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Oral History Interview: Doris Copley Miller

Doris Copley Miller

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RB: This is Mrs. Doris Miller being interviewed by Rosemary Barcello, Huntington, West Virginia, April 23, 1974. Mrs. Miller, I understand you've been a life-long resident of Wayne County.

DM: More or less. I have lived in Cabell and Wayne Counties all of my life except a few months.

RB: Well, ah, being an educator, I, ah, having going to you myself, I, ah, knew that you had some interesting things to say about the educational field, and, ah, maybe we'll got off on some other topics also, but, ah, ah, would you tell us something about, ah, ah, about, ah, the early schools in this area?

DM: Oddly enough, the earliest school that I know about is Marshall Academy, because my grandmother attended that school in, ah, the year 1844-45. I, ah, have read a good deal about it in time, and I know that it started with, ah, log school located, ah, somewhere, ah, on the side of Old Main Building at Marshall and called Mt. Hebron. And, yet as the children of the settler school out, particularly John Laidley was interested in, ah, a school, better school, higher school for the area. He had a large family, and he did send his eldest son away to school, and then he and other men of the community organized Marshall with the assistance of, ah, the Presbyterian Church and the Methodist Church in the area. The Presbyterian had to go to, ah, ah, Burlington, Ohio to church, and many times they couldn't cross the river, although, the river was nothing like it is today. There were no dams in it at that time, and it was, ah, not, floods hadn't started to the extent they have been since, but still in all there would be long months at a time that they couldn't get across to church. So, ah, they went together to found Marshall, and

in, ah, 1838, they hired, ah, brick mason, a Dutch brick mason named Jacob Stock to build the first brick building at Marshall Academy. He was my grandmother's father. So, I know from her description what that first school at Marshall was like. It was a rectangular brick building with, ah, hall that went directly through from the front door in the center of the long side of the building to the back door, ah, in the same position in the back wall of the building, long wall. The rooms on one side of the hall were larger than the rooms on the other side. The downstairs larger room was a chapel. On Sundays, the Methodists and Presbyterians met on alternate Sundays. On weekdays, it was a schoolroom where the, ah, larger girls and all of the boys of the school attended classes. Upstairs, the principal was the Presbyterian minister. Even though they changed, ah, every three years, it was still the Presbyterian minister, and he was, ah, ah, seminary graduate, a highly educated man which was unusual for schools in, in this area. Then, there was a well-educated young woman, ah, who would be teaching the class of younger girls on the second floor. My grandmother had a number of memories about this school. One was, ah, that, ah, boys being mischievous, one day, ah, a schoolboy killed a little green snake, and he laid it across the door at, ah, ah, in front of the, in the hall on the second floor. Ah, one of the little girls started to leave the room, and she screamed and ran back. The teacher went to look to see what had, ah, frightened the child. She saw the little snake, and, ah, there was a ruler in her hand. She reached down and picked up the snake and threw it over the banister into the hall below. It so happened that the principal downstairs was getting a drink of water, ah, with, from a long-handled

dipper, probably a gourd, and, ah, he, ah, the snake fell right across the handle of his dipper. Ah, then another thing that happened was that the big boys liked to slide down the banisters, and one day they broke the banister. So, the principal said to them, "You better talk to Mr. Laidley," because he, ah, was one of the, ah, ah, men in charge of the school, and, ah, they went to him. So, he said, "Well, boys get the carpenter and, ah, ah, have them to repair the stairs, the, ah, banister. You'll have to pay for it." So, out of their meager allowances, ah, earnings, they had to pay for the banister. Ah, they, ah, were good teachers, the principal, and the young ladies, and, ah, they, ah, have to study the grade, many different subjects. My, ah, grandmother had studied grammar, and, ah, ah, geography, and history before, ah, she was 12 years old. In country schools at that time, they mostly concentrated on reading, writing, and arithmetic. In this, ah, ah, school the, one of the books that they studied was a young lady's reader.

RB: Now, was that at Marshall?

