

“Special Educators”

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Teaching has been recognized as a noble profession since the days of the ancient Greeks. Education has been an important part of American history and progress since its founding in 1620. Most teachers who provided this education have been dedicated individuals with a sincere desire to serve their fellow beings by providing them with knowledge. Teachers today may be either male or female, married or single, and look forward to a retirement with an adequate pension from a “retired teachers fund.” However, there is a unique co-culture of retired teachers that is fading into the history of the United States. Those teachers were primarily female required to be single, and many of them retired on less than adequate pensions.

Background:

The need for teachers and educational institutions is ingrained in this country. The desire for knowledge to improve oneself seems to be inherent in most members of American society now and in the past. I believe teachers are respected by most of society due to the awareness that teachers help mold the minds of the future leaders of our communities and country, as well as help to establish the principles which will be held by the future members of our society. Respect for education and training has been evidenced by the promotion and advancement of people who have completed their high school education and chosen to pursue additional schooling or training. Indeed, advancement in the work world today often depends upon the specific degree of education an individual has attained.

A 1972 State of Wisconsin Retirement Research Committee Staff Report noted that there were approximately 53,000 public school teachers in the state (Logan 1972). Many of those teachers who retired since then are part of a co-culture that is uniquely different from all the other retired teachers. The difference that separates them is the fact that they began teaching before 1941 and began their careers under a different standard than those who began their careers after 1941. The United States entered World War II on December 7, 1941 and that caused sweeping changes in our national work force. Many of the teachers who began their careers before 1941 were also affected by the economic conditions in the United States following the Great Depression of 1929.

An example of the policy that was set for female teachers within the Appleton Public School system was cited by Kellogg (1994):

“On February 8, 1938, the Board of Education reaffirmed a long-standing policy:

RESOLVED that the Board of Education, in order to promote the general efficiency of the public schools, continue in force and effect with respect to the employment of teachers the following rules and regulations which have been in force for the past thirteen years:

1. No married woman whose husband is employed or able to work shall be engaged to teach in the schools of the city of Appleton, except for temporary periods to fill vacancies.
2. The marriage of a woman teacher employed by the Board of Education shall cause her contract to be terminated immediately. (1938 Minutes, Morgan Archives)”

This policy related to the commonly accepted standard as noted by Elder (1974) that “a woman’s place is in the home.” The home was viewed as the center of a woman’s world. Her marriage was looked on as a full-time job for which she had been trained. A woman lived her life through her family members and often was expected to find fulfillment through cooking, cleaning, gardening, and decorating her home, rather than through work or intellectual or social pursuits. Women who went into the teaching profession under those conditions understood that they must be single to teach and that they would give up their profession once they were married. The interview subject of this paper affirmed this policy when she remembered stories of teachers being secretly married, but who had to quit their teaching positions once their married status was discovered. It is difficult to verify through research the extent of this standard in the United States, but May (1994) noted that 3 out of 4 cities excluded married women from teaching in 1932. Kellogg (1994) wrote that the policy “also reflected the Depression-era belief that there should only be one full-time job per family because of job scarcity.”

The Great Depression was an economic collapse that hit America in 1929, spread to the rest of the world in the 1930's, and lasted for approximately 10 years. Meltzer (1969) reported on the effects of the Depression on the field of education. Education was crippled since the funds for it came out of local taxes. Budgets were cut, building plans were shelved, cutbacks were made on textbooks, equipment, and salaries. Teachers were fired and 50 pupils would be crowded into classrooms intended for 30. The school year was shortened in some places down to 6 or 7 months. Whole departments were dropped and special services were slashed.

Meltzer (1969) also reported that in some places schools survived only because teachers were willing to make sacrifices. In rural areas some teachers were paid as little as \$280 for an 8-month school year. Teachers often kept on teaching with no pay, just promises to be paid later. By the end of 1933, 2,600 schools nationwide had closed down. The education of at least 10 million children was disabled by shutdowns or shortened terms.

An interesting view of that period was given by Ogburn (1935) when he reported on the years 1932 to 1934. He reported that high school enrollments actually increased by 17% between 1930 and 1932. One reason given for this was many normal outlets for youth were closed, so they stayed in school longer. In contrast, there was a small decrease in elementary enrollments due to 2 factors:

1. Almost all elementary school age children had been enrolled each year, so there was little or no increase detected; and
2. The birth rate had been declining.

