



A Teacher of the Willow Creek School

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Full Citation: Emma Pospisil, "A Teacher of the Willow Creek School," *Nebraska History* 24 (1943): 13-24

Article Summary: Pospisil, the youngest of a family of eleven children, contrasts her first and second teachers. The first was an unnamed man who kept order "with some muscular effort," while the beloved Mrs. Collins had a warm and supportive manner that charmed the children.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Cedralia Collins, Rainsford Brownell

Keywords: Willow Creek School

Photographs / Images: Cedralia Collins

A Teacher of The Willow Creek School

EMMA POSPISIL, CEDAR BLUFFS

From the top of the hill on whose east slope my home was situated. I could gaze for miles to the north and east. The land was rolling, rising to a high bluff called Pahuk Hill by the Pawnee Indians who lived in this part of Nebraska. It was a rallying point and a place of prayer as was Mount Olympus to the ancient Greeks. As a child I used to gaze toward Pahuk Hill, a distance of about fifteen miles. This expanse which seemed to be my world was bounded overhead by a dome of blue, the rays of the sun filtering through as if earth and sky were meeting. The opening of my mental horizon came with a suddenness and brilliancy as did this stretch of view.

My parents had come from Bohemia in 1882. My father had been a soldier in the Austrian army and had fought in the War of 1866 when unifying Italy drove the Hapsburgs out of the country. He carried a stiff elbow as a result. He was receiving a fair pension from the Government but decided to emigrate to America. There were already four boys in the family and he saw no hope or future for them except to serve anew in the army as weapons to further German domination. In the light of later events, his foresight proved true.

There were eleven children in the family, eight boys and three girls, and I was the youngest. My father died before I was two years old. The older brothers and one sister married and left home. My eldest sister, Anna, my four younger brothers and I remained with my mother.

Our mother was of medium stature and walked with a limp due to an early knee injury. She had dark eyes and hair, and her careworn face was framed by a kerchief, usually black, tied under the chin. She went patiently from task to task and her shoulders were rounded from much bending. But though her form was bent towards the earth, it was heaven she saw.

She arose each morning with a prayer and then greeted the day with a song, and songs fell from her lips with ease. She

used to say that when she was young and heard a song only once, she could sing it through. None of her children possessed that ability.

She had two books brought from Europe that were much treasured. Their print was in wavy letters — not like my school books. It was Czech printed in the German script because of the long German influence. I could not read this print and liked my English school books better.

One of the books had Biblical texts with explanations and short sermons arranged for home services. I did not know that it had been originally compiled by a religious martyr some hundreds of years ago, and that all Czech literature had been buried and all but lost until a more tolerant era came under Maria Theresa of the Hapsburgs.

Our mother used to tell how their Evangelical church was three hours' walking distance away at Opatovic where a pastor would come and hold services once a month; how they walked barefooted until they came to the outskirts of the village and then put on their shoes. And she spoke of a beloved pastor. She read the text and lesson to us each Sunday and sang from the immense song book. Our most cherished memories are of the beautiful phrasing which fell from her lips.

The care of my sick father, the bearing and rearing of children, and the endless tasks of pioneer life were hard upon her. From the time she was fifty she suffered periodically from headaches which confined her to bed much of the time. I was seven when this began and the world seemed dark. My younger brothers took care of the farm, doing the work of men. After a time our sister Anna, who had been working in a laundry in Omaha, came home. She nursed our mother, took care of the household, raised chickens and garden, and then everything was nice. Our mother in her last illness recalled the days when she was young and knew happiness and repose.

We attended a school called Willow Creek, so named because a stream with its many tributaries embraced most of the district. It was a mile and a half away. The first settlers, faithful to the tradition of learning, organized the district and built the school. It was a sod structure reinforced by lumber brought from Lincoln, a distance of about forty miles. This edifice of

education was set on a lone prairie meadow where wild flowers grew and which we picked with happy abandon.

Later a frame structure was erected on the top of a hill. This was a larger building for its need to accommodate a growing enrollment. There were children of many nationalities — truly a melting pot. And I am sure that all who received their early mental nurture there have a feeling of gratitude for that plain old building, since replaced by a modern structure, because of the spirit that pervaded it. For it seemed to give them a sense of equality, justice, with humor and pathos, and somehow a moral way of life, besides the traditional three R's.

Care was used in the selection of teachers and many good teachers served. Sometimes the qualifications consisted of textbook knowledge and the handling of big boys more accustomed to outdoor freedom and farm work. The range of choice was small but most of the teachers were conscientious and hard working.