DM: That was at Marshall Academy. The year after that ah, or maybe two years after that, grandmother attended a school at Buffalo Shoals. Now, Harvester's Encyclopedia says that the first building constructed in the Union District in Wayne County, ah, for school purposes was at Buffalo Shoals in 1823. Evidently, this was the building that, ah, my grandmother attended schools in, ah, school in that year, because she said it was more than 20 years old and had been used for a school, for a store, ah, and as a dwelling place. And, her teacher was an old gentleman from, ah, east-end Virginia, ah, named Thomas Napier. He was generally called Uncle Tommy Napier. And, ah, he was not nearly as highly educated as, ah, the teachers at

Marshall Academy, so, and, he did concentrate on the three R's. So, my grandmother was much disappointed in her, ah, school there. Yet Harvester's Encyclopedia says that Thomas Napier had, ah, a great deal to do with laying the foundation in interest in education in Wayne County, that he taught many, many schools. Now generally all of these were select schools that, ah, that are prescription schools sometimes they were called.

RB: Yes.

DM: Ah, because, ah, the State of Virginia did not provide free public education.

RB: Uh huh.

DM: They had, ah, very limited, ah, ah, materials to work with. Paper and pencils were, ah, almost nonexistent. Oh, they had some paper, and they made pens from goose quills, but usually they used slate and slate pencils. Now, ah, ah, Riggs in, ah, Proctorville, Ohio, has, ah, still has the little slate that Hiram Luther, who was born in 1821 at Buffalo Shoals, ah, carried when he went to school about, it was about 1836 when, ah, ah, Hiram was, ah, 15 years old, ah, maybe it could have been a year or two later. He was a tall boy, and, ah, not being very strong, he wasn't put at hard work as the other children in the family. So, he was sent with the younger children. And, now at that time, ah, for some reason, there was no school being taught at, ah, ah, Buffalo Shoals, and, ah, they had to go to school from, ah, Schoals and Newcomb Creek to, ah, almost, ah, to Buffalo High School about where there is a bend in Twelve Pole, and, ah, it's near the, ah, Guy Plymale Farm near the Malcolm Farm on, ah, on Buffalo where this schoolhouse was located. Now, schools in that day were taught usually in wintertime, because people needed their children to help in the crops and right in mid-winter they weren't busy, so, ah,

the days were short. And, these small children couldn't travel alone, ah, ah, because there were so many wolves in the woods, and they would come after them in the, ah, early morning and late evening as they travelled back and forth to their homes. So, Uncle Hirman was as young man carried, ah, muzzel-loading, ah, gun, and, ah, he and the children carried pine torches not only to light their way but also to frighten off the wolves.

RB: Ah, Mrs. Miller, what were the country schools like during this period?

DM: You mean, ah, the, ah, building? Apparently, many of them started in abandoned, ah, buildings perhaps the, ah, first settlers, ah, some of them build, and, ah, ah, the first ones who came in here found that they couldn't get title to their land. This was all land-grant territory. And, they, ah, built, ah, log houses, ah, generally all those log houses in that day in rural areas were one room, but some of them were, ah, right good size, and, ah, apparently they, ah, some of them became school buildings. They were, ah, one room, ah, affairs with often times a puncheon floor which meant where the logs cut into, and, ah, the, ah, round sides were turned down and the flat sides up, and they were, ah, smoothed off somewhat with edges. Sometimes, ah, the youngsters got splinters in their feet from, ah, poorly-dressed logs. But, sometimes they, ah, didn't have any floor at all. Ah, now, there was an old gentleman named John Johnson who, ah, I think was a school trustess, perhaps, and he used to go to the schools and tell children about his experiences as a schoolboy. He told about the, ah, the classroom he, ah, remembered that had no floor. It had, ah, a large, ah, fireplace, open fireplace, and they had to go out and, ah, ah, well, the wood, the larger boys and bring in, and they

