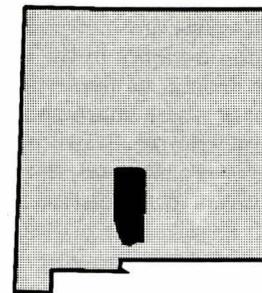


# LESSONS FROM THE PAST

NEW MEXICO HERITAGE ON THE DEPARTMENT OF ARMY  
WHITE SANDS MISSILE RANGE, NEW MEXICO  
PREPARED BY HUMAN SYSTEMS RESEARCH, INC.



## School Days on the Ranch

by Pete Eidenbach and Linda Hart

**A**fter the 1880s Cattle Boom in southern New Mexico, new settlers from Texas, the Midwest, the Old South, and Europe began homesteading in the southern New Mexico mountains. A thriving mohair industry started in Hillsboro, N.M., during the 1890s and spread to the San Andres Mountains where angora goats were better suited to the rugged terrain than cattle. These rural families built wood-frame houses, dug water wells, and constructed corrals and earthen ponds or stock tanks to catch and hold the precious rainfall. As these families grew, the need for schools increased. A good education was prized by these new settlers, and books, while scarce, were a common entertainment.

Several educational patterns developed in the rural New Mexico mountains. Some families pooled their efforts and built one-room schoolhouses. Others maintained a second home in town where their children lived during the school year. A few families sent their children to boarding schools. Occasionally young children received their early education through home schooling.

In 1993, White Sands Missile Range (WSMR) began an oral-history program to record and preserve the history and recollections of these early ranching families whose homesteads became part of the range beginning in 1941. One of the most interesting topics discussed in the interviews with family members is the school experience.

This lesson plan provides tools to understand (1) how oral history is collected and edited, and (2) what schools were like during the early 20th century in rural New Mexico. Students will learn the basic steps followed to collect and preserve oral history, and how oral history transcripts are edited so they are interesting and readable. Accounts of school experience highlight how schools in the past differed from those of today.

### *Regional Setting*

White Sands Missile Range (WSMR), Fort Bliss, and large areas of public lands owned by the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service make up most of the Tularosa, Jornada del Muerto, and Hueco Basins of south-central New Mexico. WSMR includes or borders a variety of public land areas, including White Sands National Monument, the U.S. Agricultural Research Service Jornada Experimental Range, the NASA Johnson

Manned Spacecraft Center, and the San Andres National Wildlife Refuge. Fort Bliss contains 2 million acres immediately south of WSMR. Lincoln National Forest lies to the east, separated from WSMR and Fort Bliss by a narrow corridor of private, federal, and state lands located along U.S. Highway 54, which (traveling south toward El Paso) passes through the towns of Carrizozo, Tularosa, Alamogordo, and Orogrande.

The Tularosa, Jornada del Muerto, and Hueco Basins lie at the extreme southern end of the Rocky Mountains in a region of basin and range topography. All three are "closed" basins—no streams carry water to rivers flowing to the oceans. Barren alkali flats, dry lake beds, and immense sand dunes alternate across basin floors. The famous White Sands, which are cool to the touch but which reflect light like water on a sunny day, give WSMR its name. These vast, white dune fields occupy the lowest part of the Tularosa Basin. Rugged mountains border these three basins on one or more sides, and isolated ranges, such as the Jarilla Mountains near Orogrande, rise abruptly from the desert floor itself.

The Sacramento and Sierra Blanca Mountains border the Tularosa and Hueco basins on the east, rising to a height of 12,000 feet. These steep mountains divide the southwestern Basin and Range from the Llano Estacado, or "Staked Plains" at the southwestern corner of the American Great Plains, so-called for the resemblance of the Caprock cliffs to a stockade or "estacada."

The San Andres and Organ Mountains along the west side separate the land-locked Tularosa and Hueco basins from the Jornada del Muerto basin, which borders the Rio Grande River Valley. The Oscura Mountains rise abruptly from the northern Tularosa Basin floor and merge with Chupadera Mesa, closing the basin to the north. The Franklin Mountains lie to the south, marking "the Pass of the North" at El Paso, Texas.

