

Teaching is often regarded as a simple activity, especially if the students are elementary children. Novice teachers at such levels usually focus on developing classroom skills. As they grow more experienced, they move outside the classroom, for example, mentoring and assessing programs. Many teachers complete graduate degree programs, and some seek National Board certification. Their involvement in such activities is transforming the popular view of the profession. If the public is beginning to regard teaching as complex, has it ever been uncomplicated? The following article by Karen Benjamin answers that question. Benjamin explores the experiences of Nannie Dorroh, a teacher working in a variety of Texas country schools from 1895 to 1904. With only a few months of high school, Nannie grappled with a large number of challenges, for example, job insecurity, isolation, burdensome state mandates, hectic schedules, harsh conditions, and discipline problems. Yet Nannie Dorroh persisted, believing that teaching granted her opportunities that would last a lifetime. Anyone who aspires to become an educator should read her story, and then compare her experiences with those of contemporary teachers. What has remained the same and what has changed?

—Eds.

## **The Decision to Teach: The Challenges and Opportunities of a One-Room School Teacher in Turn-of-the-Century Texas**

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*Why on earth do we want to be teachers?<sup>1</sup>*

After a hard day at school, Nannie Dorroh routinely asked the question above in her diary, and she never failed to suffer a severe headache the day before the outset of a new

school term. "Uneasy lie the heads of all who rule; the most so is his whose kingdom is the school." Nannie cut this verse from a newspaper and placed it in her diary. While she agreed, she wrote that the author should add the word country before school. "No, no position's so trying as the country teacher's. Then, there's no sympathy either."<sup>2</sup> Even though Nannie threatened annually never to return to the profession again, she did so nine times. Why did Nannie Dorroh continue to teach for almost a decade if, as late as 1920, less than 10 percent of Texas teachers had more than four years of experience? For the most part, the rewards outnumbered the often lamentable conditions. Teaching provided Nannie a creative outlet and instilled self-reliance, confidence, and the self-satisfaction of succeeding at meaningful employment. Moreover, teaching provided a respectable means of postponing marriage until Nannie procured a husband who met her high standards.

Born in Mississippi in 1877, Nannie Dorroh and her extended family moved to the Texas hill country while she was still a young child. The land in Driftwood, Texas, was fertile enough to adequately support a generation of cotton farmers despite the falling prices in the 1890s. While growing up, Nannie enjoyed an active social life surrounded by friends and family. She began writing her diary in 1894 while attending high school in nearby Dripping Springs. In the fall of 1895, eighteen-year-old Nannie began her teaching career after completing only five months of secondary schooling.<sup>3</sup> She accepted a position co-teaching with her cousin, Mary Garison, at the Liberty Hill School in Driftwood where they both had attended grammar school for eight years.<sup>4</sup>

Nannie's teaching career illustrates the frequent occurrence of rural teachers changing schools almost annually. She taught in seven different schools during her nine-year career. From 1896 to 1898, Nannie spent two years teaching the primary grades at the three-room Dripping Springs School where she had briefly attended high school.<sup>5</sup> Since Dripping Springs was located about eight miles north of Driftwood, Nannie boarded with a familiar family in town. For the 1898–1899 school term, Nannie accepted an offer to teach at the Bluff Springs School located only a mile south of her home in Driftwood.<sup>6</sup> From 1899 to 1901, Nannie taught two terms at the Pound's Chapel School in Gatlin, about five miles west of Driftwood. She boarded with her close friends, Lucy Black's family. For the 1901-1902 school term, Nannie taught the Rock Springs School in Fitzhugh, located about six miles north of Dripping Springs.<sup>7</sup> Although her father's second cousin lived in Fitzhugh, Nannie boarded with another family

who lived closer to the schoolhouse. The following year her cousin Mary Garrison obtained an interview for her in Duggerville about ten miles from Mary's school in Carl. Dugger School was thirty miles from Driftwood in neighboring Travis County. Since her uncle John Garrison preached in Duggerville on his circuit, Nannie boarded at the home where he stayed while ministering to the community.<sup>8</sup> For the 1903–1904 school term, Nannie spent her final year teaching the primary grades at the three-room Leander School in Williamson County. The Dorrohs had moved to a new farm about a mile and a half south of Leander in 1902. Although the Leander School trustees asked her to return for a second term, Nannie married and willingly quit teaching for good.<sup>9</sup>

### **Job Instability**

The high turnover rate for teachers created the additional stress of job instability. For the 1897–1898 school term, Nannie recorded the movement of her friends into each other's former positions: Mose had Lucy's school, Stuart taught Hattie's, and Jim acquired Nannie's first school.<sup>10</sup> Nannie appreciated teaching in the same school for two consecutive years as she did in Dripping Springs and Gatlin. Even in those two schools, however, Nannie waited as long as four months for notification that she had in fact retained her position. Nannie wrote:

The trustees told me when school closed, to count on my same position. But I didn't know and was tired of this uncertain condition. Mr. Mc [with whom she boarded] would send me word every chance: "Don't be uneasy about your school," But I was getting fretted, wanted to know what I was going to do. So today they sent word I certainly had my same room. And now I won't have to bother and worry soon.<sup>11</sup>

Typically, Nannie and her friends spent the majority of each summer concerned about their employment status for the following year. In fact, acquiring a position required so much effort and maneuvering that Nannie and other teachers referred to the process in political terms as "lectioneering."

