

Interview with Dotty Gilpatrick
July 2001

To avoid any confusion as to the Wheat School in which I taught and the original Wheat school that was here pre-Oak Ridge, the wheat school in which I taught was built in December of 43' and in January 44'. It opened in February of 44'. You wonder how they build the school in a couple of months, but it was an entirely frame building that went up to accommodate kindergarten through 8th, with a gym, no cafeterias at that time, an art room, a music room, an office, and a clinic. They were not anticipating the many children that really came eventually, but I think perhaps originally it was build to accommodate maybe two rooms per grade level.

It was an L-shaped building with a principal's office and all the central areas in the corner of the L and grades K-3 in one wing and 4-8 on the other wing. It was located on the corner of the turnpike and a traffic light which is now Blair Road. It was located in the southeast corner at that intersection. It was necessary for it to be there because the whole area south of the turnpike in that area on down to the K-25 buildings were government trailers. The children we accommodated lived in those trailers. Existing now under all the leaves and the trees is all the infrastruaction of what was a community with what was its grocery, its own post office. They were self sustained behind the K-25 fence. The children we had were children who came from absolutely everywhere.

My first day in the classroom was somewhere in the middle of February. I came to Oak Ridge on February 14th, but I could not go into the classroom until I had had a physical and all the necessary things that the army required before you could go to whatever your job was. When I got there several days after coming to Oak Ridge, I was

given a classroom, and that is an absolutely, literal translation of what I had. I had four walls, one blackboard on a wall, and 42 6-year olds. No furniture, no books, nothing. So, you did what you could to be creative. I did a lot with music in those days and we played lots of games. We did a lot of singing. We did folk games. We did everything a young teacher could think of to keep all those children amused and interested. They did go home for lunch, which gave a break in the middle of the day, and then they were back at 1:00 o'clock and stayed until 2:30, I think.

The first construction workers who came into K-25, of course, were the people who did the site preparation. That is a craft all by itself. When the site preparation was finished, then the people came in who were masons. They laid the concrete blocks and poured the concrete. When that craft was over, the next kind of craftsman's came in and so on through the electricians, plumbers, and all the different crafts. As they finished, they and their families and their children left. New ones moved in on the weekends. On some Monday mornings we would have as many as 100 new children to enroll. I think the saddest thing about it concerned the people who taught 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. They found it almost impossible to motivate these children because they had not done anything most of their young lives but move. So they were not too interested in going to school and being here 3 months and going on 2 months to someplace else. It was entirely different with the young children because they were excited to come to school. It was much easier to motivate them.

So how long did we live without anything in our classrooms? Well, we never knew. One day you might get a few chairs, another day you might get some tables, and another day you would get a few boxes of books, and another week you would get some

more chairs. Nothing matched and nothing went together. Remember it was wartime and you could not purchase things. As I understood it, there was a call that went out to the nation: Any school system that had surplus materials, please send them to Oak Ridge, Tennessee. So, we got textbooks from various places and in all kinds of conditions, but it was an interesting sort of thing. You made do with what you had. By the time the days passed from February until June I had a reasonably equipped classroom. Things came in pretty rapidly.

One of the special things about my classroom was that they always had the first grade down on the end of the hall. You start with first and go to second, third, and fourth. Kindergarten was in the center part of the building, so I was always at the end of the hall. During the weekend, they might add a couple rooms on the end. So, you would come in the next morning and be moved. But, everyone moved because you had to keep things in rotation. We would move, then you would settle down that day and you might be there a couple weeks. And they would add on. And if I was not moving, they were building next door to me. So, I always had carpenters down on the end of the building hammering or doing something. But as everything else in those days, it went very quickly. They would put two new rooms on this end and put two on the other end. They were up overnight almost. It was a building meant not to survive and, of course, it did not. That building lasted the rest of that school year and all of the next school year. When K-25 was finished as far as construction was concerned, it was closed.

Fairview School also served trailer children, because all of the central part of town south of the turnpike at that time was filled with trailers. And so those were trailer children. Their father's were also craft people. Fairview opened about a year after

Wheat did. By that time the schools had more equipment. That school was built in the same pattern, and built not to last also. Of course it was only in existence for a couple of years, and then it closed.

ANY QUESTIONS?

-Were there other schools?

Other schools that opened were Elm Groove, Pine Valley, and Cedar Hill and Robertsville. They opened in the fall of 43'. The High School opened in the fall of 43'. The gym at Robertsville now is part of an existing school. The High School was up on top of Kentucky Avenue near Blankenship Field. The five schools were in the main part of town, the Wheat school on the west end, and Fairview went up a little later. There was an original Scarborough school. It was out on Bethel Valley Road. The Building is now a government building, and it was an original pre-Oak Ridge.