Soils in the region are dry and erode easily. Large red sand-dune fields spread across the basin floors, occasionally interrupted by small, desert grasslands and dry lake beds called playas. Deep, eroded drainages called arroyos have cut into lower mountain slopes, carrying runoff from seasonal rains at high speeds to lower basins where the water rapidly soaks into the ground, resupplying a shallow fresh water table.

Desert shrubs—mesquite, creosote, sagebrush— mixed with sparse grasses, tumbleweeds, yucca, and cactus are the most common plants in the basins. The appearance, and even the aroma, of these plants reflect the harsh, dry environment where sharp spines or the production of bitter, pungent chemicals protect against being eaten. The creosote, or greasewood, flourishes here in a regular and monotonous distribution, producing a natural herbicide that keeps other plants, including members of its own species, from growing nearby. Buffalo Gourd spreads like a spiderweb across the desert, producing unpleasantly scented, baseball-sized fruits which may be a potential source of biologically produced petroleum.

This basin desertscrub gradually gives way to semiarid piñon-juniper woodlands along lower mountain slopes. Higher in the mountains, woodlands are replaced by evergreen forest. The highest, most exposed mountain ridges are covered by a dense carpet of alpine plants and occasional evergreen trees, twisted and battered by winds and lightning into giant bonsai.

Well-adapted animal life is everywhere. Roadrunners, hawks, songbirds, eagles, coyotes, mountain lions, bobcats, rabbits, prairie dogs, antelope, and mule deer range throughout this last, empty foothold of the southwestern desert. Smaller, more dangerous life— rattlesnakes, scorpions, all manner of beetles, lizards, ants, and spiders—is often underfoot, or nearly so.

### Objectives for Students

- Learn rural geography of the San Andres Mountains.
- Learn about family life in 1930s rural New Mexico.
- Learn about alternative types of schooling.
- Learn basic oral history and text editing skills.

### SETTING THE STAGE

#### THE SCHOOLS

Bear Den School was located in the foothills of the San Andres Mountains, in Bear Den Canyon, about 4.6 miles northwest of the junction with Rhodes Canyon. This one-room log building burned to the ground in a blaze which has been attributed to various factors, ranging from lightning, to a Christmas tree fire, to arson. Some even remember a second fire. Little is left of Bear Den School but memories. By the early 1920s, too few children were living nearby and the site was abandoned; a new school was built about 10 miles to the north.

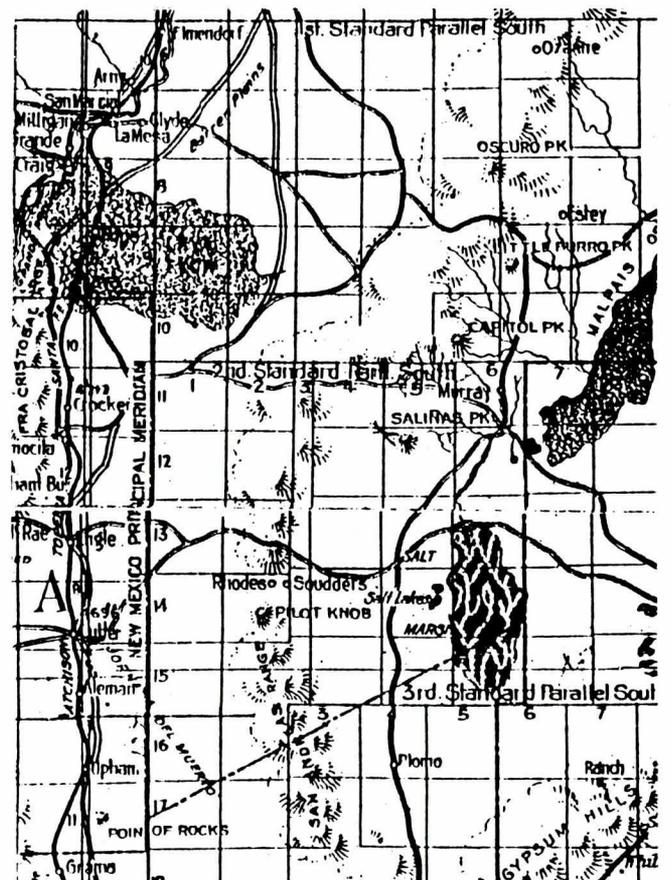
Ritch School, built in 1927, was situated roughly 10 miles north of the old Bear Den School, across an arroyo from the Gililland Ranch. The school was constructed by the Gilillands and other neighboring families. For one year prior to the completion of the schoolhouse, classes were held at the Gililland Ranch. In 1941, Socorro County lacked sufficient funds to continue paying the Ritch School teacher, and the school was closed forever. The families living in the area moved into nearby