Overall, there was an increase of 8% in pupils per teacher between 1931 and 1934.

Teachers' average salaries, as reported by Ogburn (1935), were reduced from \$1,440 in 1931 to \$1,222 in 1934. Some salaries were even reduced to salary levels of 50 years prior. Salaries of \$40 per month were common over large rural areas. During 1933 – 1934 more than a quarter of all teachers in this country were on salaries of less than \$750 per year.

Wisconsin Depression statistics cited by Glad (1990) noted that the number of wage earners declined from 265,000 in early 1929 to 184,000 in 1931, and 159,000 by 1933.

The hardest hit industries in Wisconsin were metalworking, machinery, automobile, and lumber and wood-products industries. At the time of the “crash” nearly half of the state’s population of 2,939,000 lived in rural areas and one-fourth of the state’s work force was engaged in agricultural pursuits. Teachers faced the challenge of teaching children who were coming to school from homes where there was great upset due to the family being in reduced financial circumstances. The children may not have been eating well and may have been stressed by observing their parents struggle to find employment or to “make ends meet” on an income that was much less than what they usually brought home. This writer remembers her own mother telling about her own childhood during the Depression and relating the fact that her father would go to a local bakery each morning to pick up whatever baked goods the bakery was throwing out from the day before and then bring it home for his family to eat. She also said that was when she learned to drink coffee because it was cheaper than milk. Although the family was grateful to have the bakery and coffee, they were not eating well-balanced, nutritious meals which are essential for the children to be well-nourished and functioning at their optimum intellectual level.

The intensity of the Depression lessened in the later 1930s. By 1939 America was moving towards a world war and the economy began improving through the growth of industrialization. The United States officially entered World War II when its Naval forces were attacked by the Japanese on December 7, 1941, at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. According to May (1994) the war took thousands of America’s men out of the labor force when they volunteered or were drafted into the various armed forces of the United States. Factories were producing necessary supplies for the military, such as airplane engine parts, but the men were not there to provide the necessary labor. This brought about a cultural revolution because women were then encouraged to go out of their homes and to go to work in various capacities to support their families and the war effort. Many people can recall hearing about “Rosie, The Riveter” and can bring a picture of a poster to their mind’s eye which featured an attractive young woman with a riveting gun in her hands. May (1994) reported that 300,000 women worked in the aircraft industry. Many assembled B-29 bombers and other females became welders, draftswomen (sic), and machinists.

These women learned to be independent and to be assertive in their lives, rather than depending on their husbands to give direction to their lives. Along with this change, married women who had been single teachers earlier in their lives were now called on to fill in the ranks of the teaching work force which the men had left. The interview subject of this paper commented, "I'm just sure it changed (teachers having to be single) when the war came. Men went to war, women went to work in the factories – industry and munitions. It happened so fast – everyone had to go to work" (Becker 1997). The change in the policy regarding the marital status and sex of teachers in the Appleton system began to gradually change during this time:

"Beginning with a male elementary teacher in 1935, and one married woman who was not a widow in 1943, the gender-based employment policies began to be relaxed, and by 1960, of twelve principals (all full-time administrators), seven were women (three married), and five were men. Of the teaching staff, 151 teachers: 129 women – 53 single, 68 married, 8 widows; 22 men (10.)" [Kellogg 1994]

The nearby city of Neenah, Wisconsin, changed their policy in 1955, as evidenced by the following "Back in Time" article in the January 19, 2005, "News-Record":

"1955: A new policy on hiring women teachers who are married was adopted by the Neenah Board of Education. The board stated that it still prefers to hire unmarried women because such teachers 'are not subject to the conflicting interests of a home responsibility.' Under the new policy, being married 'shall not itself preclude the opportunity to teach, but rather individual situations will be considered on its respective merits.'"

The subject of this paper might be described as a “phenomenal woman.” Learn how Poet Maya Angelou defined a phenomenal woman in her poem of the same name in 1995:

“Phenomenal Woman”

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.
I’m not cute or built to suit a fashion model’s size
But when I start to tell them,
They think I’m telling lies.
I say,
It’s in the reach of my arms,
The span of my hips,
The stride of my step,
The curl of my lips.
I’m a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That’s me.