One key problem was the surplus of teachers: "Rogers [Odom] told Mary [Garrison] & me that *teachers'* were the commonest things yet, [sic] it's true we haven't positions."<sup>12</sup> Nannie herself described Driftwood as "alive with teachers." She named forty-six teachers in

addition to herself who either lived or taught in northern Hays County while she herself still worked.<sup>13</sup> In 1898 Lucy Black depicted the process of outmaneuvering other teachers to gain employment. She wrote, "Mose [Calvert] is out lectioneering for the D.W. [Driftwood] school as Miss Annie beat him at Bear Creek."<sup>14</sup> The following day Lucy planned to see about the Liberty Hill School also, but rain forced her to postpone her visit with the Driftwood trustees for one more day. The following week the trustees offered her the school. Meanwhile, Mose Calvert volunteered to help Nannie obtain his old school, but the effort failed. Jim Black offered to recommend Nannie at the Wayside School, but Nannie accepted employment in Bluff Springs the following day. Although teachers often helped one another obtain work, the competition for schools not only created stress for teachers but surely strained friendships as well.

With so many kin and close friends qualified to teach, members of the Driftwood community often disagreed about who should be hired at the Liberty Hill School. Further obfuscating the process, various members of the community invited their favorites to teach whether or not they had the authority to do so.<sup>15</sup> Before Nannie and Mary were hired to teach Driftwood's Liberty Hill School, Nannie's father had already promised the school to Annie Wilhelm, also of Driftwood. At a Just Us Girls' (sic.) (J.U.G.) club meeting, Annie angrily confronted the young women about the misunderstanding. After her "tongue lashing" Nannie charged, "such from a lady—I never heard" but seemed most shaken by Annie's criticism of her father.<sup>16</sup> In 1902, another conflict ensued over who would teach at Driftwood's school. Nannie expressed relief when the disputants, including her father, finally agreed upon an outsider, Frank Nevins.<sup>17</sup> In December of that year the Dorrohs moved to Leander. The following spring Albert Odom and Nannie's sister, Kate Hall, each wrote to inform Nannie that she would be offered the Liberty Hill School for the 1903-1904 term, but Nannie recalled the previous infighting when she reluctantly declined the offer.<sup>18</sup> "[I] am so afraid it wouldn't be satisfactory with all, so I guess I'll just say no."<sup>19</sup> Although Nannie longed to live in Driftwood again, she thought it best to avoid returning under strained circumstances.

In addition to the conflicts among trustees or residents of a community, a dispute with the family where a teacher boarded might ruin the year. Sometimes host families tried to take advantage of young teachers. For example, in Leander a Mrs. Stewart invited Nannie

to board with her so Nannie could tutor her son at night without remuneration.<sup>20</sup> Understandably, Nannie graciously declined. She avoided problems with safety and propriety by exclusively boarding with family friends and acquaintances, but she frequently felt homesick for her extensive social network in Driftwood. She greatly preferred living at home and often thought she would feel less ambivalent about teaching if she could do so.<sup>21</sup> At the first five places she boarded, Nannie lived close enough to Driftwood to return each weekend unless inclement weather, illness, or end-of-the-year school preparations prevented her. When circumstances kept her away, someone usually visited her. Nannie cherished her correspondence with home and complained of having “the blues” whenever plans fell through.

### **Choosing Isolation or Companionship**

Working in a two- or three-room schoolhouse seemed to lessen Nannie's loneliness. In the larger schools she had sympathetic colleagues with whom to vent frustrations and share responsibility if a problem arose. After she and Lucy Black stayed up late one night relating school troubles Nannie acknowledged, “it's some relief to confide in another.”<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Nannie appreciated transferring some of the burdens of running a school to the principal. In Dripping Springs and Leander, she eagerly shifted the responsibility of handling incorrigible discipline cases to the principal after having no one else to turn to for help in the one-room schools. Most of all, Nannie simply liked having another adult in the building because she often felt threatened by the isolation of the one-room school. Because the Pounds Chapel School in Gatlin had no homes or other buildings in sight, Nannie panicked when two drunk “scalawag boys” kept harassing her. She even wrote to the county superintendent for assistance. Although her trustees eliminated the trouble by threatening the boys with arrest, she still felt frightened.<sup>23</sup> In fact, Nannie preferred working as an assistant in a larger school even though she made about ten dollars less per month.<sup>24</sup> Nannie was more than willing to sacrifice income to gain more peace of mind.

Adding to the isolation of the one-room schoolhouse, rural trustees rarely provided teachers with any supervision. One trustee usually stopped by on the first day of school and then another might visit once during the year. Nannie described Mr. Roberts as “a splendid

trustee” after he visited her class one day.<sup>25</sup> In 1896 Judge Ed R. Kone became county superintendent of Hays County and remained in the office throughout Nannie's teaching career. Occasionally Judge Kone visited Nannie's school and gave the children a motivational talk.<sup>26</sup> Weighing his responsibility for the entire county, Kone stopped by the rural schools more consistently than the local trustees. His elected office held more prestige and power than that of rural trustees, so he worked harder for reelection. According to Nannie, the local trustees seemed to regard their responsibilities as an unwanted burden. The trustees cared more for the immediate welfare of their farms than ensuring that the school had everything it needed.

