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*A recollection of a demonstration and teacher-training school  
of Southwestern State Teachers' College*

# The Grandeur That Was Union 77

By Leroy Thomas



Union School 77 and teacherage, built in 1895.

There's a Union in the past of each of us; it's that place of grandeur—that place where school was the noblest, where the cups of learning were on display simply for the taking, where the teachers were the best ever, where competition was uncomplicated because it was with trusted friends. And although there may have been students who wished that the schoolhouse would burn down or blow away, it was only a fleeting thought. At least today it's a sad realization that nothing visible is left of that Grove of Academe, and former inmates of the school feel a twinge of sadness because their school grounds are now a wheatfield or are otherwise unidentifiable.

So it is with Union 77. It had its years of grandeur, but all that glory now resides in the memories of those who attended or taught there. No longer will anyone go there for school programs, and an Alumni Association can hold no sessions in the building.

Although some of the details are vague, there's a great deal of information to draw from because anyone who was

ever associated with Union 77 has a smiling awareness of the experience; for example, the glow on Dorothy Leonard Forbis' countenance as she shares her Union memorabilia is ample documentation. So the story unfolds.

James Robertson filed on the quarter and gave an acre of land for the school. Using lumber freighted from Minco, parents of the district constructed the Union School building in 1895. Later on in the 1920's, two more acres were purchased from Len and Lena Kaiser. The school was first staked in the SE  $\frac{1}{4}$  of 27/13-15 but was moved into Sec. 34/13-15 because it was too close to Bellevue School.

During the grandest years of Union, there was a family living on nearly every quarter of land in the district. All were owned by the family living there with very few exceptions. The highlights of each year were the box suppers held in the fall, the Christmas program, and the all-day picnics held the last day of school. Some picnics were held on the school grounds, and some were on Horse Creek north of the school.

School memories include innovations that occurred along the way. A most notable one was the instigation of a school lunch program. Hot meals were first served students—three times a week—during the tenure of the James LeRoy Crossmans in the 1920's.

Along the way, favorite teachers were remembered. Some early-day teachers at Union were Murray McConkie, Mr. and Mrs. Gibbs, Lillie Fisher, Bess Chism, and Margaret Anderson (whose husband was a Weatherford banker). Some teachers before the early 1920's were Ethel Brooker and Susan Kaiser McComb. Between 1920 and 1927, teachers who served Union were Ben and Deborah Smith, Mr. and Mrs. C. C. Wyatt, Mr. and Mrs. James LeRoy Crossman, Mr. and Mrs. Ernest (Minnie) Crain, and Ila Mae Lunday. After the late thirties came Deborah Smith (1937-1940) and Opal Griffin (who was at Union when the one-room school closed in 1954).

A vital part of any rural school system was the Board of Education. Serving faithfully for many years were Sam Roesler (member), E. A. Walsh (secretary), and H. R. (Bob) Leonard (president). Others were Earl Weese and Wade Leonard. Serving as Board members when the school closed, and finishing several years of service, were Edgar Thomas, Rex Gates, and Wade Leonard.

The history of Union 77 comes alive—even for an outsider—in the notes and letters of two former teachers and one former student. One of those, the student, was Oscar Renz, who died on March 18, 1986. In a tribute to Union, he wrote:

*Union 77 wasn't just an ordinary country school to my memory. Two loving and dedicated teachers by name of Benjamin (fondly known as Ben) and Deborah Smith left a feeling of deep appreciation from every family represented at Union 77. Their sound educational skills, to this day, reach out as benefit to every child fortunate enough to have come under their supervision. This also includes their devoted efforts in teaching proper manners to be employed in every phase of living.*

*As nearly as I can recall, my first attendance at Union School was in the year 1924. We lived on a farm five miles west of Weatherford. Distance to Union School was three miles northeast of our home. Most of the time I, along with my sisters Margaret [now Replogle] and Elinor, walked or ran to school. Driving to school with horse and buggy, or sleigh during snowy winters, was definitely a treat.*

