I’m on My Way
by Carolyn K. Tanner
CHAPTER ONE:  
I'M ON MY WAY

It was my first day in a new school, that long ago day of my childhood. Our family had moved from one farm to another, just a few miles apart. But, it meant that I would go to a different school. Time takes me back many years and many miles to that frightening day of my fourth grade, with my eyes looking into a tunnel of hopelessness. What, may I ask you, could be more frightening to a shy little Midwestern farm girl in the early 1950's, than going to a new school? I would much rather have taken an exploratory trip down into the cool dark spider-filled cave that lay beneath the mounded lawn on the side of our house. I longed for another summer day that had been mine to explore only the week before.

“Carolyn,” my mother's voice sang forth, “bacon's frying in the pan; come and eat it if you can?” I always wondered how she could think up a new rhyme each day. In later years I asked her about that. Her reply was that she didn't know, but she was sure that it wasn't every day that she had one for us. Maybe it was only on the days that we really needed to hear her cheerful voice singing up the stairs to the bedrooms that my sisters and I shared. Well, I surely needed to hear something happy on that September morning because there wasn't anything in my heart but a deep dark dread. The crispy bacon didn't need to wait very long because not only had I chosen what dress I would wear and had everything carefully laid out, but the smell of frying bacon demanded immediate attention.

It was not long before my reluctant feet were carrying me along the gravel roadway, next to my older sister. She seemed cheerful enough, and I wondered how she could not be as nervous as I. We had a mile and a quarter to walk, and only occasionally did I dread it. Sometimes we walked, sometimes we rode bikes, once in a while we rode the retired work horse, tying her in the shade of a tree beside the school. This day, however, I didn't dread the walk, I dreaded how it ended.

This bright warm September morning the walk brought us to the white one room school house. I tugged open the door and entered a new world. That morning, and every morning thereafter, I pitted my strength against that heavy metal door. All these years later that building still boasts it's heavy door, now converted to a workshop on the family farm.

The small entryway displayed a row of nails, on which to hang our jackets, beneath was a space for the boots worn in the winter snow season and the spring mud season; a shelf for the lunch pails, and a large stone crock with drinking water. The drinking water came from the pump beside the school building. The small building out back was the 'outhouse.' That was expected, as our homes were similarly equipped.
Standing in the doorway to the main building I saw a room about the size of our family living room. In the center of the room was a big free-standing stove, above which was an 8 inch stovepipe that connected to the chimney. The desks were positioned around the stove, with the teacher's desk in the front.

My frightened eyes took in the other children, my sister being the only one that I knew. So, I met a girl, a year older than I, the one with long brown hair and the wide smile, and her younger brother. Another girl and brother, and a girl in the same grade as my sister. Two years later the older two entered the town high school and my younger sister, entered kindergarten. That was the total enrollment during my three years of attendance. I was in a class all by myself. That was different since I had attended my first three years of school in a class of twelve which included grades one through three. Maybe this would be better as there would be no one to laugh at my many mistakes.

Now my eyes traveled up to those of the teacher. She had shoulder length golden hair falling in soft curls to her neck, and a smile that caused me to question my earlier dark thoughts. She gently indicated where I was to sit and helped me to get myself organized. One of the first things I quickly learned about her was that her leading of the opening patriotic song was pretty weak. She was not a singer. How could they have hired a teacher who couldn't sing, I wondered? I loved to sing, always had, and I would sing to and for anyone I could get to sit still for a few minutes. However, I didn't feel like it this morning.

Why did succeeding days find such a light heart replacing that heaviness of the first day? That initial reluctance to go to school was given no more room and not a minute worth of time when I went to school in County School #79; the gentleness combined with a self-confidence in that young school teacher won me over heart and soul. That first day was a full one for all of us. Books were distributed, assignments given, routines established, lunch and recess enjoyed. The end of the school day was announced in a way similar to the beginning of the day, the ringing of the school bell. The big difference in the bell at the end of the day was not in the tone of the ring, but in the ringer herself. Could she have really chosen me to ring the bell? I couldn't wait to tell Mother all about my day, and most important was the teacher.

I liked her! I really liked my teacher! When compared with the terror of my previous years of school it seemed a miracle. I now looked forward to nine months of delight. When I said to my mother that first day, that I was on my way little did I know what that really meant. I really was on my way to the happiest school years of my life, under the direction of a young teacher who had graduated from high school the spring before, then crammed in learning to be a teacher in one summer school session. Life is full of surprises, even in a little country school.

