

When country kids went to country school

Back then, big yellow school buses did not exist. Country kids went to country schools.

Horton, Red Butte, Beaver Creek, North Timber, Pine Grove, Boyd, and one or two others stood within a radius of 10 miles from my home. Boyd School was about a mile and a half from our house.

By the time my older brother, four years ahead of me, started to school, families in rural districts petitioned Weston County to furnish funds to pay a bus driver. Finally, the county agreed, and for many years called for bids from potential drivers.

The driver had to furnish his own bus, and I remember grown-ups talking about bids of \$40 to \$50 per month.

While county roads remained passable, Model A Fords, or some other rattletrap, transported us to school. The rest of the time, horse-drawn wagons and bobsleds with homemade enclosures resembling big wooden boxes carried us four, five, or six months each year when mud and snow prohibited automobile travel.

Typical winters at home on the Canyon Springs Prairie defined themselves with wind, snow, and cold. At nearly 7,000 feet altitude, 2 to 3 feet of snow blanketed the area from early November until late April.

Our school bus route took shortcuts through fields, meadows, and rangelands where twice-a-day travel soon created a well-packed road. Neighbors used sections of the route for other purposes

such as hauling hay to livestock or commuting from neighbor to neighbor.

For my fourth year at Boyd School, Mr. M, our nearest neighbor, was the bus driver. Our place was the first one on his route, which zig-zagged a distance of eight or nine miles through the neighborhood.

Due to slow travel, distance, and short days, we left home, and got back home, in the dark. Except for Christmas vacation, we went to school Monday through Friday regardless of weather.

We traveled through many blizzards with near-zero visibility and subzero temperatures. The horses knew where to go as we huddled under blankets in our homemade school bus.

Mr. M was an alcoholic, though he did stay sober most of the time that year. When he was too drunk to drive, however, Mrs. M. accompanied him to drive the team while he slept beside her.

Snow melted rapidly that spring, and snowbanks dammed water until it could tunnel through and run into draws and low spots. Our bus route went through a small ravine about a quarter-mile from Mr. B's house.

On one of the nights when Mrs. M drove the team, a stream of water 2 or 3



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feet deep and 20 to 30 feet wide ran down that ravine. Mrs. M commanded, "Whoa."

Meg and Molly stopped. Mr. M woke up. "Whatsa matter?" he asked.

"There's too much water, we'd better not try to cross. We need to go around on higher ground."

"We can make it."

Mr. M took the lines and ordered Meg and Molly forward. The mares bobbed their heads and hesitated. He slapped the lines across their backs and yelled, "Get up, go on there."

Meg and Molly gingerly tested their footing and moved slowly into the water. A little girl started to cry. We held our breath as the horses inched forward.

At last, they began to climb to the other side. The sled eased down into the water, reached the lowest point, and slid off the tracks. Tugs tightened and horses began slipping on icy, hard-packed snow, floundering in the water.

The sled skidded downstream and tipped off sled tracks at a precarious angle as Meg lost her footing and went down. In her attempts to get up, she got one hind leg over the sled tongue and lay there with her head barely above water, grunting.

Molly reared and plunged, but some-

how managed to stay on her feet.

"We've gotta get them unhitched," shouted my older brother, as he jumped into the stream and started unhooking tugs from doubletrees under water.

The rest of us jumped out and I waded to Meg and pulled on her bridle to help keep her head above water. My brother finally got the tugs unhooked.

I reached over, unsnapped the neck yoke from Molly's harness, and undid the reins from rings on bridle bits. With Meg no longer hitched to Molly or hooked to the sled, I pulled as hard as I could on her halter rope and asked her to try to stand up.

She gave a mighty lunge, the sled tongue slid to the side far enough to release her hind leg, the neck yoke ring slipped over the end of the tongue, and she stood wild-eyed, shaking like a leaf.

With soft words and love pats, I led her out of the water. Mr. B let us use one of his sleds to get home.

There is a good reason for most cowboy sayings, and one of those sayings is, "If your horse doesn't want to go there, neither should you."

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Center Stage is written by friends of the Senior Center for the Sheridan community. It is a collection of insights and stories related to living well at every age.