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Grace: 1-room country schoolhouses may be gone, but they're not forgotten

By [Erin Grace](#) / World-Herald columnist



RYAN SODERLIN/THE WORLD-HERALD

Betty Stukenholtz helped lead a 2½-year effort to place signs where some 109 country schools once stood in Otoe County. Here, she holds a dress she wore years ago at Harmony School, a building she later bought and preserved.

RURAL OTOE COUNTY, Neb. — With little ceremony, other than the bang-bang-banging of a pole driver, they put up the last sign.

“Site of Sand Creek School” reads the white placard planted between Wade Nutzman's cornfield and a gravel road in the northeastern part of this county, about an hour's drive south of Omaha.

Sand Creek School opened in 1865, the year President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, the year the Civil War came to an end, the year Wade Nutzman's great-great-grandfather came from Germany and picked this spot northwest of Nebraska City to plant a homestead.

The school closed in 1955, the year Rosa Parks refused to budge, the year a vaccine for polio was approved, the year that three residents of Otoe County were coming of age.

Betty Stukenholtz was beginning her senior year at Nebraska City High. Ron Hauptman was an eighth-grader in his country school, Pleasant Valley, and Janis Grimes was Ron's young teacher.

Like generations of children across the state, Betty, Ron and Janis shared the experience of grade school in a one-room country schoolhouse with colorful names like Harmony. They might have been, like Betty, the only one in their grade. They might have been, like Ron and his three brothers, about a third of the 12-student school's enrollment.

Betty came to school each day in the flowered-print dress her mother sewed from chicken feed sacks. Ron came in overalls. Janis, the teacher, came at age 18. She was a newly minted teacher after high school graduation and a \$100 loan she needed to take the then-required 12 college credit hours over the summer to teach.



There were no school buses. Nobody got rides. They walked or rode ponies — Betty on a pony named Babe; Janis on a horse named Brigham Young. There were no cafeterias. Everyone brought lunch from home — Betty in the 1940s in a green metal lunch pail with buckles. Her father, Vernon, carried his lunch to the same school three decades earlier in a Karo syrup can.

With the same teacher for eight years and the same neighboring farm families for classmates, these country schools became extended families. Students shared chores like feeding the coal-fired stove. They shared anxiety about the dreaded eighth-grade exam, a requirement before going to high school — in town.

Over the years, as towns shrank, as farms consolidated, as education became more standardized across the state, officials questioned the need for country schools. Some schools didn't have the numbers needed and closed their doors. The Nebraska Legislature, citing the higher cost per pupil and a desire for efficiency, made it harder for country schools to operate. In 2005, the powers that be decided that all elementary-only schools must merge with a K-12 district or close their doors.

A year later, Small Foot School was the last country grade school in Otoe County to close.

Fast-forward to a sunny, humid Thursday afternoon at Wade Nutzman's place.

Here's Betty Stukenholtz in her green Otoe County Genealogical Society polo shirt, a yellow covered wagon stitched on the front. She's watching Ron Hauptman drive a green metal signpost a foot into the soil. She's watching Janis Grimes hold the white placard so Ron can take his socket wrench and a pair of 7/16th screws and bolt it into place.

This is the eighth and last sign. They had spent the day criss-crossing the county.

Along the way they met: Wyatt DeRoe, age 14, who presented an old tin cup he'd found while foraging on the crumbling Solon School foundation, which sits on land his dad farms. Arnold Wirthele, age 81, who presented a photo of his 5-year-old self in 1937 outside his country school, Rocky Ford. Ardys Brugman, 86, the town of Douglas' unofficial historian, who insisted for accuracy's sake that the Banner School sign go in Dean and Deb Spencer's front yard — not down the road as Deb initially requested. (But beware of their Rottweilers; they don't like strangers.)

It had been a good day. A long day. A day capping a long 2½ years since Janis first saw a news story about an Iowa couple's efforts to preserve the memory of these country schools by putting signs across the landscape. Grave markers to a time since past.

Janis called Betty, whose affinity for country schools is so strong she bought her old Harmony schoolhouse and preserved it. Betty got others with the genealogical society involved. She did most of the legwork — spending so much time at the Otoe County Clerk's Office looking up records that they finally gave her the school record book.

It took records and interviews to figure out where some 109 country schools once stood in Otoe County. One blew away in the Easter Sunday tornado of 1913. One got swallowed by a flooded Missouri River channel. Most got knocked down. Just

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20 buildings still stand, including Betty's Harmony School, which costs her about \$700 a month for upkeep.

The sign project took letters to landowners to ask permission. It took fundraisers to cover the \$25 cost per sign. It took retired secretary Betty's stick-to-itiveness, Janis' passion and Ron's brawn.

They needed Ron, Otoe County Board member, to pound in the signs.

Ron ferried Betty and Janis across Otoe County in his Chevy pickup for the past two years. Most of the time, it was just them planting a lonely sign in a field.

On Thursday they had a small group that included me. We spent six hours driving around the county on dusty gravel roads.

We ended up at the Nutzman place.

“Does anyone object?” Ron asked, holding the green post near a utility pole. No one objected.

Ron took the pole driver and pushed it into the ground.

“This ends it,” a wistful Betty said. “This is the last one.”