CHAPTER TWO: DRINKS INSIDE, TOILETS OUTSIDE

To those of us lucky enough to have enjoyed (?) outdoor plumbing this chapter will have special meaning. Our homes and rural schools were so ordered. Rain or shine; above 100 degrees or below 0 we carried water from
the pump to the house and walked the short, but well-traveled, path to use the outhouse. To be honest about it, I really don't remember pumping water to bring in, either at home or at school. I do remember the stone crock for drinking at school, so someone must have carried it in. However, I have very vivid memories of the outhouse, and of the adverse weather conditions that were endured on many a trip. I also don't remember anyone getting their tongue frozen to the pump handle, but I do remember being warned about it, both at school and at home.

School started at 8:45. Another way of looking at the time school began was after a good hearty farm breakfast and a walk to school. The school bell that always sat at the upper right hand of Teacher's desk was rung, followed by the patriotic song of the day. Nature's call began to evident about that time. If the day was inviting with sunshine, warmth, and the call of birds I had no inclination to postpone the inevitable. Sometimes, though, if an older student was reading a story aloud that I found particularly interesting I would postpone my walk. Occasionally I found myself wiggling and squirming around at my desk trying to wait a couple more minutes, at least until the end of that exciting part. Then, I would signal Teacher, receive her nod for permission and take my journey to the outhouse.

This was not a problem with the nice weather days, as I have said. It was the cold winter that I dreaded. So, I would wait as long as I could without running the risk of mortal embarrassment. Then, the signal and permission quickly exchanged, I would hurry to the entry room to get ready to brave the elements. In extreme weather conditions the full suit of armor would be required. In the 1950's I was required to wear a dress to school. I could, however, wear jeans under my dress. So, there were the jeans, boots, coat, scarf, and hand knit gloves. Once all of this ceremony was accomplished I would lean my shoulder into the heavy door and brace myself for the wind that came, full blast, over the empty field that lay before it. It now was a race to the outhouse; a race both due to the timing and to minimize the time spent outside.

How does one delicately describe the outhouse? In warm weather the smell was enough to guarantee as short a visit as possible, in the winter the ice blast that hit the area of one's anatomy least callous to the cold hurried nature's call. On cold days there was up with the dress and down with the jeans, then the brief as possible occupation of one of the two seat openings. In the event that I had to be patient in the completion of the task there was the Sears catalog to browse through. So, there I sat in complete discomfort with my jeans around my ankles, the skirt of my dress held carefully in a handful in my lap, my mittens on the floor, and my feet dangling. Is it any wonder that I neglected to take seriously the styles of the day, as shown in the catalog? Concluding the occupancy was done by tearing out one page of the catalog, to be added to the used collection.

I was sure to be careful to push the door closed, so that the wind would not tear it off the hinges. The mad tearing dash across the school yard to the warm interior of the school completed the excursion. Outerwear had to be removed and once again hung on the hook to dry out before either the next trip or recess, whichever came first.

I marvel at how different such trips are for today's elementary students. They can leave the room without any of the dressing and undressing I required, take their leisure in a clean room maintained by a school custodian. Yet there are some similarities as well. When the interest level in the classroom is high the necessity of such trips in minimal, but when it is low the trips are more frequently requested. Today's youngster can also request to pay a visit to the school nurse, who can often accurately diagnose both the student, and the classroom interest level.
Today, as well as yesterday, one's school mates deserve our consideration. I was reminded to close the door to keep the outhouse more comfortable for others; today's children are reminded to flush after use. All children consider it their inalienable right to remind previous users of the responsibilities.

Upon returning to my desk it was back to work, to take a deep breath, and to take up where I had left off a few minutes before. Perhaps, the story I had been eavesdropping on had been completed, and it was my turn to read. Or, maybe it was time for me to get back to the exciting history lesson in my own book, or to write the spelling words ten times each in preparation for Friday's test. Whatever it was I returned to, it was done with more physical comfort than when I left.

CHAPTER THREE: THE STOVEPIPE

The large stove that stood in the center of our school room does not stand out in any vivid fashion in my memory; unlike the recollected details of the stove in our home. I had a vested interest, so to speak, with regard to the stove at home. Many a cold morning I scurried down the stairs; leaving the cold bedroom with my school clothes clutched in my hands, to dress in the comfort within the circle of warmth provided by that stove. Behind it was a place for the boots to dry, as well as a place for the mittens to drip. Most homes were similarly heated using either wood, coal or corncobs.