An experience Nannie described in Leander demonstrated how the Progressive Era campaign for increased supervision could protect teachers. A parent complained because the Leander School required children who were absent to bring excuse notes when they returned to school even though Texas had no compulsory attendance law.<sup>27</sup> Despite the fact that he lacked any concrete legal standing, the principal, Mr. Owen, refused to budge on the issue, causing the parent to take his grievance to the local school trustees. The parent sought an injunction to prevent the teachers from enforcing the new rule and threatened to sue the trustees for damages. Nannie worried that the teachers' pay would be withheld. After the trustees defended the teachers, the parent brought the dispute before the county superintendent of Williamson County, but Superintendent Hamilton also supported the school. An editorial in the Leander newspaper complained that the rule requiring a written excuse deprived students “of their inalienable rights to free schooling.” Nannie lamented, “such a little matter and Oh! such an ado.”<sup>28</sup> Finally, the parent conveyed his objection to State Superintendent Arthur LeFevre. LeFevre concluded that the school made a reasonable request and it was a request of good schools.<sup>29</sup> Without such a hierarchy of authority, Nannie—and the other teachers—would have been left to the mercy of local politics and some impetuous parents.

### **Grappling with State Mandates**

Nannie gained greater peace of mind at a larger school by sacrificing income and control, but the greater job security and better working conditions promised by increased

state supervision required teachers to assume additional responsibilities and obligations. Even though Nannie gladly accepted the give and take at larger schools, she complained vehemently about almost all of the Texas state mandates. As of 1893 the official duties for Texas teachers were to use the English language when teaching, make a monthly report to hand in to the district trustees before receiving each monthly pay voucher, submit under oath an end-of-term report to the county superintendent, and attend summer normals and county institutes. In 1899 the Texas legislature added the duty of maintaining a daily register.<sup>30</sup> Since Nannie spoke only English, she wholeheartedly supported the first mandate. Texas had a unique situation compared with other southern states because it had more foreign immigrants. The large number of German and Mexican immigrants prompted the restriction of teaching school in languages other than English. In Duggerville, Nannie complained of instructing German students who spoke English as a second language. She wrote that her "little Dutch Polly & Albert" had not yet mastered English and protested that she "didn't make a contract for anything of this sort."<sup>31</sup> In southern Hays County, Mexican American students attended segregated schools; but in northern Hays County, Chicano children were simply excluded from the White rural schools.<sup>32</sup>

As for the other state regulations, Nannie saw almost no benefit for herself. She described the monthly and end-of-term reports as what she "hated to do" most, but she received no paycheck until she finished the paperwork and swore to its accuracy before her trustees.<sup>33</sup> At the end of each term, the law required that teachers swear before the county superintendent. But despite the gravity of the oaths, teachers regularly made mistakes, and Nannie claimed that it would take a lawyer to keep the school reports straight. For example, Garrett Black asked Nannie to help him figure out his monthly report after his calculations left him with  $5 \frac{1}{5}$  boys and  $3 \frac{17}{20}$  girls. During one particularly troubling report, the principal at Dripping Springs told Nannie, "Oh just guess at them & send them on any way," but inaccurate numbers made it difficult for county and state superintendents to measure progress in rural schools.<sup>34</sup> Nannie dreaded swearing falsely before the county judge at the end of each term, so she worked diligently to fill out the reports correctly.

Second only to school reports, Nannie resented traveling to county institutes. Teachers had a genuine complaint about the institutes because they paid all of their own expenses. While Nannie gladly accepted lower wages to gain security at a larger school,

she did not necessarily view the expenses incurred in traveling to teacher institutes as a fair exchange for state protection. Neither did she believe the training to be immensely useful. Nannie saved the program for a teacher's institute in Leander planned for December 12, 1903. County Superintendent Hamilton presided over the meeting, and local educators presented lectures such as "Relations of the Teacher and the Trustees," "Sisk's Grammar as a Text," "Fractions: Methods for Beginners," and "Aids and Devices in Primary Grades." The program listed Nannie as scheduled to present "Development of the Number Idea," but either the institute was canceled or Nannie coaxed her way out of participation because she spent December twelfth shopping in Austin.<sup>35</sup>

While teaching in Dripping Springs, Nannie decided to go home to Driftwood rather than attend the San Marcos Institute. She justified herself by writing in her diary, "Mr. Richard & Mr. Stubbs went, they'll put in our excuse, I don't think they'll fine us, for what's the use. To be forced to attend is not a bit of fun."<sup>36</sup> Nannie's prediction proved true; she received neither fine nor reprimand.

## Managing a Hectic Schedule

But no matter how much training a teacher received, it mattered little in managing the hectic schedules of one-room schools. A teacher was responsible for eight grades, each of which had seven subjects; she taught up to fifty-six, five- or ten-minute classes a day. In Gatlin Nannie recorded, "have them now from 1st reader to Algebra & Philosophy."<sup>37</sup> Curiously, Nannie appeared to be teaching a subject she was not yet qualified to teach since only teachers with first-grade certificates took the algebra exam for certification, and at the time, Nannie had only a second-grade certificate.<sup>38</sup> Pondering her heavy workload she fantasized, "How I'd like to teach just one branch, shall surely do so if ever I have the chance."<sup>39</sup> In Fitzhugh she shouldered extra work as well. Her trustees "were not satisfied with the common school branches, but wanted rhetoric." Nannie complained, "I had just all I could do[,] I thought."<sup>40</sup> Nannie and her students frequently worked past the usual four o'clock dismissal time. In Gatlin she wrote, "getting pokey, can't get thru—nearly five when I dismiss school."<sup>41</sup> In Fitzhugh and Duggerville, Nannie opened school a half-hour early to try and catch up but met with little success. Although



school officially began at eight, students trickled in until nine. Since Texas had not yet mandated compulsory attendance, Nannie could think of no way to discourage tardiness. The widespread belief that school began sometime after eight further impeded Nannie's attempt to rush through the day and still do an adequate job. She anguished, "I was behind time all day—an hour most." Nannie often panicked when she failed to complete all the subjects. "If I can't quicken my pace, don't know what I'll do."<sup>42</sup> Frequently, Nannie's school fell so far behind schedule that she held some of her classes during recess and lunch.