have to have a back log, and the smaller timbers go in front. Ah, they, the seats many of them were split logs with, ah, ah, smaller sapling legs. They'd bore a hole into the, ah, log near the end of it and, ah, ah, put in two legs at each, each end of the logs. Then, later the similar benches were constructed by carpenters. They had no back to them at first. Now, ah, my mother was born in 1881, and she, ah, remembers the very nice building she had to attend. Same one where I attended school when I was a child. Ah, her cousin and, ah, another young man had built this, ah, ah, school at, ah, on Newcomb Creek at Shoals. It was, ah, frame construction, and, ah, ah, one end had, ah, wide poplar boards from ah, about, ah, four feet, ah, from the floor to the ceiling that were painted black, and that was the, ah, blackboard. Children often did their arithmetic work on the, on the blackboard. Now, ah, ah, my mother remembers that, ah, my mother is Anna Copley. She is a Wayne County teacher-- retired teacher 93 years old. She, ah, recalls that on November 22, 1892, Allen Harrison was hanged in Huntington, and, ah, one of her brothers came to witness the hanging. He, when he returned, he brought her arithmetic textbook. It was the first arithmetic textbook that she ever owned. She, ah, ah, had, ah, studied arithmetic, ah, evidently with the aid of the blackboard and chalk and also with a slate and slate pencil. And, she knew tables. She could add, subtract, multiply, and divide, but she had no formal, ah, lessons from a book. There were, was not very much of the school left, and, ah, in the few weeks that remained, she worked a 136 pages of problems using her slate. Ah, they had, ah, very few, ah, books still at that time, and, ah, there, all of their equipment was, ah, crude. School terms were very short. Ah, usually around three

months, and, ah, directly they grew up to four months, but they were not consistent from, ah, one community to another or from one school to another. Sometimes, the same teacher would teach, ah, two or three schools in a year. At that time, there was no county school boards. Ah, ah, school board was elected for each magisterial district, and each school district had school trustees chosen by the school board who had charge of the particular school. By this time, ah, the system had changed until there was, was a uniform examination for teachers, 'cause in early days some, ah, some important man in the community, community examined each applicant for school. But, ah, my, it had grown to the place where, ah, teachers did attend a uniform examination, and ah, they had uniform salaries which began at about \$30 per month. Imagine teaching a school term of, ah, three months at \$30 per month and paying perhaps \$5 a month for board. Ah, teachers didn't get wealthy. Yet, ah, some of the early, ah, teachers were people who, ah, men who planned to study medicine for instance. I can think of several Wayne County doctors who taught school, ah, and, ah, would also, ah, they would save their money for a few years and then go to medical school. Often times to Louisville, Kentucky. Then, ah, by the time that, ah, my mother began teaching in 1900, they still were having three month terms in some districts and in, ah, they gradually crept up to 12 months, and then five months, and six months. But, they still paid very low salaries. Forty dollars, and it was a great day when the, the teachers' salaries was raised to \$50 a month, and it was only a teacher with a first grade certificate who received this amount. The children enjoyed school, I believe, in those days more than they, ah, have in later years. It was a change from the farm

routine, and some teachers were very popular; others were very harsh discipline, could be terribly harsh. Ah, I, ah, have heard of cruel and unusual punishments such as making a child stand on one foot and, ah, reach one hand to touch a distant object. This must have been caused some quite painful muscles and wouldn't be tolerated at all today. My mother began teaching in 1900, and she taught, ah, sometimes one school and a part of another school. Sometimes two schools in, ah, one year. By the time that I began teaching in 1917 on July 18, my 18th birthday, schools generally were, ah, six months in extent. I taught in Ceredo District which was one of the wealthiest districts of the county, because there were many railroads and public utilities in the district. The salary that year was \$75 per month, a magnificent sum. The, ah, school I taught in was a little different from the one that had been built in 1881 at Shoals. It was on White's Creek. It, ah, was one, one room with a blackboard across the front. Generally, ah, in all the schools I attended until I reached high school, a class was called, there would be eight grades in one room. Each class came forward and sat on a bench without any back while they recited. Then, ah, they took their places in their seats, and, ah, ah, the next class came forward. The seats began with the smallest size in the front, and the largest children sat in the back seat, and, ah, they, ah, were graded as to size, ah, until all of them could be seated in that way. This time, well, a long time before that, the, ah, open fireplaces had given way to the potbellied Burnside Stove which sat in the center of the room, and, ah, on a cold day when it was well stoked with wood or coal, it would turn cherry red with, ah, heat. The child who, ah, sat close

to it burned on one side and froze on the other. A youngster in the distant part of the room generally froze. It was, ah, ah, very common place for a child to hold up it's hand and say, ah, "Teacher, may I stand by the stove to get warm?" And, they would come forward, and, ah, they'd turn like you'd turn a chicken on a stick until they were completely warmed and go back to their seats.

