



3-15-1990

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Recommended Citation

Whitney, Inez Schneider (1990) "Law and Order Come to Prairie View," *Westview*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 3 , Article 10.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol9/iss3/10>

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LAW AND ORDER COME TO PRAIRIE VIEW

By Inez Schneider
Whitney

From the very first day of school, Miss Bessie Campbell made it clear that she was in charge and would countenance none of the disruptive behavior that had been going on at Prairie View, District 56. Prairie View was a one-room country school, three miles from the pioneer town of Custer City in Custer County, Oklahoma. The year was 1915. Oklahoma had been a state only eight years. A succession of teachers, all men, had been unable to control the older boys.

Edd Schneider, my father, was serving on the schoolboard with two other neighbors, Mark Newton and Sam Agan. One summer evening, Papa said, "I'm off to a meeting at the schoolhouse. Sam and Mark will be there, and several applicants who want to teach at Prairie View next year will be there too."

"I hope you will find someone who can keep the boys and girls quiet enough to get a little book learning," Mama said.

It was late when Papa got home.

"How did the interviews go?" Mama asked him when he

came in.

"Great! Can you believe it? We have hired a teacher for next year."

"What's his name and where's he from?" Mama queried.

Papa paused before answering. "Er-r-r, it's not a he. It's a she, a young woman.

Mama's mouth dropped open. "You can't mean it! Who is she? Where did she come from? Has she taught before? What's her name?" Out poured one question after another.

"Her name is Bessie Campbell. She lives somewhere on the other side of Thomas with her parents. She's taught two years in Kansas and brings a good recommendation," Papa answered.

Mama slowly shook her head. "I can't believe it. Whatever were you three men thinking of? Look what a time Mr. Garlow had last year. Run out before he finished the term, and you know all the trouble the others had before that. If they couldn't make the big boys behave, what can you expect of a woman?"

"We'll see. Anyway, Bessie Campbell said, 'If I can't keep order, you won't have to pay me a penny!' We thought it was worth a try."

Unable to contain her curiosity, Mama asked, "What does she look like, and how old is she?"

"She's twenty-four--a pretty little thing. Her hair is red--just the color of yours, honey," he said as he patted me on the head.

The news spread rapidly through the neighborhood. How the tongues wagged!

"Those three men must have been out of their minds! A woman--of all things! She'll be



run out in a week!" were a few of the comments.

"Where will the new teacher live?" Mama asked Papa one day.

"She could never drive from her parents' home. Someone said it's about twenty-five miles."

"M.I. Nehr and his wife have agreed to let her board and room with them," Papa said.

"That'll be a nice place for her. They're almost as young as she is, and Mrs. Nehr's a good cook too. It'll be easy enough for her to walk the two miles."

At last the first day of school arrived. More than fifty boys and girls had gathered on the schoolground to welcome the new teacher. Since grades one through eight were taught at Prairie View, the pupils ranged in age from six to late teens.

The girls had on sunbonnets and bright print calico dresses. The boys were blue denim overalls and blue or white shirts. Boys and girls alike were all barefoot since the weather was still warm.

My best friend, Edna Reimers, and I stood side by side holding hands. We were eight years old and ready for third grade. "I hope we can be seatmates like we were last year," Edna whispered.

"So do I," I answered back.

"The teacher should be coming," she said.

No one's walking down the road yet," I told her. "We can see almost to the Nehrs' house."

GIRLHOOD

Just then a cloud of dust appeared.

"Here comes someone riding down the road," one of the boys called out.

How amazed all of us were when the rider turned into the schoolyard and pulled up sharp. We were even more amazed to see that the rider was a young woman astride the horse and that she was wearing a habit.

"Hello! I'm Miss Bessie Campbell, your new teacher." Jumping off the horse, she hitched it to a tree.

"I'll be right back, boys and girls," she said as she disappeared into the coal shed.

***"I can't believe it.
Whatever were you three
men thinking of?"***

All of us stood speechless, "Women don't wear pants," someone finally said. Just then,

Miss Campbell emerged wearing an attractive print dress. It had long sleeves, a full skirt, and it came to her ankles just as our mothers' dresses did.

Holding a schoolbell in her hand, she walked to the front door of the schoolhouse, turned, and rang the bell vigorously..

"Boys line up on the right and girls on the left," she called.

"Let's do just what she says for now," one of the big boys whispered.

When we were all in line, Miss Campbell said, "Now march in and find a seat."

Edna and I were pushed aside as the older girls and boys rushed to find desks at the back. Many were triple desks, but we sank down at a double desk near the front.

"At least we're seatmates now," I whispered.

"I only hope she leaves us together," I whispered back.

"We'll just be real good and extra quiet," I said. In spite of the confusion, the young teacher stood calmly by her desk until everyone became quiet.

"Boys and girls," she said, "when your name is called, come to the front, and I'll give you a list of the books and supplies you'll need to begin school. They can be purchased at Harmon's Drug Store as you have done in the past. I'll begin with the first grade."

When each pupil had a list, Miss Campbell announced, "You're dismissed."

Early dismissal was customary at Prairie View the first day of school. It gave the parents the afternoon and evening to purchase what their children needed.

"I'll expect everyone on time tomorrow ready for work," Miss Campbell said as we filed out the door.

Not a single pupil was late the next morning. When Miss Campbell rang the bell, all of us marched in and took our seats. A United States flag that hadn't been there before was hanging in the front of the room.

