

A Tribute

It seems appropriate for a history sponsored by a library to pay tribute to the parents and educators who worked diligently under the most adverse circumstances to educate the young people of an undeveloped area.

There were many fine teachers who lived in lonely teacherages or boarded in crowded family homestead shacks. They taught from one to eight grades in a drafty schoolroom, built fires, carried water, put on plays and box socials, and seldom ventured more than a mile or two from their schools for the entire term.

Dedicated educators, however, were not limited to the homestead days. All through the years, teachers and administrators have been willing to come to isolated communities and give their best in spite of fewer social opportunities and physical comforts. Parents still must make personal sacrifices to assure their children of educational and cultural opportunities.

In the very early years of the development of its school system, Petroleum County was fortunate indeed to have an educator of unusual grit and determination — a fine teacher as well as an excellent administrator — a person who unwaveringly fought to provide and improve educational opportunities for every child. This person taught six-week sessions in remote areas rather than see the area go unserved, coached mothers whose children had no formal school to attend, begged and borrowed materials to begin a high school, and left no stone unturned in her search for school financing. This lady was Amanda Swift.

Miss Swift was born (1870) and educated in Maine. She displayed all of those characteristics commonly associated with the Maine-New Englander — brusque, frank, unfrivolous, independent, stern but gentle. She was a person undaunted by criticism, with dry humor, and of strict and uncompromising principles. Her credentials allowed her to teach grades 1-12.

Miss Swift was hired in 1913 to come to Winnett to teach a regular eight-months' term in the elementary school and, in addition, to teach during the summer months wherever there was a need. She soon recognized the need for instruction beyond grade eight and voluntarily began to offer high school instruction to a small group of older students.

In 1914 she ran for the office of county superintendent of schools in Fergus County, which, of course, included what is now Petroleum County. She was defeated but ran again in 1918 and was elected for a two-year term. She served another term beginning in 1920. In 1925 she became Petroleum County's first county superintendent



Amanda Swift visits isolated schools

of schools.

Four incidents of which Miss Swift wrote in an article entitled "Origin and Progress of the Schools of Winnett" perhaps better portray her character than anything another might write. The stories have been edited for clarity.

The first incident concerns Miss Swift's resolute effort to gather every possible name for the District #159 school census in about 1916.

"Being determined not to miss a single name since the per capita apportionment from the state was large, upon meeting two riders I questioned them regarding the people living in a distant shack. I was assured that a man with a large family lived there, but that I'd have to be severe with him as he disapproved entirely of education and would object to giving the names and ages of the children.

"With determined, stern mien, I rode over the hills to the cabin door and demanded the children's names of

the mild-appearing puzzled man who stood there, lathered, ready to shave — evidently in preparation for a Saturday outing. The lathered face gave a grotesque appearance as he insisted vehemently he had no names to give. As he protested, he advanced waving the razor in his earnestness. I, as rapidly, reined my horse back, wondering how I should get those worthwhile names from the man who didn't seem as insane as righteously and profanely indignant. He insisted he was a lone bachelor. Finally I realized that the riders had jobbed me, and I returned to the main trail sadder and wiser!"

The second incident relates to Miss Swift's campaign efforts on behalf of Jeannette Rankin who successfully ran for the U. S. House of Representatives in 1916 and became the first woman to sit in the U. S. Congress. A Grassrange man is alleged to have said to Amanda: "I know you, lady, you're that consarned schoolm'am from Winnett that got so mad in 1916 because the people wouldn't make up a party and hire one of the few cars in Winnett to attend the afternoon tea in Lewistown for Jeannette Rankin. You said you'd go with your horse and get there in time for the 4 o'clock speaking, and you left at 3 a.m. Some of us Grass Range Missouri Democrats thought we'd like to hear a candidate speak that could make one ride that distance to hear her. We made up a mixed party and went to hear her, and by gum, we voted for her, too! I heard afterwards you tired out this horse of yours riding round the country talking for her, and then wore out all the horses you could borrow of your friends!"

The third incident concerns Miss Swift's determined struggle to gain accreditation for a high school in Winnett. The year is believed to be 1918.

"We waited vainly for word from the State Board of Education at its conference in Helena. Finally I decided to go on the stage to Grassrange and take the early Saturday train to our Capitol. The stage driver, however, told me that the melting of the two-foot June snow had so risen the creeks that roads were impassable, and he couldn't make it with his car, but he thought by keeping my horse to the hills and higher land I might make it. I went to Teigen that Friday night. They roused me for an early breakfast and started me with much advice about the ride. Coming near the Bowman place, I encountered what seemed to be a lake. The man there said, 'Go right ahead. 'Tisn't deep. I brought my horse thru it last night.' Evidently the water had risen overnight, for soon my horse was swimming, and I was a frightened individual clinging desperately to the saddle horn and the Boston bag containing all my precious documents and duplicates of school records.

The horse swam through, and I came to the waiting train a bedraggled straggler in the long riding skirt of those days. I tried to repair my appearance in Lewistown and was soon on my way to Helena on the train. Because of the rising of the creeks and the continued rain, the train had to make detours, and in one place the passengers walked over a mile.

"I was a little late to the meeting, and as I stood at the entrance I heard the Hobson representative explain that Winnett contained just a mere handful of people — that this idea of a high school there was just the wishful thinking of the teacher, one of those damn Yankees from New England, trying to figure out a job for herself. The man from Moore declared it would rob the three fine high schools of Fergus County (Lewistown, Moore and Hobson) to start a high school out in the woods. (Deluded man! He just didn't know Winnett was over 25 miles from the timber and only painful effort got us wood to burn!)

"The state superintendent replied that she, too, felt such applications should be treated with greatest distrust and very critical and searching investigation. (The lady was a good politician and vote getter and realized 'twas a time to make good with the delegations from three flourishing towns of Fergus County.) Thereupon Leon Foote, her deputy, arose and put in a plea for Winnett. Principal Cummings of Lewistown, our friend, testified as to the genuineness of the statement of Mr. Foote but he deemed it wiser to defer the accrediting, although he resented the implication of the Hobson man that the teacher was working for a job for herself — at any time he stood ready to engage her at Fergus County High School.

"I stood rooted to the floor, dismayed, disheartened, yet so angered by all the camouflage and outright falsities that I bolted in at last, presented my papers and records, told how I found out from my county superintendent in Lewistown that all the records that had been given to her by me had been demanded from her by the selfsame people who went to Helena. She claimed they only wished to examine the papers and then would forward them to Helena. They had not done this, hence, a statement by one of the board that I hadn't complied with the request to file all records with the county superintendent. She in turn was to forward the records to Helena with her comments and recommendations. After a fiery, tempestuous presentation of facts, I was delighted to have Principal Cummings withdraw his motion to defer the accrediting and heartily move the prompt accrediting.

"The Board of Education voted unanimously to accredit; the \$5000 state appropriation due us was made. I returned to Winnett a hero for the time being. . ."

One final quote reflects Miss Swift's stubborn refusal to compromise her personal standards. It is suspected the strong-willed county superintendent in the following episode was none other than Amanda herself. She wrote: "A teacher in the north country, desirous of getting a ride with the county superintendent into Winnett one Friday night, in her haste, transferred most of the contents of her rouge box to her cheeks with somewhat appalling results. Surveying the result, the superintendent had her kneel on the bank of Box Elder Creek and scrub off part of the offending red before she would consent to introduce her to the rather critical Winnett faculty."

To Amanda and the educators who came after her, God Bless You.