RB: Mrs. Miller, ah, since the children, ah, became cold while they were even in the classroom, how did they fare, ah, from travelling the long distances to the schools, and what kind of clothing did they have, and, ah, ah, were there illnesses resulting from this?

DM: By the time I began teaching and even when my mother began teaching, schools had been increased to the point that they were not long distances for children to travel. It was unusual for a child to have to travel as much, any more than a mile to school, but they did get very cold. Ah, their clothing was, ah, warm, ah, by certain standards, but it was not warm in the way clothing is now. It was very heavy. Ah, they wore a lot of wool in wintertime, and they generally wore long, ah, underwear, long stocking that pulled up over that, and, ah, they, ah, ah, very heavy woolen outer clothing, but still they had, didn't have raincoats yet to protect from rain and heavy snow, so sometimes they would get thoroughly wet, and oftentimes they would have very bad colds and have to miss school. Sometimes, they would have pneumonia, and pneumonia was a terrible fear in those days. Sometimes, the children died of pneumonia that they seemed to stem from their very cold trips to school and from school. However, this was not as, ah, frequent as, ah, might seem likely. They were hearty little souls in most cases, and I suppose their outdoor lives

ah, helped a great deal.

RB: I can't help but wonder, ah, what were the parents' attitudes generally speaking toward education, ah, at the time when, when you were a child?

DM: I can never recall anything but good attitudes in our neighborhood generally. It was true that they would keep children out of school if they wanted, ah, them to work with their farm work sometimes, but generally the parents were anxious for their children to attend school and get a better education than they had themselves. The sad, ah, part of it was that many of our ancestors who came into this area had received a good common school education in, ah, other countries or in, ah, ah, near the eastern seaboard. For a long time, ah, they, their children had lacked these similar opportunities. They were glad, ah, to see schools improving. You see, the last of, ah, educational opportunity for young people in this side of the states was one of the prime factors in causing the division between Virginia and West Virginia and, ah, was matter of schools and of roads. But, they did want their children to get educations, and they generally were anxious for their children to be well behaved and to do well in school.

RB: Mrs. Miller, in today's, ah, education, we stress that each child be allowed to achieve some measure of success each day. Does this (break in tape) objective from earlier days?

DM: When I attended school, the recreation was, ah, varied and, ah, very interesting, entertaining except perhaps children enjoyed school on account of this recreation. The school day was divided into four periods. The, ah, teacher rang her hand bell at nine o'clock to call the students into the classroom. At, ah, 10:30, she tapped the bell to tell them to be dismissed for 15 minutes, and at the end of that 15 minutes, the, ah,

bell rang again, and, ah, classes were resumed until 12 o'clock. Then, at, ah, 3:30, the bell tapped again for last recess and 15 minutes and, ah, hour and a quarter for the last, ah, session. The main games they played at noon hour, children brought their lunches. They sat down and ate lunch very quickly. Then, ah, ah, out of this, if the weather was at all, ah, feasible to play, ah, I think in the beginning of the year, they played jump their games for a time. The days were warm and sunny, and sometimes they'd play games like, ah, ah, glaring out the windows, ah, the little children played ring-around-the-rosy. Then, we had one that we called "King William lost King James' son, and on the royal race he run. On his breast he wore a star, gold & silver plates he wore." The children held hands and circled as, ah, they sang this. "Go choose east, go choose west, go choose the one you love best, and if he's not here to take your part, choose another with all your heart. Down on this carpet you must kneel." The two who did their, ah, who the children had chosen, they were moved into the center of the ring for this verse. "Down on this carpet you must kneel, sure as the grass grows in the field; hug your bride and sister sweet, now you may rise up on your feet." And, I don't recall whether there is anymore to that or not, but, ah, ah, then they, ah, two who had been in the center went back into their, ah, the, ah, lineup again, and another, ah, two, ah, played the same thing over and over. Then, as, ah, fall progressed and days got colder, they began playing baseball and, ah, prisoners' base. (Break in tape). In for cold weather, because there was a great deal of activity in it, and it fit the youngsters' warmth. They, ah, chose up into two teams, and, ah, they have long base on either side of the playground. At Newcomb