I started to school before I was five, attending during the fall and spring months when it was warm. I would not have gone so soon but I was lonely. My brothers naturally followed the habits and inclinations of boys and worked and "ganged" together. So I was introduced into the elements of education.

But they were very elementary indeed at first. We started with the alphabet. Then we had a reader. We combined letters to make words which meant something. And I read other words and got no meaning. I think this lasted until I was eight or nine. I liked arithmetic and I loved to draw and sing. There were so many classes at first (I remember there was an enrollment of eighty one winter) that there wasn't time for anything beyond routine class work. One teacher had two songs, "O Columbia!" and "My Bonnie." These were sung once in a while and assuredly with much lustiness from eighty young throats.

We had one teacher for a number of years. He was tall, lanky, freckled-faced and red-haired. He had attended a near-by normal school and was hired for being versed in subject matter and being able to keep order. He accomplished both, the latter with some muscular effort. He used to put his feet on top of the desk and tilt back in his chair while he heard classes. To correct whispering, erasers flew past their targets (usually the

ears of some mischievous boy) perhaps by intent, not actually wanting to strike them. Sometimes the miscreant was seized by the back of the collar and hauled over desks for punishment. I had a mischievous brother, and when he was the victim my heart would pound violently, for I was always fearful. Sometimes a stealthy movement from Teacher's pocket to mouth satisfied a certain craving. Now and then an empty whiskey bottle was found.

The portraits of Washington, Lincoln, McKinley and Bryan hung on the walls. The last was an idol of our teacher, and long after the din of the campaign and the silver issue and memorable address of "the crown of thorns" were forgotten, his portrait remained. And this row of statehood, in dignified array on the wall, looked down upon us gravely.

What my little-girl nature wanted was indefinable — some teacher who was the antithesis of what we had; one who spoke softly and kindly, who moved with grace and whom I would like. Ideas were taking shape and I was full of dreams. Then, during the summer when I was ten, I heard that we were going to have a lady teacher whose name was Cevalia Collins. She was a widow in her late twenties and had a little girl of six. She had grown to womanhood a few miles to the east of my home and her maiden name was Easom. I had been told that our father had borrowed from Mr. Easom, and among some of the early papers still left are a few cancelled notes bearing dates of more than fifty years ago.

Mrs. Collins had taught in the city schools of Wahoo, the county seat, and had married a doctor. After his early death she and her daughter, Agnes, had come back to live with her parents on the farm. I wondered the rest of the summer what she was like and if she would like me. Everything depended on that! She *must* like me. I looked out from within an immense starched sunbonnet. I was thin and went barefooted and my light hair hung in two long braids down my back. All summer long, thoughts of the opening of school and the new teacher wove in and out of my mind. Surely, she would be different.

On the opening day I was ill, so I did not get the long-expected glimpse. The next day I hurried to school, my feet scarcely touching the deeply rutted road over which the wagons of un-



CEDALIA COLLINS

known pioneers had passed, and which each summer nested many quail.

Seats had been assigned and the preferred ones (that is, those that were farthest back) were already taken. I was placed near the front.

Now my hungry soul was satisfied! The schoolroom was transformed into a habitable place. Potted plants and crisp curtains were in the windows and pictures were pinned on the ugly grimy walls. There was a busyness of study which emanated from a teacher of understanding, sympathy, ability and poise. Over her roundish face was a high pompadour. Her eyes were brown and discerning. Her costume was a shirtwaist and a trim skirt. She was elegance and grace personified!

Our teacher seemed to order all things well, for there was a time and a place for everything. Classes were heard with concern, not indifference such as we had known before. She wanted our response, and therein it was easy to study. No longer did my brother think it becoming to be mischievous. Dresses rustled in those days and I liked her near me. Above all, we sang. In her list of songs were not just two, but many. I still have the old tablet in which they were copied and interspersed with drawings.

My favorite pastime after my lessons were prepared was drawing. Before Thanksgiving we drew a picture of a turkey. Mrs. Collins went from seat to seat and then the rustling presence sat by me.

"Why, that is the best of all!" My heart which had beat expectantly now beat happily.

During the noon hour we used to gather around her like one big family, from the smallest to the biggest boys and girls, and talk of various things, usually of incidents or events that happened in the homes or the neighborhood. We were learning life not only from books but from the teacher's lips as well. I liked to be close to her. Once, after much planning, I edged up to her and kissed her.

"Thank you!" She was surprised but gracious. I have been glad many times since that I bestowed upon her this highest expression of affection.

Because she played with us and entered into our games, I thought she was a very understanding person. When we sat in

our seats again, our hearts as well as our faces glowed. It was a healthful atmosphere of work and play.