*The school consisted of two rooms. One was for grades one through four, as I recall, and taught by young, beautiful Deborah, who tolerated little or no monkey business during class sessions. We all learned discipline there that stayed with us through life's demands.*

*Room number two seated grades five through eight and was taught by Deborah's loving husband, Ben. There we got by with some tricks not tolerated in the lower grades. However, Ben had a fat paddle handy for needed occasions, but I'll always think it hurt him more to use it than it did us rascals who asked for it.*

*During Ben and Deborah Smith's tenure, Union School blossomed in many ways. Interesting programs were initiated in which participation was almost 100% of families. Deborah's skill at the piano taught us music appreciation. I clearly recall sister Elinor singing "Whispering Hope" to her accompaniment at one of the programs. Sister Margaret also joined in the singing along with reciting a poem while I listened to other talented students perform.*

*Arbor Day was dedicated to planting trees, bushes, and flowers which each year enhanced the beauty of the grounds. I*

*must admit that athletics perhaps held my greatest interest. Ben Smith had a fine athletic build and never seemed to tire of building good teams of boys for track, baseball, and basketball. We would compete with other country schools and rarely be defeated. I fully credit my later success in high-school and college athletics to the fine foundation provided by Ben Smith, whose untimely death from a heart attack was sincerely traumatic for me.*

*To further her education, Deborah attended Southwestern State Teacher's College in 1935 and graduated Magna Cum Laude. In 1940, she settled in Portales, New Mexico, and taught in the Portales schools until retirement in 1958. She was justly honored by being chosen for the Hall of Fame by the Eastern New Mexico Education Association.*

*Deborah, now 97 years old, is beautiful as ever and continues an active life that's an envy to all who are privileged to know her.*

*I shall never forget Deborah and Ben Smith nor Union 77. I thank God for their influence upon my life and upon our family.*

One of the two former teachers who gave insights into Union 77 was Ernest Crain. After leaving this area, Mr. Crain was in the service about four years. Then he taught at Santa Ana College for twenty-five years before retiring in 1969. He wrote:

*On May 30, 1930, my young bride, Minnie, of May 26, 1930, and I arrived at Union School District 77. We liked very much what we found.*

*The lighting system was a gasoline lantern in our new two-room house. The heating system was a large coal-burning cookstove. There were no kitchen cabinets, so we improvised some from wooden orange crates. Minnie made some attractive little curtains for nicer looking kitchen cabinets. Our water system was a cistern just outside the front door. Water was supplied by rain from the roof of the house. Our household water system consisted of a bucket of water on an improvised double shelf for bucket and washpan with dipper hanging nearby. Just to the left of the door was a party-line telephone. It had a crank for turning to call another person. Our phone number was 5-3, which meant one long ring and three short rings. The interesting thing was that when your number was rung, it rang on the other nineteen phones on the party line, and most of the receivers came down and everyone listened in on your conversation.*

*The school grounds were very clean and attractive. There was a row of bois-d'arc trees on the northern boundary. The rest of the grounds were enclosed with a board fence painted white. The two-room school building was painted, and it was attractive. A storm cellar joined onto the building to be used in case of a tornado or severe thunderstorm. There was a belfry on top of the building which housed a large bell for signaling students to line up for marching in to start school or to close a recess period. Later, the school bell sold at auction for \$12; the small handbell and some equipment of Board of Education record-keeping are still in a Union memorabilia collection kept by a former Board member.*

*Under the direction of the Rural School Supervisor, Maisie Shirey of Southwestern State Teachers' College, Union was used as a demonstration school and teacher-training school for college students whose intentions were to get credentials in order to teach in the public schools.*

*Minnie taught the first four grades, and I took care of grades 5-8. That first year, we had about forty-five students, with all the grades represented.*

*We signed contracts with the district to teach for a combined*



First through eighth grade students (1927 - 1930).



Mrs. Deborah Smith, Union School Teacher, 1920's & 1930's.

total of \$125 a month. The chairman of the Board was Bob Leonard, and the clerk was Earl Weese. John Eckhardt was the third member. The clerk wrote the school warrants, as the paychecks were called. We were pleased with the pay situation; we received 100% cash on our warrants, while some teachers had to discount their warrants as much as 25 to 40% because of the great depression during the 1930's.