Creek we had a very nice playground. It was about three quarters of an acre in extent and rectangular in shape. The, ah, object was for a player to move out from his base and perhaps toss around the other base and get back to his home base without, ah, another player from the other base tagging him. Sometimes, the boys would get, ah, so interested in these chases that they followed each other such long journeys, they wouldn't get back by the end of the play period. They might be five to ten or 15 minutes late, straggling in the class late, and then they were in trouble with the teacher. The, ah, small children, ah, sometimes played gentler games, and sometimes all of the students would engage in, ah, ah, games over on the hill underneath the beech trees. We had one space that was the living room and had flat rocks. We carried moss and covered them over. They made very nice settees and chairs. That was the living room. Out from it a little ways was the kitchen. Table was a flat rock, and the, ah, dishes were small rocks. We had another beech tree further up on the hill that made a very nice church, and, ah, we'd have, sometimes have a great church sessions. Church was next door to the school, and, ah, in, ah, wintertime there, they would have revival meetings with daytime sessions, and we would be dismissed from 10 o'clock in the morning through the lunch hours to attend those sessions. We were very good imitators, and ah, there were some great church services held under the beech tree. (Break in tape). Another enjoyable game was (inaudible) me over when they threw the ball over the schoolhouse; ah, one, ah, group was chosen on one team and the other on the other. They took places on opposite sides. I don't remember the game too well, but I do remember very well, but they was played with a home-made ball. Some mother in the

community had, ah, ravelled out a wool sock and had perhaps gotten a hold of a small piece of rubber to go in the center that seemed to make the ball more, ah, ah, active or resilient. I don't know what exactly what you call that, but the ball would be wound very tightly then, and they would take a darning needle and sew back and forth. It made very sturdy and, ah, nice ball to play with. They used those also in, ah, baseball. They had no, ah, but, yes, but they had no standard equipment for the games. All materials were provided in the community and, ah, by the parents. The, ah, board of education, ah, provided no equipment whatsoever for recreation, and perhaps it was all the more interesting, because they were thrown back on their own resources.

RB: Mrs. Miller, is there anything else in particular you'd like to mention?

DM: It occurs to me that Marshall College, now Marshall University, played a great role in the, ah, teacher, ah, in teachers in Wayne County in the years as I was growing up and even as my mother was growing up. There were not opportunities for young women such as there are today. Ah, young women could, ah, clerk in a store or teach school or be a seamstress or something on that order, but she had no job opportunities such as the young men had. And, many of the teachers of the early day and, ah, were young women who came from Huntington and some of them who came from Ohio, because the Ohio had, ah, good many, ah, more schools than, ah, West Virginia. Perhaps, I think, because they had land-grant colleges in Ohio. Then, one of the names that I have heard mentioned, ah, from Huntington in the early days was (Inaudible), Mary (Inaudible). The name (Inaudible) has been identified with the history of the area since ah, very early times. At least as early as the 1820's. And, ah, there

were numerous young women who came out from Huntington and taught in Wayne County Schools. Then, as years went on, the girls who attended the schools began going to high school and to Marshall. And, teaching in those days, you could, ah, get a certificate and, ah, ah, teach a few years, ah, renew it by attending a high school and, ah, college. And, ah, in this way, many of the teachers who have master's degrees and, ah, are retiring at this time are ones who taught before they had ever attended high school.

RB: Thank you, Mrs. Miller.