

Story by **MISSY URBANIAK** and **JOAN WINK**

A YEAR AT ATALL

Rural Schools in Ranch Country



“IF WE HAVE ANY RATTLESNAKES around the school, Teacher, don’t worry, because I can handle them. I’ve done it before,” said Sam, a confident 8-year-old student at the Atall School, an isolated and simple two-room place of learning on the West River prairies of South Dakota.

Atall School stands along a gravel road in Meade County, not far from Union Center. A barbed wire fence borders three sides. Cattle graze in the neighboring pasture, while kids run and play in the schoolyard. The rancher who owns the cattle has three daughters who drive across it each day to attend classes.

Meade County encompasses nearly 3,500 square miles, making it the largest county in South Dakota. While the population exceeds 25,000 people, most residents live on the western edge near the Black Hills. The vast majority of the boot-shaped county is an expanse of West River grasslands, interrupted by ranches, a few tiny communities such as Opal, Elm Springs and Hereford, and five country schools that have become their heartbeat.

Teaching school in an oasis of grass and wild prairie brings challenges for aspiring educators that are not addressed in any university, as Missy Urbaniak quickly learned. “Rural teachers must pull splinters, shovel snow, trap mice, soothe



Atall (above) is one of a handful of small schools that educate the youth of rural Meade County. Each has its own unique traditions. Students and teachers at the Hereford School ride horses on opening day (top photo) as a nod to the ranch environment that surrounds the classrooms.

bee stings, unplug toilets and kill snakes with a snow shovel, or chase snakes away when there is no shovel with which to kill them,” she laughs.

Like any school, a support staff (janitors, electricians, plumbers, technical support) is available — 50 miles away. Therefore, rural school teachers, parents and the entire community work together to maintain their school. When the parking lot drifts in with snow during the night, a rancher brings his tractor to clear a path. When a leaky cistern leaves students without water,



neighbors bring buckets from their own wells.

Rural students adjust too, knowing that their teacher must also tend to three, four, or even five other grade levels. Older students are accustomed to helping younger ones.

Urbaniak says that is just one way that ranch kids grow up quickly — at times, too quickly. “While their independent spirit is usually applauded, it can also be a cause for concern,” she says. “More often than not, it is the kids that must be chased away from the snakes, or the barbed wire, or the herd of cattle on the other side. One of the unique challenges we face is children who are not afraid of the prairie.”

Prairie wildlife is another consideration. Once again, family and neighbors come to the rescue when the barbed wire fence fails to deter curious prairie critters. One father chased off an old porcupine that had set up residence under the front steps. On another occasion, a striped badger visited the schoolyard at recess, marching past the teeter-totters and merry-go-round. Jackrabbits and ground squirrels often capture the students’ attention during recess. Giving chase is irresistible, though the students have long since found capture to be nearly impossible.

THERE ARE MANY GREAT WAYS to begin a prairie school year. Students in Urbaniak’s class receive a handwritten postcard welcoming them back, while

students in Annie Hlavka’s class in nearby Faith find a gift-wrapped book on each desk. In July, Hlavka invited community members to donate, and books flooded in. Community matters greatly in rural schools.

Students at Hereford Elementary, another rural Meade County school, ride their horses on the first day. Even the teachers arrive on horseback. Small one- and two-room schools are thriving and vibrant community centers where prairie people gather to celebrate the beginning of school and the kids.

RURAL SCHOOL TEACHERS OFTEN hear the same question: “How in the world do you teach all of those grade levels?” In this day of grade-specific content standards, tests and curricula, rural school teachers must cover all content in all grades.

Again, Urbaniak found a solution from a community member. Joan Wink, a retired education professor from Howes, volunteered to read books aloud to the students of Atall School. Under her guidance, Urbaniak discovered the power of using novels and picture books throughout the year with all grade levels. Like magic, they found that the required school content is often



Riding horses on the first day of school is tradition at Hereford Elementary, another rural Meade County school. Students at Atall arrive on horseback for their final day each year.

hidden within the pages of a good story.

For example, the Atall students were eager to hear the story and see the colorful images inside *Dance in a Buffalo Skull* by Zitkala-Sa. “This cautionary tale of mice playing in a buffalo skull, while a wildcat prowls ever closer, is a perfect example of a story I can share with multiple grade levels,” Urbaniak says. “In this case, the lesson focused on elements of a folk tale for third-grade students, South Dakota history for fourth-grade students, and recognizing the theme of the story for fifth-grade students. *Dance in a Buffalo Skull* was a pivotal text. Not only was it relatable for country kids, it

also introduced local Native American folklore. The vivid photos and building suspense of the story captured their attention and led to meaningful discussions on the common elements of folk tales across cultures.”

Books also generate writing opportunities for students, sometimes with a unique country-school twist. This was the case for Trailin, who spent kindergarten through third grade primarily writing about what he loved: tractors.

In kindergarten, Trailin filled pages and pages with drawings of every tractor on his ranch, first with just one-word labels, but eventually progressing to writing paragraphs about his own experiences behind the wheel. “I sought out every tractor picture book I could find, but what Trailin really enjoyed was looking at actual John Deere manuals and handbooks,” Urbaniak says. “Being able to read and write about what truly mattered to him kept him engaged and learning. Finding titles that students in multiple grade levels can enjoy, relate to and write about became my go-to method for generating student learning and solving the dilemma of covering all subjects for all grades all nine months of the school year.”

THERE ARE ALSO MANY great ways to end a prairie

school year, but Atall students celebrate with a much-anticipated field trip. These prairie kids have been to the Mammoth Site, the Badlands, Mount Rushmore, the Sanford Lab at Homestake, the Vore Buffalo Jump, Devil’s Tower and Wind Cave.

In addition, each year, all rural Meade County eighth-grade students take a special field trip to the Capitol in Pierre during the legislative session, where they search for the legendary blue tiles on the mosaic floor. Dare they hope that they may even find one of the fewer pale hearts?

These trips provide students with something that cannot be recreated in the classroom: firsthand experiences and memories of some of the most notable locations in South Dakota. When they return, Urbaniak encourages the students to find connections between their experiences and, you guessed it, books.

Another budding end-of-school-year tradition at Atall is for students to ride their horses on the last day of class. Celebrating this way is a fitting nod to their grandparents, who once rode their own horses to attend school at this very same site.

So, how do you teach it all at a country school? It helps to have the support of a caring community. Then, you simply begin with a book. 

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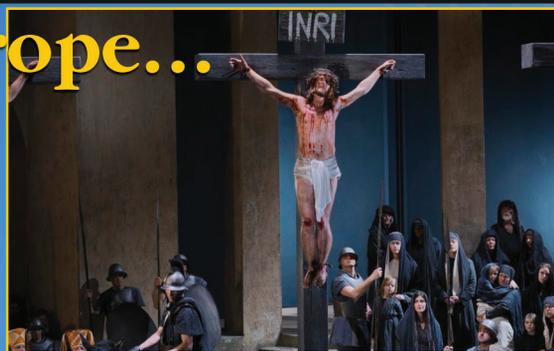
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