After everyone was seated, Miss Campbell said, "I understand you haven't been having opening exercises, but from now on we'll start each day with an opening exercise."

She had us to repeat the flag salute, read a short selection from the Bible, and asked us to join in repeating the Lord's Prayer.

"Now we're ready for work," she said. "Easy lessons for today are on the board for each grade. I'll call classes one at a time, and we'll talk about your homework for tomorrow."

The day went by in a hurry.

"How was school?" Papa asked when I got home.

I started to cry. "It's too hard. Look! I have to learn sixteen spelling words. Mr. Garlow always gave each one of us a word to learn, and that one was the only one he asked us to spell the next day.

Papa said, "I'll go right up and tell that teacher off."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," Mama said. "Inez is smart.

The list isn't hard. I'll help her after supper."

How proud I was to be the only one in my class of seven who didn't have to stay in at recess and study spelling.

After a day or two, some of the older boys who had caused so much trouble the year before began to rebel. When they didn't have their lessons and were asked to stay on, they walked right out saying, "Miss Bessie, I need a little exercise" or "I have to be excused to go you know where." Or they would put their heads down and say, "I'm jes' too tired to finish my work."

The situation gradually got worse and worse. The boys began to stay out longer and longer when Miss Bessie rang the bell to come in from recess. Finally they were spending almost as much time on the playground as they did inside. Miss Bessie would get the group together and talk to them; but the next day, things would be just the same or a little worse.

One day, she said, "Boys, I'm afraid you'll regret this. You're not learning anything, you know."

"Aw, what can she do?" we'd hear them say under their breaths. "She's only a woman."

Parents began to talk. They were shaking their heads and saying, "She's going to be run out just like the men."

But Miss Bessie hadn't been idle. She was reporting daily to the County Superintendent of Schools. One evening, she told him, "The situation is really becoming unbearable. It's a real problem. They not only care nothing about learning, but it makes it hard to work with the others."

The next morning about eleven, here came the county superintendent accompanied by the county sheriff. The superintendent asked Miss Bessie to come outside after he and the sheriff had rounded the boys up.

"Are these the boys who've been giving you trouble?" the sheriff asked.

"The very ones," she replied.

"Boys," he said, "you are now expelled. You can no longer attend this school. Never at any time must you set foot on this school ground or linger near it." The sheriff added, "If you do, you will be arrested and taken to jail."

"Aw, we were jest havin' a little fun," one boy said.

"Yeah," the others chorused.

"You're not here to have fun," the sheriff replied. "The superintendent tells me that every one of you should have passed the eighth-grade examination some time ago and be going to high school in Custer. Now all there is for you to do is go home and help your fathers on their farms."

The sheriff went in with them to get their belongings. "Miss Campbell," he said, "if these boys give you one bit of trouble, just give me a call and I'll be right out to take them to jail."

He took the boys outside and started them home. How dejected they looked trudging down the road.

The rest of the school year

was uneventful. If anyone became a little unruly, all Miss Campbell had to say was, "Is it going to be necessary for me to call the sheriff?"

On the last day of school when Miss Bessie announced that she would see us in September, there were clapping and cheering.

What a change took place during the summer. How

***"Are these the boys
who've been giving
you trouble?"***

different the first day was when Miss Bessie started her second year at Prairie View. Besides the boys who had been expelled, several had passed the eighth-grade examination and were starting high school in Custer. Also, during the summer, three families--the Allens, Buntleys, and Reimerses--had moved, taking a dozen or more of the pupils. A school picture taken that year shows Miss Bessie with only seventeen students.

A smaller enrollment wasn't the only change. Miss Bessie had convinced the schoolboard to go along with the new trend in school furniture. What a surprise! All of the old double and triple desks were gone. In their places were shiny new desks that seated only one. Most of us didn't like them too well; it was more fun to have a seatmate.

By Thanksgiving, Miss Bessie had prevailed upon the schoolboard to buy some books to start a school library.

"That's all we need to pass the requirements for a model school," she told them. "I hope you men will come and build some shelves."

The schoolboard went several evenings after dinner. One night when Papa came home, Mama said, "That

teacher has you three men wrapped around her little finger. Whenever she says 'frog,' you all jump!" I think she was a little jealous.

But how wonderful it was to have some of the classics to read. The first one I checked out was DAVID COPPERFIELD, and how I enjoyed it. Although I was only nine, I was an excellent reader.

At the middle of the term, Miss Bessie told Mama and Papa, "Here's a list of books I want you to get for Inez. I'm putting her in fifth grade."

I still have my report card for that year. On it is written: "promoted to fifth grade Jan. 1 and promoted to sixth grade May 2, 1916."

The school year was an enjoyable one for all of us. There were no more behavior problems. Miss Bessie taught us many games to play at recess. Every Friday afternoon, we chose up sides for a spelling bee, geography match, or ciphering match. What fun it was to go to school!

On the last day of school, Miss Bessie announced, "Boys and girls, I won't be back next year; you'll have a different teacher."

Someone said, "Oh, please come back" and everyone said, "Yes, please do!"

"Afraid I can't. I'll be thinking of you, and I know you'll do your best."

How we idolized Miss Bessie! I'm sure that I wasn't the only Prairie View student who cried herself to sleep that night.

The news soon came that she was marrying a young farmer in the community in which she grew up. I never saw or heard from her again, but the two years I spent with Miss Bessie at Prairie View are very precious memories.