-How were you and the other teachers recruited?

That is interesting. I guess I can just recall and tell you my own experience. Dr. Blankenship, as you know, was almost commandeered by the army. He was told to set up the best school system he could dream of. Money was no object. It was to be of such superb quality that the finest scientists would want their children to be there. So, at that point he began looking for teachers. Most of the teachers that came were single. A few

were married and, if that were the case they were here because their husbands were working here. I don't know of any married teacher that was recruited to come.

My personal experience was that I had a friend who heard they were looking for teachers. I was teaching school in Corbin, Kentucky. On Friday, I was told, "Mrs. Lloyd, I am certainly sorry to give you up." I said, "I beg your pardon?" My principal replied, "I had a call from Dr. Blankenship from Oak Ridge, Tennessee. He interviewed me over the phone and I think you have a job." I got home from work that afternoon, and there was a telegram from Dr. Blankenship. It said: Dear Miss Lloyd, "Please report for work on Wednesday morning, a.m." Most of the people who were asked to come, received just such a short of notice. I was pretty independent because I replied by telegram that said I couldn't be there Wednesday. I said I would be there on next Monday. That was the way I was recruited. He was combing the school systems everywhere. I guess we were never real sure what his criteria was, except we had to be certified. We understood that being young was a big advantage. We understood he was looking for people who were creative, ingenious, and willing to take some risk. The original teachers that came to Oak Ridge were absolutely from everywhere.

-What was the incentive for you to come here?

The incentive was salary.

-Where and how did you learn about it?

You see Corbin, Kentucky is only 90 miles from here. Word was everywhere, at least within a 100 miles radiance, that something big was happening here and no one knew what. It was considered a construction site. No one knew what was being built. Salary was \$210.00 per month for 10 months. That summer of '44, I worked for the recreation department and I made \$200.00 a month. That was big money for a teacher in those days. My room in the dormitory was \$15.00 a month. My incentive was also a change. The salary was big inducement. That is what brought most people. What else could induce you to come?

-I was thinking about the lack of aesthetics. I would like you to comment about getting into the gate.

I guess I was completely overwhelmed. It was like an army camp, and of course I had never been in such a situation like that before. I was a little intimidated at all the red tape you have to go through. This is purely a personal matter. We had to have a physical. Here I was in the hospital, lying on an examining table, stark naked with a sheet over me. We had real sheets in those days, not paper. In comes this handsome doctor, and he was in uniform, no white coat on. I had a very peculiar feeling. He was an ordinary man. He was Dr. Reagan. That was a little intimidating. It was an adventure. I moved into a dormitory in West Village. In those days, they were numbered. It was WV8. Then it became Donora Hall. I moved in while it was still under construction. I was in the shower one morning. A man walked in and said, "Stay where you are lady, I have a little job to do." So, I stayed where I was and in a minute he said, "You can come out now. I

am leaving.” So, it was that kind of a life. My father was very wise. He said, “I do not know what is going on down there, but it is a construction job. You are going to meet men like you have never met before. Be careful.” And he was so right.

Many of the people that worked at the menial jobs were the low social economic level. The language and the experiences we heard and learned were completely foreign to most of us that came from a cultured background. Immediately, at the very earliest, cultural things began to develop. On Sunday afternoon, life could be just what you wanted it to be. Everything was wide open all the time. You could not go anywhere because we did not have cars. We made our own recreation. There were a lot of people that thought home visits were necessary. We did not make home visits, per se. It was just not socially acceptable. Police and FBI informers were everywhere. They were people like we were, who had been recruited to work in that spot. They kept their regular job, but they were under orders to report anything they had seen. You might be teaching school next door to someone who was reporting.

Dr. Blankenship was recruited from Columbia University. It was the leading educational school in the country at the time. So the army went to where they considered they would get the best person. And the reason he was loved is because he said we are going to make the best school system we ever heard of. You are going to do it. We had blank checks. In those days, we had workshops on Saturday, one Saturday morning per month. So, that morning you spent with your grade level, and two hours of that morning you spent two hours with at an intersect level. People came from different backgrounds educationally and geographically. When you get together with 30-40 1st grade teachers, you have all these stimulating notions, and then you have to filter all of this and decide

what you were going to do. It was amazing what a meeting of the minds there would be. I can really never remember a time where we strongly disagreed. You would say that is a good idea, or I like what you are saying, but there was always a consensus. One example of a result of collected ideas was a compilation of short poems for young children. They were all things we had gathered from other places. They weren't originals, but we put them all in one book so a teacher had all these nice little poems on her desk if she wanted to use them. We did the same things with songs. Again all these things were in print and we had permission to reprint them. I have recently given my poem book to a Willowbrook Kindergarten teacher. She looked at it and said, "This is great, and they are all right here." That type of thing came out of the Saturday workshops.