Further exacerbating the hectic schedule, the chronic problem of poor attendance left Nannie constantly assigning make-up work and trying to determine where each student was in the curriculum. Most families determined their own school term rather than adhering to the official one. When cotton-picking season lasted into the winter, students helped with the harvest. During the 1902-1903 school year, attendance for children statewide dropped by almost 18 percent because high cotton prices forced children to work in the fields. Nannie often wished cotton-picking season would end; "then perhaps they can all come."<sup>43</sup> While teaching in Gatlin, Nannie wrote "hurray for me today" when finally, a month into school, she had a full class. On most days she described her school as a "little single handful."<sup>44</sup> In some cases, new pupils continued to enroll with only two weeks left before school closed.<sup>45</sup>

Nannie could never establish a routine for long. If the one-room schools had not promoted self-paced education, grading student achievement would have been hopeless. In the rural school, an older pupil who worked on the family farm might finish a grade by attending school for a month each year for three years. Given such conditions, Nannie found that filling out her monthly and end-of-term reports was a nightmare.

Nannie's work often continued when she returned home after an exhausting day at school, especially as the close of school drew near and she began preparations for the end-of-term entertainment. For the Dripping Springs production, Nannie began choosing pieces two-and-a-half months before the end of school. She described the daily quest for gender-differentiated, age-appropriate recitations as "right vexatious" and complained of reading until her eyes hurt. Once she located a sufficient number of appropriate passages, she copied pages by hand for each student. One night alone she wrote seventy-five copies.<sup>46</sup> The plays, songs, and recitations required practice at recess, lunch, and in the evenings. Nannie groaned that practice was even worse than school, and she always predicted that the enter-

tainment would prove a disaster. After one practice she complained, "one more such and surely we'd be insane."<sup>47</sup> In the end, however, the entertainments always came out "so much better than while getting it up."<sup>48</sup> The students cleaned and decorated the house by "bumming nearly everyone in town" for flowers and other props, and a few students provided the violin and piano accompaniment. Regardless of the chaotic preparations, Nannie always relished the actual night of the entertainment.<sup>49</sup>

## **Maintaining Discipline**

In addition to the academic workload, Nannie had the difficult task of maintaining discipline. The threat of rebellion always existed; the isolated one-room schools made mutiny a tempting and fairly easy accomplishment. In extreme instances, an adolescent became violent. A student at Nannie's former school in Bluff Springs stabbed a male teacher after receiving a harsh punishment.<sup>50</sup> Nannie never experienced excessive trouble herself, but she did have to assert her authority at almost every one of her schools. In Gatlin she wrote:

Some said that part would scheme around & not recite,  
But I proved up my authority this time. . . .  
This shows that I have the school under control.  
There's a bit of contrariness existing I'll admit,  
But I think I'll straighten all this.<sup>51</sup>

Nannie even expelled one adolescent girl for refusing to do recitations. When another girl refused to take part in Washington's birthday exercises, Nannie "plainly laid the law down" and the girl recited.<sup>52</sup>

Some nights Nannie worried about particularly troublesome discipline problems and received little rest until she effectively resolved the situation. Nannie used a switch to whip naughty children, placed offenders facing the wall, separated talkative seat mates, made disruptive boys stand near the girls, and commonly kept disobedient or lazy students in at recess. She sent students outside to choose their own switches, and in one case she ordered switches through a local merchant. She triumphantly wrote that her "naughty elves" calmed down once they viewed her new purchases.<sup>53</sup> An effective lecture was often a more productive discipline technique than corporal punishment. Only once did Nannie go

“on the war path” and apply the switch three times in one week, but many teachers did rely heavily on corporal punishment.<sup>54</sup> Nineteenth-century education theories advocated hiring women as teachers because they supposedly nurtured students rather than always resorting to coercion.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps Nannie endeavored to conform to the stereotype of women teachers, but regardless of the implicit sexism, the softer techniques seemed effective. Although Nannie constantly worried about discipline, it appears she maintained sufficient control over her classes.

### **Coping with Harsh Conditions**

Despite the daily classroom stresses, Nannie believed “the worst job of the day was going.”<sup>56</sup> She dreaded walking to school in the rural areas because she feared running into snakes, “mad dogs,” and strange men, especially on misty days.<sup>57</sup> On one occasion she became “terribly wrought up” over a couple of “*scuzy*” boys she encountered on her way to Pounds Chapel School in Gatlin.<sup>58</sup> Nannie's blatant racism added to her often irrational fears—particularly in Duggerville where African Americans and Mexican Americans made up a larger percentage of the population.