towns or to other ranches. Now only scattered boards, foundation remnants, and a variety of bottles and cans, desk parts, and trash mark the site.

Loretto Academy of the Visitation, a Catholic girls' school, was located in Las Cruces, on property acquired by the Sisters of Loretto in 1870. Tuition was \$200 per year, although alternative arrangements were made for those who could not afford the fee. The school closed in 1944, as more children attended a new Loretto Academy in El Paso. The facility was used as a seminary by Franciscan friars, then abandoned. The buildings were eventually demolished in the early 1960s, and a shopping mall was constructed on the property.

### LOCATING THE SITE

Ask the students to examine the New Mexico map on page 1, showing the location of White Sands Missile Range. Because of the sensitive nature of the military activities on the Range, a detailed map is not available. Ritch and Bear Den Schools were located just a little northwest of center within the Range. Have students use a general state highway map to locate the San Andres Mountains, Jornada del Muerto, Las Cruces, Tularosa, Truth or Consequences, and Carrizozo, and to familiarize themselves with this portion of the state. Compare contemporary maps with the section of the 1910 road below.



## What Is Oral History?

History is the story of the past. It relies on three types of primary (or original) documents to discover and tell that story. The first and most familiar type is written: letters, memoirs, census records, official documents, business and family papers, and birth, marriage, and death certificates. The second type of historic document is often called the “built” environment: the homes, neighborhoods, towns, and cities where people have lived. Oral history is the third type: the living memories of our elders and family members. Unless this third type is recorded, it is lost as each generation dies.

## How Is Oral History Done?

Oral history is conducted in three basic steps:

### • Choose questions and find answers

First, you must decide what part of your family, local, or regional history you would like to learn about. Once you have compiled a list of questions about your chosen topic, you need to find your informant, the person who can answer your questions. Before you begin to interview, record as much biographical information as possible: where and when was your informant born? Where did they grow up? Who are their relatives?

### • Conduct an interview

Once you have your questions and have found the person to answer them, you are ready to do an interview. A small portable cassette tape recorder is the easiest way to record your interview. Don't be surprised if your informant strays from your original questions. Try to let your informant do most of the talking.

### • Transcribe, edit, and preserve your interview

The best way to preserve an interview is through a transcription—an accurate written copy of the tape-recorded interview. Transcription is always the most time-consuming task in oral history, but it opens the door to sharing what you have learned with others. Listen carefully to your tape and type all the questions and answers (a pause switch on the mike or recorder is very helpful). If possible, use a computer to make editing easier. Once you have completed the transcription, listen to the tape again and read along, correcting as you go. When you are done, you will have a raw transcript such as the example in Exercise 1.

Always remember that your informant's memories belong to her/him. To share those memories in print you should obtain a written release from your informant.

White Sands Missile Range has prepared an interview Do-It Kit, available free upon request (505-678-9731).

The best way to preserve your interview is to deposit the original tape, transcript, your informant's biography, and release form with a local library or archive. Your library will also be interested in copies of any photos or other materials which supplement your interview.

