



3-15-1984

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Kate Jackson Lewis

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Recommended Citation

Lewis, Kate Jackson (1984) "Depression Teacher," *Westview*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 3 , Article 17.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol3/iss3/17>

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Depression Teacher



by Kate Jackson Lewis

"What's your name, son?" I inquired. The startled 6-year old looked up, his big blue eyes spilling over with tears. "I-I-forgot now," he stammered, and started wailing. "I wanta' go home."

College professors and textbooks had failed to prepare me for a crisis such as this. Overjoyed at first that I was getting a job during the thirties depression, I was now having my doubts.

Later I found out that the child had always been called "Judge," a nickname. Trying to remember "Bedford," his real name, was too much for a frightened child.

It still seems like a miracle when I think how I procured my first teaching position. The depression had begun. Jobs were scarce, and I was not quite 17. By fibbing a little, I had secured a two-year state certificate. My age necessitated the pre-variation, and at the time, it seemed of vital importance that I start earning my own livelihood.

Feet dangling from the side of a flatbed truck, I rode 20 miles into one of the poorest counties of southeastern Oklahoma, seeking employment. Needing to know of any existing vacancies, I went to see the county superintendent. He recommended me because we had been members of the same singing class. Had he stood near me, where he could hear me sing, he would have been more reluctant to recommend me.

Contract held securely in one hand, I pulled off my shoes and waded the creek to put in my application to the school board clerk, who was plowing in a nearby

field. Without much hesitation, he gave me his stamp of approval, then directed me to the homes of the two other board members. They, too, signed my contract. None of them bothered to tell me that after Christmas my warrants could not be cashed without a discount because the county never had enough funds for the entire term. I sold one warrant at 50 per cent of its face value. Needless to say, these circumstances didn't help me pay off my debts or raise my standard of living.

These were trying times for my patrons too. Many of them relied on making a living from the sale of moonshine whiskey. It was not unusual to see smoke emanating from the many stills scattered throughout the woods and hills.

Once in a social studies class discussion on ways of making a living, a small lad held up his hand and lisped. "My daddy makth whithkey."

Children came to school barefoot all winter, bringing poor rations for their noon meals. Many of the children's parents had pellagra because their diets lacked B-vitamins. Then the big blow came. Federal officers raided the whiskey stills and took the distillers to Muskogee federal jail. After that, the mothers and children became desperate for the necessities of life. Many children stopped attending school.

My \$90 monthly salary would have been a fortune had I been able to cash warrants at face value. Still, I couldn't help sharing the paltry sum with the poorer children. One third-grader stayed

away from school because he had no coat. I bought a second-hand mackinaw for 74 cents. Another time, I ordered six pairs of canvas shoes at 33 cents each from the Sears Roebuck sale catalog for my basketball team to wear to Coalgate to the county basketball tournament.

The children shared with me, too, often giving me a baked sweet potato from a syrup bucket lunch pail. Once a child gave me some roasted 'possum. That was too much! My stomach rebelled. Not wanting to offend the child I took the meat home with me. One first grader saw me put part of a leftover sandwich into the pot-bellied stove. His response shamed me.

"Miss Jackson, didn't you know it's a sin to burn bread?" he reproached. To this day I've fed my scraps to birds or animals.

In the summer of '33, I became principal of the school. Instead of gaining financially, my plight grew worse. For some reason, Coal County received no state aid. In the spring all county schools closed to await further developments in the crisis. Soon, help was promised through the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. Each Saturday thereafter I hitched a ride into Coalgate and stood in line wondering if I would get a check. The weekly checks (if available) ranged from \$10 or less to \$35. One time after failing to get a check, I met my brother-in-law as he waited to take me home.

As he counted his few left-over coins, I heard him say, "If I had four cents more, I'd buy a sack of Bull Durham." Counting my last pennies, I handed him what he needed to buy his 10 cent bag of tobacco.

I've often wondered what my net income was for the four years I taught at Parker. Not enough to pay income tax on, I'm sure.

**(Appeared in "And Gladly Teach," a collection of retired teachers' early experiences, edited by Smallwood)*