

Senior Spotlight September 2015

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With back to school, kids are getting ready for another year in the classroom. While it may be hard to believe, there was a time not that long ago that school was very different than the way it is today. This edition of our Senior Spotlight focuses on Laverne Haarstick, a now 94 year old former teacher who began her career in a one room country school house.

Life was a lot different when Laverne Haarstick was born to Norwegian immigrant parents in April of 1921. The house she grew up in, 2 miles east of Pelican Rapids, was actually an old grainery. “You can imagine what we had to do to fix it up,” she said. “We had to paint, there was dust everywhere.” The small box shaped home had just three rooms: a kitchen, a front room and a bedroom. The upstairs, where the kids slept, was unfinished. Modern amenities, like plumbing and electricity, hadn’t made its way to rural Pelican Rapids. “We didn’t have running water, we had to use an outhouse. I don’t know how we did it,” she said. “We did our homework by an oil lamp, the chimney had to be clean or you couldn’t see very well.” The family got electricity by the time Laverne was 15. “Oh we thought it was just wonderful,” she said.

One of the bigger differences between life today and in the past is the way school is taught. When Laverne was growing up, it was very common to have several grades all taught together in the same room by one teacher. The one room country schools dotted the landscape around the Pelican Rapids area and school busses were unheard of. “A lot of the kids walked several miles just to get to school each day,” recalled Laverne. The school houses were very different than what we know today. Most had no electricity, no running water and no heat. “The teacher had to start the fire each morning. We’d have to chop up kindling, sometimes save the wastepaper from the day before to get a fire going,” said Laverne. The curriculum was quite different too. “We had the basic classes like reading, writing, arithmetic, history, health. We had a class called citizenship where we learned about government and things like that,” she said. While learning

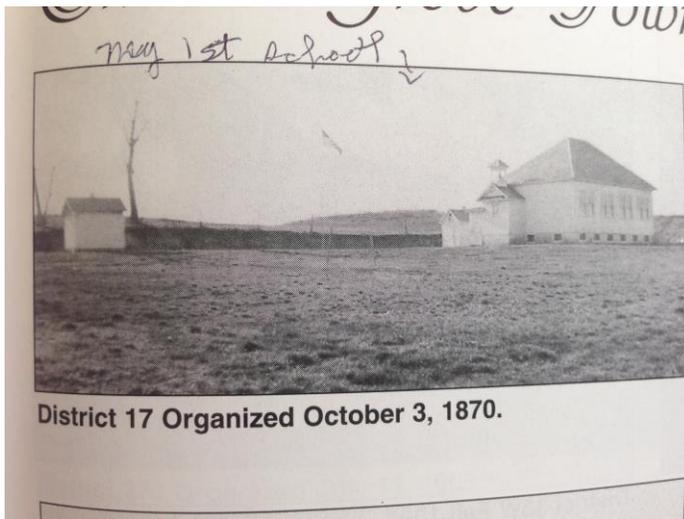
amongst other grade levels might seem challenging, Laverne says it wasn't. "We had grades 1st through 8th at my school, sometimes you might not have a grade if there weren't any students in it. We just had a schedule and the teacher spent about ten minutes on a subject and you listened to what the others were doing," she added.

Always a smart student, Laverne excelled in school. She attended a one room country school until high school and thinks the quality of her education was excellent. "By the time we came high school in Pelican Rapids from country school, we figured the city kids would have a better education than us. But we knew just as much, sometimes more," Laverne said. "Our valedictorian had gone to country school." She skipped a grade and graduated high school early. By the time she was 17, Laverne was enrolled in college at Moorhead State, hoping to become a teacher. The tuition for 2 years of college was \$350. \$150 per year and another \$50 to practice teaching in nearby schools. "That was a lot of money at the time," Laverne said.

At the age of 19, Laverne had her degree in hand and was ready to start teaching school. Her first assignment was at a one room country school a mile east of Erhard, which still stands today. Her monthly salary was \$75. \$35 of that had to go towards her room and board. The rest she used to pay off some debts. "I had my tonsils taken out and that cost \$35 so I was still paying that off. I had borrowed some money for college that I was working on paying back too," Laverne said. While getting used to being a teacher wasn't easy, she felt her upbringing gave her an advantage. "I had a book that told me what lessons to teach but since I had gone to a country school, I knew how it was supposed to go. The others that hadn't had a harder time," she said.

The school was big for the time, with about 31 students enrolled. However, her first teaching job was short lived. "I was only there for one year. It was a big school and I was young and it was hard," she recalled. Laverne moved to a school near Dalton, where she spent three years there. After a few other jobs in country schools over the next ten years, she took a teacher aide position at Pelican Rapids Elementary school in 1957. Laverne spent the next 26 years at the school, helping teach reading and math and she left lasting impressions on the students she helped educate.

When asked about the differences between her school experience and that of students today, Laverne said “Well, I think they learned more of the basics in country school but now they have all this technology that helps.” Looking back on her school days as the new school year for today’s students starts up, Laverne has a few bits of advice. “Work hard at the basics like reading, writing and arithmetic. Get in on some of the new subjects they have now like advanced math.”



The school Laverne had her first teacher job at.



Laverne showing off some of her homework she did in 1st grade



Laverne around age 14-15

Haarstick retires after 26 years as Viking Elementary staff member

Call her an aide or call her a teacher, but when students needed a boost in reading and math, they called Laverne Haarstick.

Laverne will be retiring from the Pelican Rapids School District this month, ending 26 years of dedicated service to boys and girls at the elementary school.

Prior to her employment here in March of 1957, Laverne taught rural schools throughout the area including districts 17, 19, 52, 16, 161 and 89.



A native of this area, she graduated from the Pelican High School and attended Minnesota State Teachers College. She holds a rural primary teaching certificate and later, a rural life certificate.

For most of the past 18 years, she has worked as an aide in the Title I, a federally sponsored program designed to assist youngsters with reading and math difficulties. Bev Olander, Title I Leader, reflects, "It's going to be a real loss not having Laverne around to help me with the students who need extra help in the basic subjects."

Laverne and her husband will continue residing in Pelican Rapids. Retirement plans are undecided, but one can be sure that Laverne will continue to take an active interest in the young people, her needlework, and her gardening.

An open house in her honor will be held from 3:45 to 5:30 p.m. on Monday, May 17, at the elementary school.

A newspaper clipping from her retirement.