One spring-like day near the end of the school year we went on a field trip. Now, I used to think that all knowledge had to come from books, and this is one of the days I like to recall the best. She named the weeds and grasses along the roadside. Even weeds had names. What a revelation! Trees were named and birds identified. We came to a gully where buttercups peeped. In later years I used to peer down each spring during those horse-and-buggy days, and sometimes I saw them. I have seen much floral beauty but no one else has shown me the buttercups, the simple and lovely flowers. Today, a modern wide gravelled road has replaced the winding trail and obliterated the wild flowers nestling there. I had always been an outdoor girl, but from my teacher I gained a greater love and understanding of nature.

On a lovely spring day soon afterward, a young farmer by the name of Rainsford Brownell, who lived near by with his mother, visited school all day. Our youthful minds comprehended romance.

And soon came the last day of school. It was the climax of the year, just as eagerly looked forward to as had been the first. There was to be a picnic dinner at noon and a program in the evening. There were a number of girls who had "finished" the eighth grade that year. They were of the ages of fifteen and sixteen, but during their later years of attendance they had helped at home with such work as corn-picking, cooking, butchering and cleaning. Their parents found their help indispensable in the rearing of those big families.

We had planned a surprise for Mrs. Collins. Some of the older pupils thought it would be appropriate to present our teacher with gifts, one from the boys and one from the girls. A voluntary committee acted, consulting a mail-order catalog. The boys chose a gorgeous boxed set comprising brush, comb and mirror, and the girls a large round brooch set with garnets and brilliants. Oh, it was intriguing to conspire and no one as much as whispered the word "surprise" in her presence. The package was prepared, each gift accompanied by the names of the donors.

It was a perfect May day. First was the hurry and bustle

at home to get the food and dishes ready. Perhaps each girl rejoiced in something new — a dress or a ribbon, and each boy a new tie. The day was "different," so each special aspect was noticed and enjoyed. Planks were laid over the desks to make long tables, and these were covered with snowy white cloths which the ladies had brought. Then the food was placed upon this whiteness with bouquets of lilacs and rose-petalled apple blossoms. There were sandwiches and tempting salads, high white frosted cakes, pies, rolls and kolaches, fresh and still hot from the oven. There was ice cream frozen right there by the bigger boys, the ingredients brought by the pupils. And there was hot coffee brought in large pots, and lemonade. It was a feast for the eyes, — the eager, expectant eyes of the children, and the grateful eyes of mothers and fathers who came to share in its deliciousness and the happiness of a communal gathering.

And then the dinner itself, with simple friendliness lingering over cups of hot coffee and cool lemonade. I know that country mothers can be so very lonely, and not until I myself taught did I realize what their interest and closeness meant. So they visited heart to heart, the one reaching out toward the other. Yes, we were filled — our hearts as well, to overflowing.

Soon we were on the playground to be joined later by the grown-ups and Mrs. Collins for the last "hand over," "drop the handkerchief," and "long ball," and the last day was all but gone. But now we hurried home to do chores so that we could be back again for the evening program. Some of the elders rode in buggies but many of the children walked. Automobiles were scarcely heard of just past the turn of the century. And what did a mile or two of walking matter when one counted the pleasures of anticipation?

The planks which had been used for the tables were now used in the erection of a stage. The teacher's desk was hoisted up and chairs were arranged for Mrs. Collins and the graduates. On the desk were the bouquets which had adorned the dinner table. The school room was lit by lamps and lanterns brought from homes. They formed a dim half-light, but all eyes were upon the stage. The school room was filled with people and — yes, Mr. Brownell was there, and he sat near the front.

In the dimness of time I do not recall the program, but it

seems as if a voice of fulfillment spoke, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

I see the fresh faces of the young girls with their hair combed smoothly back and wearing new summer dresses. Mrs. Collins wore a long pale blue dress ruffled from the knees to the floor and a black velvet sash. I recall that her face looked different. I think that it was softer. Oh, there are so many things we do not understand when we are young. It was the springtime of our lives and the fragrance of lilacs and apple blossoms was in our hearts.

All too soon the program was over. Then the last good-byes were said, the key was returned to the school board director and we walked home, lighting our way with a lantern, after the happiest and most eventful of days.

During the summer, Mrs. Collins joined her daughter and parents in North Bend. They had retired from the farm to a beautiful large house surrounded by great shady trees on Main Street, not far from the business section. Once during the following winter I went with my sister to North Bend—ten miles away to a dressmaker. From her I learned that Mrs. Collins lived just around the corner in the same block. It was during the noon hour and I walked to her home. How happy I was to be enfolded in her arms.

