

Raney Township's Country Schoolhouse #3

By Marleen Ehmann Bussma

My grandfather, Jacob G. Kalmbach Jr. a German from Russia immigrant farmer, served on the school board for Raney Township's four country schools in LaMoure County, North Dakota. He was concerned about his children having an opportunity to go to school as were others of his generation. My parents also valued a good education. They wanted their children to have an easier life than they did. This is dedicated to these parents who made sure their children attended school even during a harsh North Dakota winter and to the teachers who provided an environment of learning alone out on the prairie with bare basics.

I walk along the fenceline
As I gaze off to the west.
I'm searching through my memories
Working on my latest quest.

The ground is plowed and broken
And it does not look the same.
The building and the prairie
Disappeared as progress came.

A little one room schoolhouse
Used to stand upon this hill
With prairie all around it.
In my mind I see it still.

Big windows on the east side
Were the only source of light.
Without electric power
No one stayed into the night.

The coal shed sat behind it
Dressed in paint of faded red.
It held the needed coal pile
Used to keep the stove well fed.

The stove was big and stood out
A ways from the schoolroom wall,
The only source of heating
When we'd watch the snowflakes fall.

The flagpole rose above us
As it saw our school day start
Where we pledged our allegiance
With our hands upon our heart.
There was no running water
So the bathrooms were outside
On each side of the coal shed
Where wild critters tried to hide.

We had our drinking water
In a big ceramic crock
That sat close to our school door
Underneath the windup clock.

Our music education
Was not left to be ignored.
There was a fine pump organ.
When it played, gave notes that soared.

We gathered 'round the organ.
Though our voices sometimes strayed
We liked our time with music.
We would sing while teacher played.

At recess in the winter
When the snow was fresh and loose
We'd shuffle out a circle
Then start playing fox and goose.

When snow was wet and heavy
It would soak right to our skin.
We'd sit beside the big stove
'Till our clothes dried out again.

The prairie was our garden
In the springtime and the fall.
The flowers bloomed so pretty
And we'd hear the wildlife call.

It gave a place for picnics
When the days were warm and good.
We sometimes roasted hotdogs
Using willow twigs for wood.

"The county superintendent!
She is driving up the road!"

Were dreaded words to my ears.
It was fear that my eyes showed.

She'd come by unexpected
To observe us for a while.
She took her job real serious
'Cuz you never saw her smile.

Maybe that's why she scared me.
She would usually look so stern
Which made it hard to study
Pay attention, try to learn.

She always was real dressed up
In assorted navy blues.
She wore a Sunday church hat
And her sturdy oxford shoes.

When she was done observing
We could go outside and play.
While she conferred with teacher
We would chase our cares away.

The roads back then for trav'ling
You'd call primitive at best.
In winter filled with snowbanks
Horses fell through to their chest.

They struggled for their footing
As they plowed on through the snow.
The sled would bounce and jerk hard,
Just another mile to go.

We went to school for eight months,
Mid-September through mid-May.
The kids were needed at home
To tend crops and stack the hay.

The years that I attended
The enrollment was just four.
When Shirley graduated
There was no school anymore.

The country school was closed up;
The last township school to die.

We kids were sent to town school
Amongst strangers, wondering why.

Today's youth does not struggle
With the challenges I had.
They're turned on, tuned up, plugged in
To the latest 'lectric fad.

The kids today are shortchanged
Is the way it seems to me
When I think of Raney Township's
Country Schoolhouse #3.