The stove at school had certain characteristics that I do remember; it was tall, also had a place reserved for boots and dripping mittens, and shelves on either side of it that we used to warm our lunches. While the stove itself is not clear to me from this point in time, the stovepipe itself is. It was not long before this new student realized the significance of the upward glance. We all checked the stovepipe from time to time. School students today wonder about fire drills, their timing, and what supernatural powers control them. We wondered about the marvelous stovepipe.

This particular connection from the heat source to chimney was a bit precarious; one could even say that it appeared unsteady. However, neither rain, nor wind, nor dark of night could affect its connection. One could truly say that it had a mind of its own. Many a devout prayer was said on the eve of tests that included the stovepipe, along with the desire that we had studied the right things, had them straight in our minds, and we could keep ourselves calm enough to accurately recall the information at the appropriate time.

I did all the right things in preparation for a history test. I would be asked the dates for the major explorers for our great country. First, I studied, (oh, how I studied) then I said my prayers. This was very good timing, actually, the wind was blowing; surely that creates stress on the best of stovepipes as it swirls in uncertain gusts down the chimney. So, the stovepipe entered my prayers.

The day dawned bright and cold. All the way to school I recited the dates, and said my quiet little prayer. Upon entering the
classroom I discovered that all was normal. I cast an accusing eye upward to the length of pipe that connected the heat source to the outside. All was as always. The appointed time came, and there was no reprieve. So, I took the test. The dates seemed to match themselves up with the appropriate explorer and location, so, I guess there was an answer to prayer. I had, in fact, remained somewhat calm, that was also an answer to prayer.

At our country school we all appreciated recess, including Teacher. We enjoyed the fresh air coming off the surrounding snow-covered, corn-stubbled fields, and the many games that we added to our repertoire. That day was particularly enjoyable to me, having the test completed and my mind free from worry. So it was with reluctant feet that we scholars trudged back to the classroom. With our outer clothes hung and our lungs full of good clean air; we headed back to the classroom.

Upon opening the door from the cloakroom a surprise awaited us. The air was thick with black soot, not only the air, but the contents of the room as well. Everything was covered with the smelly soot, books in the desks as well as those left on top, paper and pencils, the maps upon the walls, the windows, and even the pictures of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln boasted the dingy dark sheen of soot.

All teachers know that they have to be flexible. Teacher had long since learned that she needed to keep in mind her students and their families. People don't fit neatly into the little boxes allowed in the plan-book. Now, she also learned that she had to be flexible because of the stovepipe. So, those carefully made lesson plans had to be changed. School was still in session, it was just different.

The first action to be taken was to send an older student to the nearest farm house. That was where Teacher boarded, so they were familiar with the requests that a teacher in a country school might make. This time it was for rags and buckets, and another pair of adult hands to help. Next, was to open the windows allowing the cold clean air to blow through the room. The afternoon was spent scrubbing. Even with all that effort and George and Abe's faces clean there still remained the smudges on assignments for some time to come. It was days before we came home without the smell clinging to our clothes and hair.

Once the cleaning had been accomplished it was up to one of the fathers to come and 'fix' the stovepipe. It would surely stay forever this time! I sometimes wonder if there was a twinkle in the eye of the father as he remembered how nice it was to break the routine of the school day as he hauled the old dirty stovepipe up the ladder, yet again. He remembered just enough, but not too much about the business of permanently putting that piece of necessary equipment in place. I know my father has enjoyed relaying some of his school experiences. He enjoys telling about the problems of the girl who was lucky enough to sit in front of him. He would dip her long braids in the inkwell and tie the sash of her dress around the back of her chair. Could he have thought that our little school needed excitement? I don't remember if it was his turn to 'fix' the stovepipe on this particular occasion, but he did get to take his turn. I just wished that one of these fathers could figure a way to set up some kind of timing device in that old stovepipe. Now, if each of us could have had a way to activate it when need really arose we would be all set. But, we could not control it any more than the children of today can control the fire-drill timing.

CHAPTER FOUR: RECESS

Recess was a delightful respite from ongoing scholarly pursuits. It occurred twice each day; in the middle of both morning and afternoon. Of course, there was a play time during the lunch break, as well. I think that many of the elementary schools today do not
have the time for recess, as we did. However, today's students have many activities that we did not have; art, music physical education, library time, fire prevention programs, assemblies, to name but a few. Recess was fifteen minutes of social interaction, that is play!