The people of Union District were good economists who somehow paid their taxes; therefore, our warrants were good for face value. The people of the district were interesting in another way in that the northern half of the district was made up of people of English and Irish descent, while the southern half was made up of basically German people.

The students won many trophies at county meets in academic subjects, dramatic readings, songs, and athletic events. Minnie was proficient at teaching readings, songs, and academic subjects; therefore, they were winners. Our basketball teams usually won because all the students enjoyed playing.

The bathrooms, toilets, were in the far corners of the school grounds. They were known as "two holers" usually with the sanitation system consisting of a sack of lime, some of which was dusted into the holes after use.

There was also a long stable for horses as about half of the students rode horses to school or came in buggies pulled by horses. An interesting event of the first day of class involved horse and/or buggy riders. They came early in order to get a good stall. That stall then belonged to that same horse throughout the school year.

The one modern thing on the school ground was a one-car garage with a large lean-to shed on the side of the garage for keeping a supply of coal for heating the school rooms and teacherage with coal-burning heaters. The school room heaters had metal jackets around them for the purpose of diverting some heat to the students who sat farther from the stove and to prevent roasting of students who sat near the heater which was located in the center of the room.

The annual Christmas program was very important to the community. There was community singing of Christmas carols, a program that involved all the students. A nice large Christmas tree beautifully decorated was enjoyed by all—Irish, English, German. It was all capped by everyone receiving a sack of goodies presented by a Santa Claus. Bob Leonard was in charge of the sacks of goodies, and each had to have exactly the same number of peanuts, other nuts, and pieces of candy. There was a big group of young people each year who came together to count the nuts and candy.

When Pearl Harbor came, Minnie, our two children, and I moved to California. I went into the military, and Minnie

finished her teaching career in Costa Mesa Schools in Orange County.

Dorothy Forbis has been corresponding with Deborah Smith and others in order to gather materials for the Union 77 tribute. Mrs. Smith gives some valuable insights:

*Dorothy, the picture of Union 77 that you sent recalled so many things; I spent the whole afternoon trying to identify things with the magnifying glass, but I can't guess the date. We screened the porch, but it looks as if a room had been enclosed on the porch. That would be after 1940. There was no garage in 1920 when we first came. We lived there from 1920-1927, then again from 1937-1940. It still seems like home, more than this one where I have lived for forty years. . . . I'm happy to enclose a copy of the tribute that Oscar [Renz] wrote. I'm afraid it isn't what the magazine wants, but it's a treasure to us. I think they want more facts as to how, when, and why Union was started. Anyway, the magazine will have the last word. . . . Oscar used his poetic license, for if Ben or I ever used the paddle I don't remember.*

*I loved teaching and I, too, thank God for the beautiful ten years we spent at Union 77. We arrived there in September, 1920 to find six-year-old Wilbur Kaiser sitting on our doorstep. There never seemed to be any friction with families or Board, and I can still see Ben and your dad [Bob Leonard] sitting on the cistern platform settling the problems of the world.*

*I love the WESTVIEW magazine and even read the ads. . . . I'm fine except arthritis, and that makes me slow. My eyes give me trouble, and nothing more can be done. I still read with two contacts, glasses, and a wonderful lamp. I consider myself lucky.*

By the time Union 77 closed in 1954, it was a one-room school. The last teacher was Opal Eads Griffin, who still lives in Weatherford. Edgar Thomas, who served on the Board the last ten years the school was in session, has many happy memories as a student, parent, and Board member of Union. He seems to be representative. Like other people familiar with the setting, he and Everett Hamburger can still identify the place the school was located because of a black locust tree located in the area, although the buildings are gone and the area is a wheatfield farmed by John Regier. The location is a mile east of the Thomas farm and 3/4 miles northeast of the Everett Hamburger farm (the old Roesler place). Although the exact place is vague to many onlookers, the spirit of Union 77—that grandiose citadel of education—continues to live in the hearts and minds of those whose lamps of learning were lighted there. 