I walk into a room
Just as cool as you please,
And to a man,
The fellows stand or
Fall down on their knees.
A hive of honey bees.
I say,
It’s the fire in my eyes,
And the flash of my teeth,

The swing in my waist,
And the joy in my feet.

I'm a woman

Phenomenally.

Phenomenal woman,

That's me.

Men themselves have wondered

What they see in me.

They try so much

But they can't touch

My inner mystery.

When I try to show them

They say they can't see.

I say,

It's in the arch of my back,

The sun of my smile,

The ride of my breasts,

The grace of my style.

I'm a woman

Phenomenally.

Phenomenal woman,

That's me.

Now you understand
Just why my head's not bowed.
I don't shout or jump about
Or have to talk real loud.
When you see me passing
It ought to make you proud.
I say,
It's in the click of my heels,
The bend of my hair,
The palm of my hand,
The need for my care.
'Cause I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me."

Maya Angelou 1995

In an effort to personalize the single retired teacher of this co-culture, I conducted an interview with Miss Lydia Becker (1997) who was a resident of the nursing home where I worked in Appleton in 1997. We talked about her personal history as a single teacher who had dedicated her whole life to her career. She shared the following information with me, and I have noted parallels to the above information. Lydia was born in 1908 and her father believed in the adage, a woman's place is in the home." However, he passed away when she was a toddler, which left her mother in the position of being a single parent with 6 lively children to raise. The 3 eldest daughters never went to high school, but rather sent to work as soon as possible to help out their difficult financial situation. Their mother believed in education for women so encouraged her fourth eldest daughter to complete high school and go on to college. She, in turn, encouraged the fifth eldest to continue her education, and then those two both encouraged Lydia to also continue her education.

Lydia graduated with a degree in physical education from the University of Wisconsin at La Crosse in 1930 at age 22. Her first teaching position was in Litchfield, Minnesota, where she taught "phy ed" for all grades from first grade through high school. A parallel to Meltzer's (1969) research was that Lydia lost her job after 3 years. The reason for being let go was an interesting one – it was given to a hometown girl in need of a teaching position during the Depression. Lydia returned to Appleton, Wisconsin, where she worked as a clerk in the "five and dime." Her next teaching position, and the one where she stayed until retirement, was obtained a year later through another parallel to the above information. A friend of hers had been teaching in Wausau but had to quit because she was going to be married. The friend recommended Lydia apply for her position which she did. Meltzer's (1969) information is paralleled again by her wages. She began teaching at 66% of the normal salary for someone with her education and experience and was promised increases as the economy improved. She received an increase each year and was finally at full salary in 7 or 8 years. This coincided closely with obtaining her master's degree from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor in 1940. During these years Lydia supported her mother and felt fortunate that she had no desire to marry, since she felt that was not an option because of her mother's situation.

Lydia retired from her teaching position in Wausau in 1970. She received 80% of her Social Security and matter-of-factly reported that teachers' pensions were increased too late for her. She said that the first teachers strike for matters such as pensions was held the year after she retired.

Although every person has his or her own unique enculturation, Lydia had some shared cultural elements with her peers:

1. born in the early part of the century when horse transportation was still very common;
2. born by chance into a large family (birth control options were very limited until the advent of "the pill" in the late 1950's);
3. the family was of modest means;
4. part of the dominant North American culture – individualistic and of Christian, white, Anglo-Saxon heritage – people who prized traditional values of honorable and ethical moral behavior, hard work, and loyalty to family;
5. began her teaching career between World War I and World War II;
6. taught during the Great Depression;
7. was directly affected by the Great Depression when she lost her job;
8. taught during World War II;
9. was directly affected by World War II when she had to apply for food stamps for rations to get hot dogs which her GAA (Girls Athletic Association) sold at high school sporting events to raise money; and
10. most importantly, she began teaching during an era when teachers were expected to remain single. Her subsequent life choices were influenced by adhering to that rule.