What could that number of children do? There weren't enough to even play baseball let alone kickball or other organized games. My, we never even considered all of those things we couldn't do. There were just hundreds of things we could think of. Where do you even begin with only fifteen short minutes? I really am convinced that Teacher loved those interludes just as much as we did; and what we couldn't think of she could. She was a young teacher, with not too many years separating us. (I wonder if she enjoyed her later students as much as her first students. I also wonder if her later students enjoyed her as much as her first students did.) I believe the fifteen minutes scheduled was stretched a little, after all it could take at least half of that time to get the boots, coats, mittens, and scarves on. Then, also, consider the visits to the outhouse, drinks, and taking all of those clothes off again.

So, here we were, outside all dressed for the winter temperatures and conditions. We decided to play 'fox and goose,' we hadn't played it since the new snow came three days ago. We all stood in the center of the school yard and began by stomping the snow down into a small circle, then a spiral of circles was made, increasing in size until the entire yard was involved. This probably took the first recess of the day; but it was ready for the game either at lunch or afternoon. On those following recesses a 'fox' would be chosen and the rest of us were 'geese'. The center was 'free' (where one could take a moment to catch a breath). The 'fox' had to catch a 'goose' while both remained on the track. Other favorite winter activities were snowmen and snow angels.

However, many of our winters had very little snow, so the snow activities were fairly infrequent. Much of the winter would be spent in playing tag or just going for walks; or staying in for the inside games we could think up. One inside game that was often played as we ate our lunches, was 'I spy.' the designated 'it' mentally chose something in the room, and once having told the color the others had to try to guess it. The successful guesser was the next 'it.' Of course there were the obvious easy ones like the nail head on the wall ten feet above our heads, the cobweb in the corner, the dead fly hanging from a light fixture. But, there were the hard ones that seemed to take forever to guess. One of Teacher's choices really had us stumped for many long minutes. Would it ever be anyone else have a turn? The longer we took the more delighted she became. Even after we figured it out we were pretty certain that it would show disrespect to make the identification, so we were in a quandary. She had described it as brown with something small, threadlike, coming out of the center. She was amused when she had cornered us into identifying the mole on her cheek. That is how she was, she had a special way of being with us, but yet we all knew we had a respect for her and would do nothing to embarrass her if we could avoid it.

Teacher was the center of one memorable recess that I believe none of us would ever forget. At least in my own memory it is a very vivid, but not pleasant experience. One of our good-weather outside activities was 'run around the school-house.' I suppose we all knew it could be dangerous, but what
elementary school child really considers the dangers? Perhaps Teacher should have known better, but she had as much fun at it as any of us. So, when that was the choice for recess no one really felt any concern. It was a very simple game with an 'it' running one direction around the school and the rest of us the other. When 'it' came around a corner those in view had to be standing still or else they had to join the 'it' team. When all were caught the whole process was repeated with the last one to be caught being the next 'it.' Corner collisions were a common happening in this game, with no one really suffering any significant injury. That is, until Teacher collided with one of the runners. The impact brought all of us on the scene with due haste. She was bleeding from her mouth and uncontrolled tears of pain coursed their way down her cheeks. Our only transportation at the school was our feet, and with no telephone it was some minutes before a neighbor could be summoned to take her to a doctor. As she left we sadly and quietly made our separate ways home. Of course, it was no mortal injury, but it did cause one of her front teeth to be darkened for the rest of her life. I rather hope that she carried other, more pleasant, permanent memories of our recess fun.

Teacher wasn't to be stopped in her recess fun. She continued to enjoy our play times together, whether they were inside or outside, she was there to be with us. I believe, though, that we no longer played 'run around the school house,' instead we played 'one, two, three over.' In this game we divided into two teams one on either side of the length of the school. After yelling 'one, two, three over' the ball was thrown over the top of the school and someone on the other side was supposed to catch it. If it wasn't caught that team forfeited one player to the other team. When the last one on a team failed to catch the ball the game was over. This seemed to be much safer for all of us.

Recess was a marvelous time in our country school. It was a time of laughter, friendships, whispered secrets, and imagination.

Each one of us had a special contribution to make and all of us seemed to be accepted as people of worth. Teacher taught us by example that we could laugh at ourselves, play hard, get hurt, and bounce right back up. She showed us that we need to give our all to a game, to enjoy it to the fullest, and to respect each and every participant for their unique qualities. Is it any wonder that she was a well-respected teacher for years to come?