While walking to church or an entertainment, Nannie always traveled with a beau or a group of friends. Walking or riding a horse to school was the only time she had to travel completely alone, and she had to summon the courage to do so. In addition to Nannie's active imagination, tangible difficulties such as muddy roads, swift creeks, wind, rain, and sleet made the walk to school a precarious one. Without radios or even telephones, Nannie could not inform her students when she canceled school. She often risked formidable weather conditions just in case a small pupil came to school and was stranded alone outside. Once during a hard rain, Nannie arrived at school to find one young student there all by herself—no other students appeared for another hour.<sup>59</sup> During cold and wet weather, Nannie described the Pound's Chapel School as a regular washroom with all the aprons spread around to dry.

Almost every time it rained, the Gatlin Creek swelled so that Nannie and her pupils would “almost need a little canoe to cross.”<sup>60</sup> Eventually the Gatlin community constructed a bridge so that Nannie and her students would no longer need to search up and down the

creek to find a safe place to cross.<sup>61</sup> When the creek rose in Duggerville, Nannie joked about having cavalry but no infantry at school because only the students on horseback could safely cross. Duggerville also had a number of mud holes, and Nannie wrote that she no longer needed a dictionary to fully comprehend the meaning of mud: “gluey, nasty, and stickey is not near enough [sic].”<sup>62</sup>

Nannie complained of exhaustion after walking to and from school, and claimed that the wind made her feel as though she weighed two hundred pounds. Out of curiosity, she weighed most of her wraps one day, and the scale read eleven pounds. She guessed the total would have reached fifteen pounds if she had weighed them when still wet. As early as February, the afternoon temperature in central Texas could be “hot enough to melt” making for an uncomfortable walk home in a corset and winter dress. Spring’s “changeable weather” meant cold mornings, hot afternoons, and unpredictable thunderstorms. Nannie dressed for wintry mornings and possible showers, then had to “wag” all her wraps home in the warm afternoon.<sup>63</sup>

The weather remained a problem once Nannie and her students arrived safely at school because the schoolhouse provided little relief from the heat or cold. On spring-like days Nannie opened the door and windows wide, but unfortunately, nice days did not last. She often confronted the problem of whether to open the windows to ventilate the school or keep them closed to preserve heat. A small, wood-burning stove provided the only warmth for the entire classroom. Often the ventilation was so poor that the stove smoked out the room or an adjoining class. In Fitzhugh the wind actually carried away the stove pipe. After listening to students complain about the cold, Nannie decided to build a fire in the stove anyway.<sup>64</sup> The ventilation at the Dripping Springs School was so inadequate that even when the “poor little children were so wet and cold,” Nannie could build no fire at all without smoking out the other two rooms. In Leander the stove tipped over during class, and the entire three-room school had to dismiss early.<sup>65</sup>

Although providing fuel for the stove was the responsibility of the trustees, Nannie frequently sent her students outside to chop wood. If no one volunteered, Nannie “wrapped up” and collected the wood herself. Sometimes she dispatched one of her pupils to borrow a match so she could light the fire.<sup>66</sup> In 1901 the Fitzhugh trustees waited until November before putting up the stove, making repairs to the house, and hauling in wood. Nannie

furiously chastised them since a cold front had arrived the week before.<sup>67</sup> While Texas weather might not turn cold until late October or November, Nannie felt the school should be prepared. When the Duggerville trustees failed to put up the stove until late November, the children had to build fires outside, huddle around the heat, and wait until Nannie called in their class to recite.<sup>68</sup> Nannie also had few resources to provide relief from the heat. Early one February she complained that it had already become too hot to study. As the weather warmed up, she used the wood to prop up the windows rather than as fuel for the stove.<sup>69</sup>

### **Keeping the Schoolhouse**

Although the job of trustees included upkeep of the schoolhouse, routine construction jobs often devolved to Nannie. She hung up the blackboards in the Liberty Hill School and kept them painted. She replaced the windows in the Dripping Springs School “bottom upwards” but decided they were “bound to stay.”<sup>70</sup> The following school term she tried to keep out the draft by nailing boards over cracks in the walls. She held up a young boy by his feet to nail boards where she herself could not reach. Nannie patched the windows in the Pounds Chapel School by using pieces from the blackboard, and in Duggerville she constructed a bench for new pupils after she ran out of desks. She described her work as a “poor job,” but the students had to sit someplace.<sup>71</sup> In fact, the one direct censure Nannie wrote in her diary about Texas rural education was the condition of the schoolhouses. While teaching in Gatlin she wrote:

We patched up our windows today with “pasteboard,”  
Such school houses as Tex. does afford!  
It's a shame and disgrace to the state,  
They ought to be comfortable at any rate.<sup>72</sup>

Nannie considered moving her classes outside when the wind seemed strong enough to blow down the old walls of the Rock Springs schoolhouse. She joked that she would be forced to teach under a tree if the winds kept up. Because the poorly constructed schoolhouses created a thin barrier between nature and the classroom, Nannie competed for space with squirrels, mice, snakes, lizards, wasps, and mosquitoes. In Fitzhugh she groaned that the squirrels had taken possession. At one point students counted five

squirrels on the ceiling at once. Nannie also complained of a mouse that visited the school every afternoon writing “[I] can’t stand for it to come near me.”<sup>73</sup> Because mice and other creatures played havoc with her discipline, Nannie relied on the larger boys to “murder” the pests.<sup>74</sup>