The most important thing for a 1st grader to accomplish is reading, writing, and numbers. Dr. Blankenship would look over what you had done and say that is great, but how about this? He would never say I don't like that, let's start over again. He said to his principals, your teachers are your crowning jewels, so turn them loose. And they did. I do have to say we did not have as many problem children as we have in school now. The teaching was easier. The children who had special needs did not go to school. That made a big difference. The children that went to Pine Valley, Cedar Hill, and Elm Grove were children with professional parents. I think back on those children I had at Cedar Hill. I had Dr. Pollard's children, and others of well known parents. Some farm families left in the area had not been removed. Their children came to us and they were Appalachia. That came into the mix too. Somewhere in the area of Oklahoma Ave. and the Turnpike, there was a farmhouse and they had a bunch of kids. Those children came to school in their overalls and bare footed. They were pathetic.

Late in my career I said if you want to close a school, send Dottie Gilpatrick there. I was at Wheat, Fair View, Highland View, Cedar Hill, Pine Valley, and Glenwood. All of these schools are closed. I opened Woodland. I went there when it was brand spanking new. It was stimulating and so exciting.

-Tell us about where you are working in the preschool.

That is a new chapter in my life. I resigned from the Oak Ridge School in 1955, because I was pregnant. I had been married for nine years and had given up on a family. We suddenly discovered I was pregnant much to our delight I immediately I quit in June of 1955. I was at Woodland still. I thought I would never go back to teaching. Then in early 1965, Sarah Ketron came to me and said the Oak Ridge Schools are launching a new program as an experiment. We have gotten federal money to try a program for preschoolers. She said, "Would you be interested?" The first test case was built in Scarboro Community. I thought about it I was working as the director of Christian education at the time. Sarah Ketron is very persuasive and I talked to the superintendent of schools. So once again, I launched into something new. It was an unknown territory. It had 40 children. We operated it like the Kindergarten did at that time, which is half day. I had 20 something kids in the morning and 20 something kids in the afternoon, and no help. It has improved a thousand percent. It was indescribable the condition some of those children lived in in 1965. Well, they were more than infantile level, one-year-old level when they were four years old. Many of them were this way. So you take them where they were, which every good teacher does. You take them where they are and you

have a goal out there. You try to get them from point A to point B. You devise your own methods to get there because I had nothing to go on.

-Was that because of their environment that they were growing up in or were they genetically disabled?

No, many of these children advanced as far as testing was concerned as much as three years. So, it was not lack of ability. It was deprivation in their background. Many of these children came from homes in which the only thing they had heard was "Shut up", "Be quiet", "No". They only heard negative commands. Many of them had never sat down at a table to eat. They did not know how to sit in a chair or use utensils. They were eating with their fingers. They came almost from an impoverished background, which is hard to say but it is what I encountered. So, you started with such elementary things as to how to pull a chair up to a table, sit at the table, how to drink your milk without spilling it, how to use a fork or a spoon, and what to do when you finish eating. A napkin was unheard of for many of these children. I tried to expose these children to as many things as I could that was outside their world. You remember Davis Brothers Cafeteria? Near the end of the year that first year, I went to Davis Brothers and I told them I would like to bring my class down in 2:30 in the afternoon and have the children eat dessert. I had to make special arrangements for this. I had to elicit mothers to go with me, and I tried to bring the concept, even though these children did not have much, something would be required of them, so they were to bring a quarter. I wrote letters to the mothers. We transported these children to the cafeteria and not a single one of them had ever been any

place like that. I had arranged that they have Jell-O, ice cream, or cookies. There were not a lot of choices, but yet the children went through the line and picked something. They paid their quarters. Remember the cafeteria had cloth napkins? Well, we had learned how to use paper napkins, but a cloth napkin was larger. One of the little boys, a bright little boy, when he finished eating he folded his napkin up carefully and put it in his pocket. Taking things was a problem. So I said, "What are you going to do with your napkin?" He said, "I am going to take it home to my mother. It is so pretty." Then I explained it had to stay there. I said, "It is dirty, you have to leave it here." He looked back toward the back and said, "They got a washing machine back there?" He knew it was dirty, so it should have been washed. That was an end of the year treat for the children.

In regard of integration, it was the spring of 67' when the schools were going to be integrated. That whole school year there was much tension and much excitement of a negative kind. It permeated the whole community. The parents were unhappy and insecure, and the children were repeating what they heard at home. I felt tension in the community, and it reflected in the children. This little boy said to me late in the year, "I ain't going to no Goddamn white school and I ain't going to have no Goddamn white teacher." I said, "That is very interesting because I am white." He looked up at me with his big black eyes and said, "Oh, you don't count." I think that is just how life should be: we should not count.