CHAPTER FIVE: NO SCHOOL TODAY

Children and parents alike today and for many yesterdays spend time on bad weather days with an eye on the clock and an ear tuned into the local radio or TV station. Is there school; isn't there school? Do the children get dressed with the appropriate bad weather outer wear; or do they go back to bed? Will we all be home today? Does the emergency child care arrangement activate? When WILL the announcer finally read that list again? Hasn't the school made a decision yet?

Each morning has its trials with regard to getting ready for school and getting out the door on time. The bad weather days carry a double dose of trial, what with the children wishing for a day off, and parents just wishing to know so the day can finally be planned. This early morning rush of activity differs very little from the pattern of my own childhood. On a farm the activities begin early every morning, though perhaps not quite as early in the winter as in other seasons. But, we faced the same questions. I do not remember any public announcements being made with regard to canceling or delaying when I went to the small country school. I believe this type of message was communicated with a telephone call to each of the homes. As we were to find out the timeliness of this call was very important.

On one particularly cold and snowy winter day whether there was school didn't really seem to be a question. It wasn't that awful
out and probably wouldn't get real bad. I was the only one of the family attending the country school that year, my older sister having moved on to the town school and younger sister not having entered, yet. It was, however, a day when I was given a ride as it was blustery. I can still see that red-pick-up as it pulled out of the school yard when I approached the heavy outer school door. "What a heavy door," were my thoughts, as I tugged with all my strength. The wind coming from that direction off about a zillion miles of empty mid-western corn stubble could really be hard to fight against when struggling with that door. Why wouldn't it come open? They couldn't have heard any banging on the door from inside the school room, so I just kept on tugging for some minutes. Finally, I noticed that there was no light in the windows either. Do you mean to me that my Dad just left me off in the middle of a snow storm and there was no school!

By this time the snow was coming harder, so hard in fact that in the little time I had been standing here it had really begun to drift and accumulate. It was heavy enough that I couldn't see across the road to where Teacher stayed. Years later, when I had moved East, I discovered a very descriptive term for this kind of weather condition. A whiteout was a storm with a great deal of snow, wind and with blowing conditions, but one where the atmosphere and the ground look alike to the poor unfortunate person caught in it. I was that person! I felt small, helpless, and afraid. And besides all of that I felt abandoned. Would I ever get back home? Would I ever get warm again? I have no idea how long I stood there. I just knew that my parents would eventually remember their poor forlorn middle daughter; and perhaps when the snow melted, in about three years, they would come looking for me. When they did I had better be where they left me. "If you get lost don't go wandering around, stay put." It was good advice but then I didn't have any real choice.

First, I stood, then I sat huddled by the door, then, I walked to the end of the cement block, then I stood by the door, again. I repeated the lonesome cycle again and again. I quickly found that tears didn't help and they only froze on my face making my chapped cheeks hurt more. So, I controlled that urge. My mittens were wet from wiping my tears and my nose, so my hands were surely just frozen solid. My legs were cold inside my jeans. My ankles were sore from a long winter of wearing the boots with the wet tops chafing at every step. The plastic bags, carefully inserted in the wet boots to keep my feet dry, had failed in their purpose and were now all bunched under my toes. What a miserable situation!

After the three years had passed I saw my sister riding the horse as she came around the edge of the school. “On the horse?” I yelled. Above the wind she yelled back at me to get on, no one could get through any other way, the roads were all closed with the drifting snow. I now understood the reason it had taken so long, an old retired work horse couldn't move very fast. I did give the gracious comment to her that I might be a little testy, so she only said that I should hang on.

That was the longest ride I ever took on a horse! We went on the road about half of the way, but the snow was so deep that the progress was very slow. When we reached the edge of our farm we knew where there was an opening in the fence, allowing us a shorter and windswept way. The wind had clear sailing, and while it was still very cold, much of the snow had blown away leaving easier traveling.

Now, I had waited three years for someone to come and get me, and by the time we reached home another two years at least had passed. Surely, by this point I had added enough years to my young life that I was old enough to decide to quit school. Mom and Dad didn't really see it that way. I shall carry with me always the feeling of warmth as I came into the house, the feeling of love coming from my mother as she sat holding me close, pressing my icy hands to her warm body. I felt loved and
cared for, while such a short time before I had felt lonely and abandoned. The call to relay the school closing message had arrived after Daddy and I had left, and before the days of cell phones, he didn't receive the message. I was gently reminded by Mother to be sure to thank my sister for coming to get me. She, too, had braved some pretty chilling conditions.

