ELM VALLEY COMMUNITIES

AS RECALLED BY A ONE ROOM SCHOOL TEACHER

In the decades immediately following the turn of the 20th Century, Elm Valley named after a creek that flowed southeasterly across the north east corner of Collingsworth County, encompassed several small communities. These communities were centered around their schools. Needwood, China Grove, and Hog Jaw (Elm Valley) are three examples. Roundup, another small community was located near the Oklahoma border. Apparently this community was named after a site near Roundup creek where a large ranch conducted its periodic cattle roundups. China Flat and Ella were two schools at the extreme NE corner of the county.

China Grove and Hog Jaw were two small communities that thrived for a time after the turn of the 20th century bordering each other on Elm Creek, southeast of Shamrock, Texas. Traveling from Shamrock, the Hog Jaw community was reached first at the junction of a road south toward Aberdeen. About five miles further down Elm Creek on the north side lay China Grove. Each community had a one room school house that served to identify and give it legitimacy. Needwood was situated south of Elm Creek about 6 miles distant on the road to Aberdeen.

Miss Maude Hicks, a young woman who had recently completed two years at West Texas State Teachers College in Canyon, Texas, was employed to teach the 1930/31 school year at China Grove. Her salary was \$135.00 monthly over the 9 month school year. Miss Hicks boarded with the Hill family her first year at China Grove. In exchange she paid \$20.00 monthly for room and board. She would ride to school on a horse behind Mr. Hill's young son, Harold.

In 1930/31 Mr. Brown was one of the three Board Members for the school along with Mr. Herbert Hill and Mr. Charlie Graves. Miss Hicks recalled that Charlie Graves studied penmanship from a penmanship book and had beautiful penmanship.

She recalled that the school consisted of grades 1-8; twenty-nine students were enrolled her first year. All occupied the single room. Some grades might be represented by 1, 2 or 3 students. Some grades might not have any students. The older students assisted the younger ones in learning their three R's: reading, "riting" and "rithmetic". The younger students would observe the older students as they recited their lessons and the older students might assist in tutoring the younger students, often their siblings.

Among her students were Odell, Irene and Lee Bowen and Ruby, Charlie Dow "C.D.", Clifton and Billie Brown. She also taught the Glassock children, the Wattenburgher children (the family owned a ranch further down the creek toward Oklahoma), the Nobel Miller children (Ancel, Walter, and Loretta). For years afterward, Ancel who traveled widely would appear from out of the blue to families he knew from his youth on Elm Creek. He was particularly close to the Elder and Brown families. Ancel joined the army and served multiple tours of duty. He also told tales of exploring for gold in South America. He finally settled in the remaining years of his life in California. Other students were from the Serber and Hill families. The Hill children were Charlie and Harold. Charlie later married Myrtle Keese who would teach at the Needwood school and eventually teach 5th Grade at Samnorwood Consolidated School District.

One of Miss Hick's students, Walter Miller had a slight speech impediment and could not verbalize his R's. Some 80 years later Maude chuckled as she recalled a humorous incident involving Walter. At

recess one day, the children were playing a coed baseball game. Ruby Brown was running the bases and Walter, in his excitement, cried out "Lun, Luby, Lun!" This incident may seem slightly "Politically Incorrect" by modern standards but it illustrates some interesting facts about the one room school of the past where boys and girls played together, studied together and in their excitement, cheered each other.

Miss Hicks' family lived at Fresno S.E. of Wellington, TX, and sometimes she would drive home to see the family on weekends. Since Mary Jones, the Needwood teacher, was also from the Wellington area she would cross Elm Creek on the road south toward Aberdeen, pick up Mary and they would travel together the 30 odd miles to Wellington.

Near the junction of the two roads was a fresh water spring from which the various families living on Elm Creek got their drinking water. Farm families had wagons with a water barrel in the bed to carry the family water supply. Raymond Brown recalled driving the team to collect water. He said that he would sometimes see someone coming down the hill from the south to collect their family water. Seeing each other in the distance, the drivers would race their teams to see who would get to the spring first. Since the water was collected in a reservoir beneath the spring whoever arrived first depleted the supply and the next person might have to wait hours for the reservoir to fill enough to fill their tank.

A short distance to the west of the spring are three unmarked graves. According to tradition, they are the graves of a mother and her children who were passing through Elm Valley when they picked and ate some wild greens. They died of food poisoning.

