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Imogene Barger

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Ethel McClain, Star

By Imogene Barger

Some people may not consider a teacher as a star, but in my opinion, a good teacher can be counted among the most important stars when you consider how many young lives teachers influence. A child, after he becomes school age, spends far more prime time with teachers than with parents, so teachers become an important part of a person's life. A teacher need not be brilliant, but he must really care what happens to the students he teaches and be able to instill in them the desire to acquire knowledge.

Ethel McClain of Lookeba, Oklahoma, was not only a knowledgeable teacher; she also had the power in her quiet way to gain the love and respect of her students and bring out the best of their ability. I have yet to hear any of her former students (and I have known many) have anything but praise for her. They will say "Oh! she made us behave in class and get our lessons, but she never yelled and always treated us as equals so we wanted to do the things she asked," or "I loved her so and she helped me when I needed it most."

At her retirement program, Mr. Leist, Lookeba-Sickles school superintendent, pretty well summed up everyone's feelings when he said, "She is first of all an excellent teacher; a kind person who places others ahead of herself; a generous person who gives of herself and the best she has; a loving person who holds the respect of all who know her; a firm person in her ethical beliefs and in her teaching. A Christian person who believes in God and illustrates this belief in her everyday living, a perfect example of human humbleness."

Ethel was born on October 8, 1899 in Everitt, Missouri, the oldest of eleven children born to Bill and Clara Grant. She graduated from Everitt High School with four years of Latin, three of math, English, history, and science. High school wasn't all study because she participated in glee club, basketball, held class offices, to say nothing of the parties, horseback riding, ice skating, buggy rides, and other fun things.

The family moved to Arkansas the year she graduated, and she saw her first cotton and peanuts growing. Cotton was still king in that area, and Ethel could hardly wait for the bolls to open and the fields turn white as she had visions of getting rich picking cotton. So much for those visions — the first day she picked fifty-six pounds and was paid fifty-six cents; on top of that she had a sore back, sore hands, and a sunburned face. She didn't get much better as a cotton picker and soon decided there must surely be an easier way to make money. She decided to take the examination for a teaching certificate. She passed it easily and received her second-grade certificate. Two years later she passed an algebra test and received her first-grade certificate.

But who knows? Perhaps she did get rich in that



Ethel McClain, 1987.

cotton field. That is where she met Joe McClain; and when he asked her if she would like to take three rows together, she was quite willing as she was very much impressed by that strapping, six-foot young man. From picking cotton together they started courting in a rubber-tired buggy and on March 31, 1918, they were married at Dover, Arkansas. To this union were born two sons, Jack and Ben. They also kept a foster daughter, Mae, for five years. Ethel has been blessed with three grandchildren and five great-grandchildren, but Joe no longer enjoys them with her as he died in 1980.

Ethel began teaching in 1922 in a little one-room school on an Arkansas mountain called Hickory Glade. She made the grand sum of sixty-five dollars per month and did all of the janitor work. During the depression years the pay warrants were not worth face value if they could be cashed at all. The school districts were broke and buses couldn't run. It was during this time that she taught at a subscription school. A number of area high-school students were not going to be able to graduate because they had no way to get to a high-school. So a subscription school was set up, and Ethel was issued an emergency high-school certificate and helped the students finish school. She said everyone was so broke that she was paid in hams and other foodstuffs more than in money.

Ethel's first school in Western Oklahoma was in Caddo County at Southview, a small country school near Cement. It was her first time to be around Indians, so it turned into a learning experience for her.

Ethel and Joe lived on a farm in the Sickles area, so



Mrs. McClain, seated at table, with Driver's Ed Class, 1952.

she wanted very much to teach there so she could be at home with her family more but there was a bit of trouble getting hired. It seems one of the leading board members was dead set against hiring a married woman to teach, and this was in 1938. Perhaps the deciding factor in her favor was that then, as well as now, basketball was deemed very important at the Sickles school and her foster daughter was an excellent player and was needed for the team so they took Ethel to get the daughter—one of the best decisions a school board has ever been forced into. Ethel moved to the Lookeba school in 1945 as her husband managed the Lookeba Farmers Co-op Gin at that time. Then it was back to Sickles when the two schools consolidated in 1960 where she taught until her retirement in 1974.

Ethel was a grade teacher until World War II when qualified teachers were hard to find and the school needed a high-school math teacher. She was more or less drafted for the job because she had more college hours of math than any of the other teachers and was quite good at it. During her many years of teaching, besides her regular classroom work she at various times coached basketball, was 4-H sponsor, grade principal, and even filled in as superintendent for a time.

Forty hours of Ethel's college work was done at the Arkansas Technical College at Russellville, Arkansas, and the remainder was done at Southwestern in Weatherford, Oklahoma. She received her B.A. in 1942 and her Master's in 1957. She said that she never did get to go to college a full semester; all her hours were done in night classes and summer school.

Ethel was the kind of teacher that had that special feeling for her students, and living in a small farming

community where she taught she knew all of the parents of her students well enough to know any problems that both the parents and students might have and was always ready to help anywhere that she could. She was always proud of students who went on to do well in life and hoped she had influenced them for the good in some small way. When one went bad she always wondered, "Did I fail him in some way?" Whatever happened Ethel cared for the person as a whole.

Ethel was and still is loved and respected by all who know her, and that is many. When Lookeba-Sickles built its new gym, it was named the Ethel McClain Gymnasium in her honor.

Ethel had a busy life through the years; for besides teaching and being a housewife and mother, she is a Rebekah, belonged to a Home Demonstration club, was clerk and a Sunday School teacher in her church and belonged to the OEA and NEA. Now that she is retired, she is still busy. She is not the type to just sit and rock her life away, so she works in her yard, makes quilts and pillows, works crossword puzzles, reads books that there wasn't time for before, belongs to the retired teachers organization, has taken several tours and best of all, she visits with her many friends.

So — Congratulations — to one teacher among many who has been a great star; who at 88 years of age (she will never be old because she is too interested in enjoying life) after fifty-two years (thirty-seven of those were in Caddo County, under the critical eyes of parents, students, and school personnel) can still inspire our love and trust. ■

IMOGENE BARGER, Lookeba, once again gives WESTVIEW some significant background on her home community.