The uncomfortable conditions and poverty Nannie witnessed probably fueled her desire to postpone marriage until she and her spouse could afford a clean, comfortable, well-maintained house. In Driftwood her family had a spring-fed well near their home, and in Leander their house had waterworks with two hydrants. Yet at most of her schools, Nannie and her students drank from a bucket of stagnant water. In Fitzhugh Nannie expressed her disgust when she found two dead mice in the school’s water bucket even though the fatalities failed to diminish some of her students’ thirst.<sup>75</sup> Even worse, Nannie was appalled that the children in Duggerville actually drank from a mud hole. After a good rain shower, Nannie described the water and mud mixture that provided their water supply as “soup.”<sup>76</sup> At a few of her schools Nannie witnessed a poverty rarely seen among her close friends and family. On occasion she noted with surprise that all of her pupils came to school despite the freezing temperatures and some had bare feet. She promised herself that her own family would never go barefoot or be deprived of any of the finer things in life.<sup>77</sup>

## **Preparing for Marriage**

Nannie’s material ambitions required patience before committing to matrimony. Unfortunately, her parents viewed the domestic labor of six unmarried daughters as unessential to the family economy, and so Nannie felt pressure to marry earlier than her brothers did. Teaching afforded her the financial means to postpone marriage while remaining close to her friends and family. The few other options available to her would have required that she board at a distant college or move to an urban area. Nannie preferred teaching close to home: she spent two-thirds of her career at a school within eight miles of Driftwood. But, because she had few options, teaching often felt more like a trap than an opportunity, and the burdens placed on rural teachers tended to drive her out of the profession. Nannie complained, “So trying on the nerves, it’ll ruin anybody—Don’t see how I’ve stood it nine years, hardly.”<sup>78</sup> The fact that she continued to teach despite the

undesirable working conditions demonstrates her determination to choose wisely in marriage. She wrote, “We’re tired of teaching, that’s a fact, and anxiously awaiting a good chance. Yes, it has to be good—the very best.”<sup>79</sup>

Nannie certainly did not postpone marriage to extend a beloved career. Her diary largely contradicts the assumption that white women were forced to quit teaching when they married. Education reformers repeatedly expressed the view that since married women had to divide their attention between keeping house and teaching school, they would fail to do an adequate job at either task.<sup>80</sup> Nevertheless, Nannie’s friends and relatives refuted the idea that communities would not hire a married teacher. Nannie taught with a husband and wife in Leander, and her cousin in South Carolina continued to teach after marriage. For Nannie, the more oppressive situation was not being forced to quit, but being forced to endure the classroom whether she wanted to or not. Nannie’s parents and the other members of her community expected her to continue teaching and earning an income until she married.

If I were to quit teaching, people’d have fits,  
Seem to think: we have to marry when we quit.  
I’ll show them a thing or two some day.  
Will rest or teach, as I like,  
have things my way.<sup>81</sup>

In fact, the greatest motivation for Nannie to marry was the desire to quit teaching. “Teachers have so much to aggravate,” Nannie confided to a friend, that she could not “blame them for marrying to quit.”<sup>82</sup>

Nannie could imagine little worse than combining housekeeping with teaching. She expressed horror when she learned that her cousin, Bessie Dorroh, continued to teach after marriage.<sup>83</sup> When boarding, Nannie escaped the burden of heavy domestic labor. After returning home at the end of one school term, Nannie complained, “such a washing, starching, sprinkling this child has done. The first I’ve done in six months. . . . I’m so tired that I can hardly move.”<sup>84</sup> Once she married, however, she would no longer board for half the year and would lose the benefit of having her sisters and mother share the onus of domestic work. Nannie realized that continuing to teach after marriage would more than double her responsibilities. While she never once referred to a community’s reluctance to hire a married teacher, Nannie made clear her assumption that any sane woman would quit teaching upon

marriage because doing both required too much sacrifice.

## **Conclusion**

Despite Nannie's frequent complaints, teaching allowed her to define herself before she married. She gained a creative outlet and an opportunity to prove her competence at a wide range of tasks, from disciplining children to carpentry. Teaching enabled her to demonstrate her intelligence, experience success, and make her life feel more meaningful. She sometimes acknowledged her value as a teacher, "[there is] nothing more important than training Texas youths, preparing them for many vocations in life."<sup>85</sup> In addition, teaching gave her more self-reliance as she conquered her fears of walking alone to school and engaged in creative problem solving to contend with the wide variety of minor catastrophes each school day.

Most importantly, however, teaching provided Nannie with financial autonomy. By the time she married, she had accumulated enough wealth to make a substantial contribution to her marital alliance far and above the traditional quilts and other pieces of a trousseau.<sup>86</sup> Nannie wanted to avoid marrying someone who would squander away her hard-earned money. In fact, with every year she taught, Nannie gained more of a vested interest in protecting her property. By the time she retired, she had saved and invested \$700—almost 40 percent of her gross earnings.

During her career, Nannie loaned out money with her brother-in-law and invested in cattle and chickens.<sup>88</sup> In addition, she purchased forty-five acres of her father's best land in Driftwood.<sup>89</sup> When she married Albert, Nannie had created quite a substantial nest egg to add to his farm. She built up financial wealth not necessarily for her own independence, but for comfortable dependence. Because of that fact, she wanted to marry someone who would manage their estate responsibly. Nevertheless, she still refused to rely completely on another individual. Nannie believed that by contributing property that she herself had earned, she would not have to grovel for pocket change. Teaching allowed her to contribute her own wealth and thereby gain more empowerment in her marriage. In countless ways, Nannie's diverse experiences while teaching rewarded her for the rest of her life.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Nannie Dorroh Odom diary, Alyne Gray Collection, Southwest Collection, Texas Tech University Library, Lubbock, Texas, 23 January 1903.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Nannie's nineteenth birthday was 21 October 1895.