On a beautiful Spring day (April 19, 1933) Miss. Hicks took a walk to collect the mail with two members of Tom Brown's family, Juanita and Ruby. They walked about three miles up Elm Creek in a westerly direction to the mail box. While walking they noticed storm clouds building in the southwest. The sky grew darker and more ominous with every passing moment as the winds began to rise. Fortunately, Mr. Tom Brown noticed the clouds and instructed Raymond, his son, to take the family car and pick up the walkers. When they returned, they all insisted that Miss Hicks come to the Brown house instead of returning to the back room of the school house which had been provided for her quarters after her first year of teaching. The Brown's had a storm cellar to which they retreated during weather that might produce tornadoes. The next morning when she looked out toward the red brick school house she saw that it had been in the path of a tornado and was partially destroyed. As she looked across the fields toward the school house she noticed that the roof had been blown from the building and her clothes were scattered and some were hanging from mesquite trees in the open fields. Her quarters had been in the cloak room and consisted of a single bed, a cabinet on which sat a coal oil lamp and a shelf from which she hung her clothes. Upon entering the building she found that a pile of bricks lay on the floor at the head of her bed. The bed and its covers were untouched. The covers were exactly in place, the tall cabinet had blown out slightly from the wall and the unbroken oil lamp's glass chimney was wedged between the cabinet and the wall. School was dismissed for the year and Miss Hicks received her full salary as though she had finished her contract.

Other teachers in Hog Jaw (Elm Valley) and China Grove were Claude and Velma Cheves who later taught at Highland Park School near the WWII airbase in Amarillo and after they retired they taught at Grady, NM. Jack and Maggie Sutton also taught in the valley. Claude Cheves and Maggie Sutton were brother and sister. The Suttons moved to Canadian, TX, to continue their career of teaching. Miss Hicks married Raymond Brown in 1934 and moved to the Fresno School Southeast of Wellington to teach for the 1935/36 school year. In the 1942/43 school year, Mrs. Hicks Brown returned to teach at China Grove. Her daughter, Shirley, started school that year but the School was consolidated with Samnorwood and she transferred to teach there for the next 14 years. Thus, her daughter along with her class mates in the first grade in 1942 were in the last class at China Grove and, at the same time, and in the Samnorwood first grade class the same year.

Crime was not unheard of in the Elm Creek community. At least two murders were recalled in the oral history of Elm Valley. A man was fatally shot by an unknown assailant from the cover of trees when he stepped out on the porch of his house. The murderer was never identified but it was assumed to be a

grudge killing. The perpetrators of the other murder were captured and jailed. It seems the wife of the murder victim and her lover drowned the husband in the creek, perhaps believing that they could claim an accidental death by drowning. However, killing him was not an easy matter as evidenced by the tracks and marks left by the victim in the mud on the bank of Elm Creek. The sheriff from Shamrock read the evidence in the creek-side mud, decided it was homicide and arrested the wife and her lover. It was alleged that after some time in jail, she called out to the jailer, "Won't you give an old woman a little snuff in her hour of grief?" About half way to China Grove from Shamrock on the left side of the road was a lone tree called "the hanging tree". It is uncertain when or under what circumstances it got this designation.

Life on Elm Creek required creative entertainment for the family. Collecting arrowheads and grinding stones was easy as the valley had afforded excellent winter campsites. Prior to settlement, Comanche Indians were known to govern this region but it was also visited by the Kiawa Indians. The Elm Creek valley had offered relief from the harsh North winds and a plentiful supply of fresh water for the Indian camp and its livestock. The surrounding rolling hills and prairies land must have offered fodder for bison, deer and possibly elk. The trees within the valley would have sheltered turkeys. The sandy soil within the flood plain also offered an easy site to dig graves. When laboring in the fields it wasn't uncommon for the Elm Valley farmers to uncover the remains of these shallow graves. Raymond Brown recalled that while hoeing cotton one of the work party uncovered a skull. The family gathered around and the brothers and sisters were tempted to dig further. However, an uncle told them to "cover him up and let him sleep."

Though isolated from major towns, the Elm Valley communities found various opportunities for entertainment. Tom Brown was a fiddler and called for many of the square dances on Elm Creek. In addition to dances there were pie suppers and auctions for pies and cakes. This offered opportunities for young men to have some personal time with a sweet heart over a box lunch or dessert. Sometimes others, knowing the romantic desire of the bidder, would bid up the price as a practical joke. Other outlets included picnics along Elm Creek, Church meetings and potlucks. Often families would gather around the kitchen table to play dominos or card games such as "pitch".

The great depression forced many of the small farmers and their families to leave the valley to seek employment in other areas. This led to reduced class sizes in the small schools in Elm Valley leading to the consolidation of the community schools. This also contributed to the loss of community and the passing of a unique era in Elm Valley's history.

Recollections of Mrs. Maude Hicks Brown at age 93