Lydia weathered a number of serious personal health crises over the years, but continued her teaching career and moved on into retirement with a very practical, positive attitude. She had always had athletic ability and enjoyed activities such as traveling, hiking, biking, bowling, and curling. She continued active into her 88th year by still driving her car

back to Wausau occasionally to visit with former colleagues and around the Fox Valley to keep up with the newest construction, to view the sights, and to enjoy the contentment that comes from looking out over the water of local lakes and rivers; displaying a keen interest in wolves and collecting pictures of them, and enjoying frequent contact with her extended family. Lydia had a smile on her face most of the time and had a lively sense of humor. Current events continued to be of interest (including local sports – she was occasionally seen wearing her Packer sweatshirt!) She walked indoors or outdoors, depending on the weather, and on her daily schedule. Her mind was bright, as evidenced by her remarkable feat during 1994 at age 86 of winning first place in a local “Post Crescent” newspaper literary competition about Christmas memories. Those memories, about a bus ride on a snowy Christmas Eve in 1944 and a little child trying to cope with the fact that his daddy would never be coming home again because he had been killed in the war, are also a part of her co-culture; it was a special time in United States history which her peers also experienced.

Lydia’s upbeat, positive attitude brought her the rewards of being remembered by many of her former students who still took the time to visit or write. One of her pupils from the 1930’s was corresponding with her. Continuing contacts like this helped to fill the gap that might have been filled by children if she had married. I asked her if she thought she had missed anything by not being married. She responded, “Nothing...what you never had, you never miss.” When asked if she felt a void at not having a husband and children, she replied that her extended family of 5 sisters and their families more than filled that void. She noted that her family was exceptionally close and as each sister married, she felt that she did not lose a sister, rather she gained a brother. They had a strong network of support for her during her life and, as they passed away, that support was taken over by their children. On the day I visited with her, she proudly showed me 4 long-stemmed red roses sent to her by 4 little great-nephews.

During my interview I asked Lydia what she gained by being a teacher. Her first response was “my own happiness because I loved every minute of it.” She also commented that she had developed an understanding of high school girls which helped her to that day whenever she met young

people. In addition, Lydia reported that she had thoroughly enjoyed her independence all those years, so much so that she never even had a roommate (Becker 1997).

The primary identifier of Lydia's co-culture is the fact that she was a teacher. She and her peers shared some common and individual values. We talked about those values, and it was interesting that the first ones she identified had to do with morals, ethics, and character, rather than values related to the curriculum. The first ones she identified were: (a) honesty, (b) integrity, and (c) instilling "a desire to work for what they got." Lydia stated that she believed those common values were also desired by her peers and related them back to her Christian upbringing and the era in which she was raised. When discussing individual values for her field of physical education, she identified: (a) "regard for their fellow man," (b) "play to win," (c) and (d) "play fair and square." Her goal was to make her students aware of worthwhile and healthful activities, such as tennis, bowling, and curling, to do in their leisure time as they went through their lives. Lydia commented that she believed her peers shared those same common values and then had individual values pertaining to their own field of education (Becker 1997).

When discussing the above common values, it was obvious to me that Lydia had lived what would be considered a "good Christian life" by the dominant North American culture. However, there was no mention of involvement with a church or spirituality when reviewing her adult life information. I asked her specifically about that omission. Her response was that church had been a part of her youth, but then "I kind of got away from it in college." She had never had an active church life since that time, and did not find that a void in her life (Becker 1997.)

Lydia's life story has a number of parallels to Mays (1994) book. She noted that many young women between 1940 and 1961 took jobs to help support parents and siblings. Lydia helped support her mother. Employment also offered an alternative to the woman who did not desire marriage and provided economic independence. More than 6 million single women in the 1930s were surviving on their own and contributing to the support of their parents' households.

It is interesting that when Lydia taught school, she had to design her own path to success and learn how to survive on her own.

Retirement

Lydia shared more cultural elements with her peers when she went into retirement:

1. investigating financial retirement options;
2. deciding where to live;
3. determining which activities would fill her days;
4. choosing the persons with whom she would socialize;
5. looking ahead to potential health problems that might come her way
6. eventually choosing alternate housing, such as a nursing home; and
7. facing her own mortality.

She faced all of these things alone without the support of a spouse.

Our society has come a long way to help our retired teachers, one way being a list of helpful hints in an article entitled, *Success and Survival Strategies for Women Faculty Members*, by Sandler (1992). There are parallels to Lydia's life in Dissinger's (1980) recommendations on how to enjoy ones retirement. Some of Dissinger's hints tell the reader to get involved in something that interests you, don't dwell on the past, don't worry about the future or live in it, become a sensuous woman, don't expect other people to make you happy, do only what you want to do and what you enjoy doing, get in the habit of doing many things you like to do alone, be interested in other people, learn to cope with your problems, always have something to look forward to, take care of your health, don't sit with unhappiness or depression, count your blessings instead of your lacks, and make friends with yourself.