<sup>4</sup> Dudley R. Dobie, *A Brief History of Hays County and San Marcos, Texas* (San Marcos: privately printed, 1948), 60; Frances Stoval, et al. *Clear Springs and Limestone Ledges: A History of San Marcos and Hays County from the Texas Sesquicentennial* (Austin Eakin Publications, 1986), 335. Liberty Hill was the original settlement by Onion Creek at present-day Driftwood. In 1885 when the community became large enough to add a post office, the leaders of the community changed the name to Driftwood since another community in Williamson County, northeast of Austin, was called Liberty Hill.

<sup>5</sup> Dorroh diary, 2 February, 24 May, 2, 19 July, 16 September 1897. Stoval, *Clear Springs*, 435-437, 478; handwritten Hays County Superintendent's School Records, Hays Courthouse, San Marcos, Texas, 1893-1897.

<sup>6</sup> Dorroh diary, 3, 29 October 1898.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Poellnitz Johnston, *Pioneers in Their Own Rights* (Birmingham: Featon Press, 1964), 277.

Henry Dorroh was D. L. Dorroh's second cousin.

<sup>8</sup> Dorroh diary, 5, 6, 10 June, 2 November 1902.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., November 1903; 7 April 1904.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 11 January 1898. Mose Cavett was a pupil at Dripping Springs while Nannie taught there. Hattie Martin was Nannie's aunt, although they were the same age. Stuart Stone was an acquaintance of Nannie's. Jim Black was Lucy's brother and a beau of Nannie's.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 2 July 1897.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 12 June 1898.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 23 April 1902. This is a conservative count. I only added those teachers she referred to by name which she connected to northern Hays County. She of course met many other teachers at institutes while traveling and when she lived in Caldwell and Williamson counties. While visiting relatives in Mississippi, Nannie noted, "Teachers here are like they are at home, on all sides" (13 May 1899).

<sup>14</sup> Lucy Black diary, Nola Harding Collection, Harding Foundation, Raymondville, Texas, 5, 6, 7, 14 June 1898. The third trustee was most likely Nannie's father.

<sup>15</sup> Dorroh diary, 4 April 1897; Black diary, 1 June 1898.

<sup>16</sup> Dorroh diary, 13 July 1895. J.U.G. Club refers to the "Just Us Girls" club, popular throughout Texas at the turn of the century. Pricilla Thompson, "Just Us Girls' Started Library in 1900," *Amarillo Sunday New-Globe*, 23 August 1987.

<sup>17</sup> Dorroh diary, 4 July 1902.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 30 March 1903.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 11, 28 May 1903. Albert Odom married Nannie in 1904. Kate Dorroh Hall was Nannie's older sister who remained in Driftwood after the family moved.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 6 September 1897, 19 October 1903.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 29 January, 7 November 1901; 3 March, 5 April 1903.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 23 November 1898.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 2 March 1901.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 9 March 1901. In Dripping Springs, the male principal earned \$65.00 a month, the first assistant made \$35.00, and Nannie received only \$30.00 a month.

<sup>25</sup> Thad Sitton and Milam C. Rowold, *Ringing the Children In: Texas Country Schools* (College Station, Texas, A&M University Press, 1987), 178; Dorroh diary, 27 March, 29, 30 April, 30 September 1901.

- <sup>26</sup> Newspaper clippings, Nola Harding Collection, Harding Foundation, Raymondville, Texas. Dorroh diary, 28 October 1898; 13 January 1899; 4 April, 26 November 1901; 29 March 1904.
- <sup>27</sup> W. F. Doughty, *Compulsory School Attendance*, Department of Education, State of Texas, Bulletin 53, 1 July 1916. Texas would not legislate a compulsory attendance law until 1911.
- <sup>28</sup> Dorroh diary, 4, 7, 8 February 1904.
- <sup>29</sup> Clipping from Leander paper, inserted in Dorroh diary, 20 February 1904.
- <sup>30</sup> J. M. Carlisle, State Superintendent of Public Instruction, *Digest of the School Laws of Texas* (Austin: Ben C. Jones & Co., State Printers, 1893), 25; J. S. Kendall, *School Laws of Texas, 1899* (Austin: Von Boeckmann, Moore & Schutze, State Printers, 1899), 34-35. Normals were programs and schools that taught people to be schoolteachers. County institutes provided similar instruction, but many were offered in individual counties during the summer and lasted only a short time.
- <sup>31</sup> Ellwood Cubberley, *Rural Life and Education* (1914; reprint, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1922), 57; Dorroh diary, 18 November 1902. "Dutch" was a common mispronunciation of German "Deutsch."
- <sup>32</sup> Hays County Superintendent records.
- <sup>33</sup> Dorroh diary, 17 November 1897.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 8 April, 27 October 1899; 27 January, 23 February 1900; 27 May 1902.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 12 December 1903.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 23 October 1897.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 24 October 1899.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 16 January 1900; 5, 20 February 1900. Nannie taught algebra, a high school course, to Minnie Black. Minnie may have wanted to take algebra to prepare for certification, but even though all three of her brothers and sisters taught, Minnie never took the examination.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 19 January 1900.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 October 1901.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 29 January 1901.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 26 January 1900; 29 January, 20 February, 12, 13, 15, 25, 26 November, 16, 18, 20 December 1901; 6 January 1902; 17, 24 February 1903.
- <sup>43</sup> Arthur LeFevre, *Public Education in Texas*, Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1 September 1903, 10; Dorroh diary, 2 December 1901; 18 December 1902.
- <sup>44</sup> Dorroh diary, 6 November, 23 October 1899.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 March 1900.
- <sup>46</sup> Dorroh diary, 26 January 1898; 13 December 1899; 22 January, 11, 12, 15 April, 29 October 1901; 3 February 1903.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 April 1904.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 29, 30 March, 7, 8, 12 April 1904.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 20 December 1901; 7, 8 April 1904.
- <sup>50</sup> Driftwood Dots, 12 November 1901, inserted in Dorroh diary; Wayne E. Fuller, *The Old Country School: The Study of Rural Education in the Middle West* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 209.
- <sup>51</sup> Dorroh diary, 28 January 1901.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 30 January, 20, 28 February, 26 March, 19 April, 2, 11 December 1901; 19 February 1902.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 28 February, 11 March 1901; 23 January, 9, 10 December 1903.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 30 November 1899; 19 April 1901; 26 February 1902; 29 January 1903.
- <sup>55</sup> Fuller, *The Old Country School*, 161; Donald Warren, ed., *American Teachers: Histories of a Profession at Work* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1898), 315; Redding S. Sugg, Jr., *Motherteacher: The Feminization of American Education* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), 103-105.
- <sup>56</sup> Dorroh diary, 14 December 1899; 8, 25 February 1901.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 December 1898; 6 February, 2, 3 May 1901; 15 May 1903.