That glowing warmth and family love that came to my rescue that long ago day has often been mine to enjoy. It reaches out to me often as I call or visit my family. I had only to hear Mother sing into the phone, “Oh, it’s you!” and the warmth filled me anew. I could be calling out of some frustration I’d encountered, fear, or homesickness and, I had only to hear Daddy say, “Well hello there.” It quickly stirs my heart into flames of love that only family can kindle. Out of that cold raw experience of facing the elements that winter day came the opportunity to hold in my very soul the kind of love my family feels for one another. Mom and Dad gave us that lesson about family life, and I believe each of us, daughters, with our husbands, have nourished that same love with our own children.

CHAPTER SIX: FULFILLING THE STANDARDS

We were a little country school, with very few students, so you would think that maybe the larger district would forget that we even existed. Not so! I am sure that Teacher had all kinds of reading material to enlighten her and to keep her on the straight and narrow. She had to cover certain subjects with each grade and be careful that the correct amount of time was spent on each. Standardized tests were given to check our progress in relation to other students in the district. So, we were carefully monitored and duly entered in the district records. The facilities also had to meet certain requirements. We were encouraged to participate in district activities of various kinds, some of which we did, and I remember them.

All of this sounds rather boring; and I'm sure that sometimes it must have seemed a bit tedious to Teacher. We were not really aware of much of this part of it. I only know it must have been involved some of this because of my memories.

One day I remember a rather portly lady, dressed in a red business suit came to call. She and Teacher had a whispered conference, so not to disturb the studying. Well, we were quiet as could be trying to hear what was being said; all the while giving the appearance of being very absorbed in our work. I remember the Miss Lady-in-Red laid something down on my book. It was a small box with some kind of a meter with a needle registering something or other. Well, I was interested! It looked like something my Dad might have had in his tool shop that I would have been told to leave alone! Enough time passed that I had taken a very good look at it. After a bit she came back and cooed at me that I couldn’t very well study if that was in my way. What Teacher and I both knew was that I was supposed to be giving my attention to the other side of the book. I was sure that I would be reprimanded for it; I felt that I had let Teacher down in front of important Miss Lady-in-Red. But nothing was ever said about it. I always was a worrier! The meter was to measure the level of available light at my desk. So, see, the district was looking out for our welfare. I really wonder, however, if she checked all of the facilities.

I have no idea how the academic records were kept for all of these little country schools. Probably if I knew where to look, or if I had the interest to pursue it far enough I could come up with my grades stored in a dusty box in a long forgotten location. Or perhaps some state official decided in recent years that all of these records should be on computer. Those years could be on some little colorful disk in a storeroom. They probably have me all filed away by my social security number and all of my grades are available to whoever has the inclination to look. There I am, in numerical order, quietly sleeping the time away with
thousands of fellow students, waiting to be reawakened at the touch of the computer key!

Whoever has the interest to pursue my scholastic record will find that one of those three years I did better than my 'slightly above average' rating when taking the Standardized Achievement Tests. We had been duly admonished to get plenty of rest during the week so that we would be at our very best. (That speech is recited every year to every student and whoever wrote it should get royalties!) So, of course we all did our best to follow instructions. However, we were all farm children, and planting time meant late nights. But, that was true for the whole state so the norm must surely have reflected that.

The only test that I remember taking was the one that drew Teacher's immediate attention. It is a well-established fact that I am a poor speller. That is why she was aware that I had scored higher in that part of the test than what was expected. It was reflected in my rating at something like the eighth grade level. (I'm sure there were some months tacked on to it as well, as we must be accurate in all testing). When it was time to go out for recess it was announced that she and I would be out in a few minutes. Well, I tell you, I was so scared! What had I done wrong? I didn't remember doing anything. Oh, dear, what will my parents think when they hear that I had to stay in during recess. I surely had myself worked up in fine shape by the time she came to my desk to talk with me. All she did was ask me to spell a word; so I did. She smiled her 'I like you smile' but I figured I had spelled it wrong. Well, I didn't; I had spelled pickle correctly several years before I should have been able to do so. That word, combined with the other ones that I had spelled correctly, put me way up on the scale for spelling. It is a good thing they didn't ask me to spell scissors! What a good feeling it was to have had that success and a teacher who was proud or me.

We were also encouraged to do nice art projects that could be displayed at the county fair. If they were judged good enough they would go to the state fair. So, all year long we did our best at drawing and painting so that they might be hung in the education building at the fair. They were labeled by district school number so that our school had all of ours together. All schools were represented and I believe there must have been thousands of papers on display. Most of us looked only for our own school and duly admired them, then skipped the rest of the miles of art work.

