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ON HORSEBACK IN OVERALLS

by Pat Kourt

If a list of world records in education were compiled, Kenneth K. Sweeney of Thomas just might be at the top! Imagine these statistics:

- 1) A man taught or headed a school for 45 years, never missed a day of work, and never even went home early because of personal illness!
- 2) From 1929-1983, he attended every senior-high commencement program of the same school.
- 3) The same man never missed a senior class play for more than 50 years in the Thomas School.
- 4) Also, he attended every Southwest Oklahoma teachers' convention between 1923-1981.

This educator's lifestyle message to his co-workers and his community seems to be patterned after the familiar words of Proverbs 3:13. "Happy is the man that findest wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding."

Mr. Sweeney's remarkable dedication to gaining wisdom began at age twenty in the rural Bear Creek School District southeast of Thomas. There he became the teacher of eight pupils. Ironically, though, he himself had not graduated from high school--he still lacked one year. "I didn't see the inside of a high school until I was seventeen," he reflects.

"My first job was inspired by an older teacher of mine, Mr. W. H. Smith. He asked me what I was going to do about my education. He suggested I try teaching. I

remember I went by horseback in overalls to visit the board of education to see if they thought I might possibly teach for them. All I had was hope. With encouragement from them, I began studying night and day. I was rather a nervous young man when I reported to Arapaho to take a two-day county teacher's exam. I recall (and this is certainly nothing to brag about) that as that exam was finished, I got sick and almost fainted from exhaustion. But my whole future depended on that test."

Passing that exam meant receiving a "third-grade" certificate. The young Mr. Sweeney earned \$70 per month for his first term of seven months at Bear Creek. "At the end of the term I borrowed money to go to summer school at Weatherford. I hitchhiked from home and studied psychology and pedagogy (the art of science of teaching)."

Next, Kenneth became employed at the Mulberry School where he claims to have learned his greatest respect for all types of people. "Mulberry was an Amish school. I had thirty-nine students of all grade levels. It was quite a change from having only eight youngsters. I spent three years at Mulberry. I enjoyed eating at those folks' tables even though they seldom spoke anything but German. They were marvelous to me. Also, it was at Mulberry that I taught my first Indian students. It's been my privilege to learn many cultural ways during my career."



Ageless at eighty, Mr. Kenneth Sweeney reflects on his years as an educator.

Bear Creek School, southeast of Thomas

His third position was at the Swan School where he and his family had received their grammar school education. Its location was five miles south and five miles east of Thomas. The school term was lengthened to eight months. Because Swan School was not accredited, the young instructor drove students to Thomas High School for their graduation exam. "I became known at the Thomas School, and in 1929, the superintendent asked me to teach eighth grade."

One early reminiscence about those earlier school days is graduating from Thomas High School on his twenty-second birthday. Already he had taught in rural schools for two years at that time!

Mr. Sweeney's career at Thomas Schools continued with his receiving a Bachelor of Arts degree at Southwestern in 1935. "Interestingly, I attended only summer classes and night school or did correspondence work. I never attended a regular semester of classes. I was always just one step ahead of the state requirements, and it took hard work in those days. But I enjoyed the studying. My mother had taught me to enjoy reading. That love of books grew into a boyhood ambition to graduate from the University of Oklahoma. It was there that I received my master's degree in city-school administration."

The years passed quickly for Mr. Sweeney — forty-five of them with Thomas area schools. Thirty of those years

were as superintendent.

In 1968, Kenneth's active career in education slowed a bit with his retirement. In fact, as he laughingly observes, "I was totally surprised at the end of my last day at school because I'd been so busy with working on last minute details in the office. George Nigh was our commencement speaker that evening, and it was a pleasure to share the platform with him. The next thing I knew, Kenneth Roof, a teacher and spokesman for the Thomas community, presented my wife Lorene and me with a \$2,000 check for a 22-day European trip. It was a wonderful evening. I realized even more what a great community I lived in. I've had the same address since 1910—I've never had a desire to leave."

Since that occasion in 1968, a large black and white formal portrait of a dignified, almost-ageless man has adorned the entryway of Thomas High School. It is a contrast from the overall-clad young man of nineteen who sought his first teaching position. However, the picture displays the same sincerity, warmth, and self-assurance of the youth. It is a reminder of accomplishment to area schools, classes, and educators of several past decades.

Yes, records are made to be broken, but few if any careers have equalled the dedication of Kenneth Sweeney, who at age eighty, remains a true friend of education in Western Oklahoma.