She took me first to her father who was lying on the couch. He had been a Civil War veteran, a Kentuckian, lean and long-bodied. He had pushed westward when this state was being settled and had brought the heritage of high-minded living.

"I used to know your father. He was a good man." I remembered his words and treasured them later.

Then I met Mrs. Eason. She was a small lady, white-haired soft-spoken and serene. I liked this English house of gentleness. I sensed something of sublimity, for they were in the hush of their eventide. That same spring when the sun rose high in the heavens and called men to labor in the fields, he passed away. He was laid to rest where the gray-white slabs rise pillar-like in the sunshine, while the wind whispers through the evergreens and the meadow lark sings close by.

Many years passed, during which I attended school and also taught. Mrs. Collins taught for a short time, and after her mother

had also passed away she and Mr. Brownell were married. They lived on the farm southwest of town and here their son, Donald, was born.

Mr. Brownell was a man of not many words but one who spoke with considered interest, meaning and helpfulness. Whoever sought his advice was sure of its substance. His farm, which was larger than usual, reflected a diligent hand. On the red-painted barn the name "Cedar Hill Stock Farm" stood boldly out. The long cribs were filled with corn, and in the corrals which sloped toward the road were seen fattening cattle, hogs and horses.

He loved horses. For their breeding and raising there was exacted something of the spirit. And there were no sit-down strikes or wages-and-hours disputes! They could be seen bunching together in the autumn or winter sun or closely cropping the grass of the slough across the road. Among them were spirited thoroughbred trotting horses which won on the tracks in Iowa, Kansas and Nebraska. He drove well matched teams which won the admiration of his neighbors.

In the community he held positions of responsibility and trust. He served the school district, the precinct, and held several offices in the bank at Morse Bluff, the nearest town. Among them he was a charter stockholder, a director, and for many years a president.

When the boy, Donald, was of school age, the Brownells moved to North Bend and lived in what had been the Easom home. The farm was rented out but Mr. Brownell continued his interest in the bank and was also active in the civic and religious life of North Bend. The children were given a sound education while many parents in the neighborhood, wishing to provide security for their children's future, bought farms. With the coming of the depression and low prices many of these farms were lost.

After the war things did not go so well with the banks. During the period of inflation speculation ran rife, chiefly in real estate, driving prices up to fantastic levels. It was a period of pseudo-prosperity and I never liked it. The added wealth did not come from greater application or ingenuity but from higher price levels. Everything seemed to have an artificial luster. And

after the glitter and sheen of the day, the darkness and pall of the night must fall.

Money which had been borrowed upon land could not be repaid. An early state guarantee law deprived the bank of large sums. Mr. Brownell, steering the bank over the rocks of the depression, assumed his share of losses as a stockholder. One great loss sustained had been a package of forged notes bought from a bank in the northern part of the state. The cashier of this bank was given one hundred ten years for his crimes! But the stockholders of the Morse Bluff bank assumed this loss, Mr. Brownell insisting, in order to save the deposits of the people. And the earth which had seemed so secure under our feet had become a quicksand. The Brownells lost with others, leaving but a residence.

Younger men could start over again and recover some of their lost fortune, but he, well past seventy, could not. Worry and despair contributed to his illness and death. At the last he became as a child to be led by the hand. And when he died, he left a legacy of honor. None could lay their distress at his door; none had less that he should have more.

The home where the Brownells lived was sold to a doctor, as it had facilities well adapted for that purpose. Mrs. Brownell gave away many cherished possessions. White-haired now and in the middle sixties, she secured a position as house-mother for a fraternity connected with Wesleyan University at Lincoln. Here she served for three years.

In my early hour of need she had filled an aching void. She showed me the ways of kindness where I had known harshness before. I could have followed her across the world.

The last time I saw her was in an order. During the singing of the closing ode, she did not sing. Her head was bowed and her face was as ethereal as the whiteness of her gown. There is a shadow fallen upon the earth that is caused by greed. There are those who seek the ways of ease. She is my lode-star still. The cup of charity which others so eagerly grasp she did not take, but worked near the councils of those who teach the way that men and women should go.

Last summer she visited her son Donald, near Boston, and

wrote that she was seeing the many fine historic spots of New England. This year (March, 1941) she has been house-mother at the Tau Epsilon Phi fraternity at the University of Maryland. Though our future is engulfed in an imminent gloom, still there is something left of our pioneer spirit that dared to go out and build a civilization on the bare prairies. This spirit is carried on by heroic souls and will be a guiding light in the days before us.