While I like to think that our little building was unique. It was really pretty much like all the other little country schools. We were all trying to do our best with few students and few up to date resources. But, we weren't forgotten by the state or county education officials; and we were expected to fulfill all of the requirements to make us productive members of society. When I attended the University of Nebraska I met many students educated in the same rural setting that I had enjoyed. Those same people are today's medical doctors, farmers, shop owners, truck drivers, lawyers, teachers, nurses, and other highly skilled vocations. So the person doing research on students of country schools back in the computer disk room will find some pretty amazing facts. Out of the ordinary came very well educated, well rounded, happy, healthy members of many communities throughout the United States and the world.

CHAPTER SEVEN; MY SPANISH GUITAR

Music was not among the many talents of Teacher. She couldn't sing well or play any instrument. We had long since taken over leading the morning patriotic song, as well as any songs for school programs. She was happy enough for us to do that, and readily admitted her lack of ability. It hadn't taken us long to get used to the situation and adapt ourselves accordingly. Our school programs tended to be mostly memorized poems or little skits with a few songs. Christmas was easy enough as everyone knows the carols, and we could invite
all in attendance to join in the singing. Actually, I don't really remember the programs very well; even when all the families were in attendance it didn't make for a lot of people. With all of us active in various local church congregations our performance experiences were more centered outside of the school.

As far as special holiday celebrations I remember Valentine’s Day the best. We devoted time to make cards and added elaborate extras to them. Shoe boxes were brought from home to be decorated in fancy individual styles to serve as unique mail boxes. On the day itself refreshments were brought from home and mothers and younger brothers and sisters would come for the afternoon. My mother would share her cake decorating ability by bringing a heart shaped cake. Our afternoon would consist of eating, playing games, and opening our cards from each other. Perhaps an added reason to celebrate the day was the anticipation that spring was just around the corner. Some years March represented a pretty big winter snow storm or two, but once Valentine’s Day had come there was hope that maybe there wouldn't be any more snow storms.

I don't remember who chose the music, but I'll venture a guess that it was my sister. Teacher surely would have been relieved if that was how it was decided. The plan was for all of us to sing something together (all five of us!) and then one other girl and I were to sing one song alone. Our song was “The Spanish Guitar.” We were encouraged to work hard on our songs at home so that we would be able learn them quickly.

Our trips to practice with the piano were somewhat time consuming, and had to replace recess; but all of that seemed a small price to pay to have some music during the school day. My memory is that we had about a half mile to walk and that the glorious sunshine of the early spring added to the enjoyment. Of course, Teacher led the expeditions but not the music. It became a party kind of event as the hostess encouraged us to enjoy milk and cookies to give us the energy to walk back to school. As I now remember it maybe it took the whole afternoon each time we practiced.

Mothers became involved in the preparations as “The Spanish Guitar” involved costumes. My memory 'sees' the costume very clearly, but it really wasn't very Spanish. It looked more like the colorful dress of a friend, temporarily altered to serve the purpose. However, I felt like a future Hollywood star about to be discovered by a talent scout. Without question, I sang better for having that marvelous costume. The two of us performing that song were in costume. The guitar was cut out of cardboard and had been strung with common white string so that it looked authentic. I wonder now why we hadn't used a real guitar; my mother had one. But, it would have been too easy to do that, and not half the fun.
The big day arrived and we packed ourselves off to the contest. I remember the excitement of the whole experience and quietly filed it away in my active dream world. It became a part of my many early music experiences that helped to shape my life. I find it interesting that I really don't remember who won the contest? It would be so easy to 'remember' winning. But, I really don't know that to be the case. The day, however it was recorded, was a victory for all of us and we took that happy contended glow of a job well done. It was one of the many events in our school life that pulled us together, strengthening the bonds of loyalty. That can be said of many school music performances. They teach so much more than music and stage presence. They teach loyalty and pride, the value of work, of sacrifice, and the cohesion of members that can come from few other experiences.

CHAPTER EIGHT; IN HER FOOTSTEPS

There were many experiences, in that little building, to be appreciated. My three years were completed as was the school itself. I would enter town school for junior high, grades 7 and 8. When I boarded the school bus to continue my education in the big school there would have only been three children in the little country school. It was decided that wasn't enough to keep the school going. So, it would close. Teacher would be teaching someplace else, or did she return to school as a student to continue her college education? I don't have the answer to that.