A California study (Pearce 1993) examined retired educators' attitudes toward their retirement. The author likened retirement to the process of suffering a major loss and, therefore, recommended that school districts provide expanded pre-retirement orientations, recognition of service, expression of appreciation, make efforts to maintain contact with retirees, and utilize the energy and talents of retirees. Lydia did not express an expectation of the expanded services

recommended above; however, she did comment that she enjoyed seeing her former colleagues at reunions. Perhaps she would have enjoyed these services had they been available, and she certainly had energy and talents to be utilized by her former employer.

I examined my personal enculturation and that of my interview subject, Lydia. There were some parallels that would facilitate effective interaction between us. Although it was for different reasons, we both lost our fathers at a young age, hers through death and mine through another kind of death – a divorce. Both of our mothers valued education, although my mother did not encourage me to continue mine beyond high school. We were both influenced by our schooling. We both filled the void of needed family support through our extended families. World War II had an effect on both of us, for her in a personal experience and for me through movies and effect on my parents' lives. Our need for money and economic stability was a driving force for both of us. We had both been exposed to world politics through the news, media, and personal involvement of our families. She worked at her same job site for approximately 36 years, and I worked at mine for over 23 years. She graduated from college in the University of Wisconsin system, as did I --- Class of 2000. We both valued independence and were both life-long learners. Finally, we were located in the same facility each day and shared much of the same environment. All of these parallels gave us much common ground upon which to interact.

When examining potential areas of conflict in communication between us, the most obvious one is that I chose to marry and had a family, in addition to my career. I had the experience of being wed, enjoying the love and companionship of a mate, of learning to adjust to living with another person (Lydia had stated that she had never desired a roommate which was a lifestyle of some of her peers [Becker 1997],) and the sometimes challenging, but very rewarding experience of giving birth and raising my children. Although she and I both valued independence, I would not have given up my family for absolute complete independence. I preferred to try to blend the two

values of independence and family. I believe, however, that Lydia respected my choice because she respected that choice among her own relatives and friends.

Another area of difference between us is that I found a greater spirituality within myself in the traditional sense and regularly actively participated in activities at my church. However, here again, I did not see the potential for a significant conflict, since Lydia seemed to practice her own style of spirituality by appreciating nature (her interest in looking out over local lakes and rivers and her interest in wolves) and having a caring relationship with her extended family and friends.

Lydia and the other members of her co-culture had a unique set of shared meanings that I do not share with them. They grew up during a different time in the last century (early 1900's as compared to my childhood in the late 1940's and early 1950's,) seen progress that I took for granted (the growth of the automobile and other transportation industries, the involvement of women in the work force, the availability and increased use of the telephone and the media as mass communication, the development of suburbs, living through times of war and economic depression); and she had to utilize independent decision-making skills and face physical and/or emotional declines without the support of a spouse. They also had to use organizational skills to make lesson plans and develop goals for the meaningful education of their students.

I must admit that I greatly admired her feisty, positive, determined attitude which was seasoned by a delightful sense of humor and a caring nature. I think she could be an inspiration for many other retired persons, teachers as well as people from other walks of life. She grew up in difficult circumstances but used that adversity to her advantage and lived a remarkable life. She was a phenomenal woman!

In conclusion, I studied one member of a co-culture that is fading into the history of the United States with the passage of time as their members pass away. They lived and served during a unique time in history according to a standard imbued in our society – “a woman's place is in the home.” That standard has changed and society has moved on. These women left a legacy of personal sacrifice and dedication that has influenced a significant portion of our society.

This co-culture has educated the “everyday man,” as well as the leaders of this country. They taught self-discipline; opened minds to new fields of study (both technological and sociological), other lands, cultures, and co-cultures; and instilled or influenced the value systems of their students. I like the current car bumper sticker that reads, “If you can read this, thank a teacher!” That sentiment is definitely true and teachers can also be thanked for all of the above contributions to our lives which should not be forgotten.

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