- <sup>58</sup> Ibid., 25 October 1899; 9 December 1902.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid., 2 May 1901; 14 January, 4 November 1902.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid., 27 October 1899; 11 February, 11 October 1901.
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid., 5, 12 January, 11 April 1900.
- <sup>62</sup> Ibid., 14, 19 January, 11 March 1903.
- <sup>63</sup> Ibid., 19 February 1897, 8, 19 March 1901; 12 December 1902.
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid., 18, 19 February 1901; 5, 6 March 1902.
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid., 26 October, 8 November 1897; January 1904.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid., 14 December 1899; 7 March 1901; 3 February 1902; 2 January 1903.
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid., 11 November 1901.
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid., 17 November 1902.
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid., 12 February, 27 March 1902.
- <sup>70</sup> Ibid., 10, 13, 30 December 1895; 1 March 1897.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid., 1 November 1897; 14 December 1899; 6 January 1903.
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid., 30 January 1900. C. E. Evans, *The Story of Texas Schools* (Austin: The Steck Company, 1955), 111. In 1890 State Superintendent Oscar H. Cooper valued school buildings in urban areas at \$33 per capita, but only \$3 per capita in rural areas.
- <sup>73</sup> Dorroh diary, 11 December 1900, 22 April, 3 October 1901; 27 February, 4, 19 March 1902; 29 February, 31 March 1904.
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid., 3 October 1901. Even though she lived in a rural community, Nannie remained uncomfortable with small animals. Once she mentioned that a lizard created excitement at prayer meeting. On another occasion, a snake under the arbor scattered everyone during a sermon. Dorroh diary, 20 June 1897.
- <sup>75</sup> Ibid., 22 January 1902.
- <sup>76</sup> Ibid., 27 November 1902.
- <sup>77</sup> Ibid., 7 March 1901; 19 November 1903.
- <sup>78</sup> Ibid., 11 April 1904.
- <sup>79</sup> Ibid., 28 February 1904.
- <sup>80</sup> John E. Carrico, "A Study of the Employment of Married Women as Teachers in the Public Schools," master's thesis, The University of Texas at Austin, 1933; Hoy Chaddick, "The Problem of the Married Woman Teacher in the Public Schools," Master's thesis, The University of Texas at Austin, 1939.
- <sup>81</sup> Dorroh diary, 6 April 1902.
- <sup>82</sup> Ibid., 8 January 1900.
- <sup>83</sup> Ibid., 13 November 1900.
- <sup>84</sup> Ibid., 24 March 1897.
- <sup>85</sup> Ibid., 21 March 1901.
- <sup>86</sup> Ibid., 26 February 1901.
- <sup>87</sup> Nannie rightly complained about her meager pay. According to her diary, she earned only \$1800 gross pay for all nine years of her career. Dorroh diary, 16 April 1904. During the 1895-1896 school term, Nannie's first year to teach, the average yearly salary for a White female teacher in Texas was \$241.43. This average rose to \$266.82 by the 1902-1903 school year. In 1902, a White male teacher received \$261.31, and a Black female teacher only earned \$207.92. Arthur LeFevre, *Public Education in Texas*, Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1 September 1903, 11.
- <sup>88</sup> Dorroh diary, 17 November 1899; 1, 25 May, 6, 18 September, 3, 27 October 1900. In 1900 her father and brother-in-law purchased and branded eight cows and calves for her that she claimed cost about one hundred dollars. The new cows raised her total herd to twenty-five head. Once while she was away teaching, Nannie's father informed her that three of her cows and a calf had died. Nannie cried when she heard the news of her financial loss.

<sup>89</sup> Hays County Deed Records, Hays County Courthouse, San Marcos, Texas, D. L. Dorroh and Nannie Dorroh, 1904.

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