There is some debate whether a teacher is made, born, educated, evolved, or just how the process takes place. Probably, it is a combination of several such ingredients. Those of us who are teachers know that this type of lifetime commitment is rich beyond measure. However, where did that life of teaching originate and which of the many possible directions has it taken?

The reader will have noticed that I had a very high opinion of Teacher. I think that it was not one of hero worship, but rather of admiration and respect. Certainly, I wanted to be as well respected in my chosen field. When I actually chose to be a teacher is an unanswerable question. It happened very early in my life, of that I am certain. I never was nor will be much of a scholar, but being a scholar and being teacher are very different skills. I can teach another how to learn, how to have an open inquiring mind in all kinds of areas of which I, myself, have limited knowledge. I do not need to be a concert pianist in order to inspire another to such a high level of achievement. I do, however, need to have enough skill on the instrument, and enough understanding of the skills and techniques to teach and motivate that aspiring student. This is the heart of teaching. This was Teacher with the young student that I was in the early 1950's.
Teacher had the confidence that I could learn and that I had the interest and self-confidence to learn. Often, when I asked her a question she guided me to find the answer for myself. On some occasions she probably didn't know the answer. What she did was to guide me to learn how to learn. Several times I asked her how to spell a word and was directed to look it up in the dictionary. She had such confidence in my ability to learn how to learn that I didn't have the heart to let her know that I was unsuccessful in my search. To this day I keep a dictionary close at hand because of these troublesome words: squirrel, scissors, and banana! However, she did have faith in my learning to use the dictionary even if I had (have!) such a lack of spelling ability. I spent hours at home with my mother giving me my spelling words so that I might get a good grade on the weekly test.

Reading was hard for me, perhaps related to my poor spelling ability. But I loved the stories in those simple readers. I had already heard most of them as the older students had read them in previous years, but it was with great anticipation that I awaited the day when I could actually read them. The stories lost none of their appeal for my knowing the outcome from the beginning. The pictures were old fashioned and the setting was outdated, as were the books themselves, but they still held a fascination. Our home library was limited, and the town library was reluctant to loan books to country children. So, the school stories were special.

There were times when I confused fact and fiction. I occasionally forgot that my study of history was an effort to understand the past; to know where civilization had been, how it had grown and developed, and to try to learn from the mistakes of the past. To me it had the fascination of the stories in my reader and I may confuse the two. The history of the struggles for territorial claims in our country read like an exciting adventure story. I was impatient with the delay to get on with the drama by having to complete the exercises at the end of the chapter and passing a test on it. Then it was back to the suspense of how it would all turn out. I was reminded by Teacher that this history had happened already and it was established fact. First of all I was embarrassed to have been so foolish as to confuse this history with a current adventure. Once I knew the outcome it was no longer so exciting.

That lesson needed repeating, as I also rooted for the Indians (known to our modern society as Native Americans). I hurt so for the unfairness with which our early settlers treated the original inhabitants. I became emotionally involved with the slaughter of the Indians and the total disregard for natural resources that were recorded in my history books. Yet, in the same breath my heart pounded with excitement as I imagined myself a young girl on the wild frontier. I lived the stories, not as a scholar, I think, but for the involvement in the drama.
In this vein of involvement I set out to be a teacher, even as a child. There were very few candidates around for me to teach; my older sister is very much the scholar and didn't need me to teach her. My younger sister is five years younger than I and to this day both sisters are my close friends. When I wasn't doing my own homework in preparation for the day to come, I was playing school with my younger sister. By the hour I 'taught' her of the things I had been learning. I remember Mother telling me that I really needed work on having the same kind of patience that Teacher had, and I needed to remember that she was still just a little girl. It was times like that that I had to let up on my 'student' and teach the cat or my dolls. When she went to kindergarten I had to be told in no uncertain terms that she was off limits, because she was totally bored in school having been taught all of it!

During the those three years school was very important to me. Not only was there a degree of academic learning, but I also learned how to be a teacher. Of course, I went on to colleges to earn my degrees. I had to prove to the powers that be that they could confidently hire me and I could take home a paycheck for doing what I loved; but the teacher in me had already been formed. I had learned from the best, Teacher.

Carolyn K. Tanner has many years of experience teaching in local churches and in public schools. She has worked in libraries, volunteered for hospice, and has written and published for the United Methodist Church and for The Order of Saint Luke.

Carolyn was born and raised on a farm in Nebraska. Her interest in writing this story came about some years ago when the first draft was written. Early in 2022 another revision was written. These are her stories and experiences from that little school that was situated at an intersection of roads that divided cornfields.

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