## TEACHING ACTIVITIES

### DETERMINING THE FACTS

#### Exercise 1: Editing an Oral History Transcript—

Why do we edit a transcript? Shouldn't the informant's responses be presented exactly as spoken? For the most part, yes. But when a person is “shooting from the hip,” responding to questions in a spontaneous, stream-of-consciousness dialogue, rather than from written-out answers, sometimes being guided onto new topics by the interviewer, he or she doesn't always pay close attention to proper grammar, tense agreement, etc. So, in editing a transcript, one of the primary goals is to make the person come across as the intelligent individual he/she is. You edit the text for readability, repairing only the most obvious blunders, without changing the meaning or suppressing the informant's character. In deleting the interviewer's queries from the transcript and bringing the responses together to create a flowing manuscript that more closely resembles a person's reminiscences than a question-answer session, you must sometimes insert segments of text that will help the reader understand what topic is being addressed.

Exercise 1 offers an opportunity to examine and refine part of an oral-history interview. Provide students with copies of Exercise 1. Have them consult a dictionary to find a set of standard editorial marks to use during the editing process. They should edit the material as if they were preparing it for publication in a book about experiences at one-room schools. The students should be prepared to explain why their edits were necessary.

#### Things to Think About

After conducting the editing exercise, read aloud the edited example narrative or provide students with a copy. Compare the results of the editing exercise.

- Did the students include the interviewer's questions?
- Did the students correct colloquial contractions?
- Were proper names substituted for pronouns?

Review the editing process and its purpose, above.

- Why is a transcript edited for publication?
- Does editing make Mellie Potter come “alive” for the reader?
- Do the interviewer's questions add to or interfere with the narrative?
- When and why should grammar be corrected?

#### Discussing the Editing Exercise

After conducting the editing exercise, read aloud the edited narrative example or provide copies to students.

**Compare** the results of the editing exercise:

- Did students include the interviewer's questions?
- Did students correct colloquial contractions?
- Were proper names substituted for pronouns?

## Exercise 1: Editing an Oral History Transcript—MELLIE CRAWFORD POTTER

Oral historian Janie O’Cain (JO) interviewed Mellie Crawford Potter (MP) in 1994. A selection from the “raw” (or unedited) transcript from tape is given below. Try editing the selection to make it more readable without changing its meaning. You will find that no two edits will be exactly alike. A published version will be provided after this exercise for comparison.

*Mellie Crawford Potter was 13 when she moved to the San Andres Mountains of New Mexico to live with her maternal aunt and uncle, Myrtle and Finus Henderson, on their cattle ranch. Mellie attended the old Bear Den School not far from the Henderson Ranch, but Bear Den burned and Ritch School was built roughly 10 miles to the north; so her children went to school in Tularosa until the Ritch “bus” began picking them up and dropping them off again at the Potter Ranch. Notice that Mellie’s married name and Hazel Johnson’s (next reading) maiden name are both Potter. Mellie’s husband and Hazel’s father were related and the families lived only a mile apart—close neighbors for that area. In addition, Mellie’s Uncle Finus and Hazel’s mother were both Hendersons. Such relationships were fairly common, as children from these San Andres ranching families frequently intermarried.*

- JO: We were talking about the children, did they start school in Bear Den out on the ranch?  
MP: *No, they didn’t have a Bear Den school when mine started to school. They went on past over at Wood’s, Gililland’s Ranch, and they went to school there. They went on a bus.*
- JO: To, was it Ritch School?  
MP: *Yes, and . . . .*
- JO: So, Thomas was born in ’26; then he would have started school like in 1932?  
MP: *He went to school here in Tularosa his first year.*
- JO: Oh, he did?  
MP: *Uh-huh.*
- JO: You all were living in town that year?  
MP: *We had to bring him in town for school and I stayed in here with ’im.*
- JO: Why, can I ask, was it that he came down here to go to school. Was there just no school out closer to the ranch at all at that time or . . . ?  
MP: *There was, but my husband didn’t want ’im to go there; he thought he was too young to go that far on a bus. Besides that, if it comes big floods, well, the road would wash out and they’d have to stay back over there with, uh, some of the neighbors.*
- JO: So the first year that he attended first grade you, you lived here during the school year.  
MP: *Uh-huh.*
- JO: And at what point did he start to go to school at the Ritch School?  
MP: *When he was in the third grade.*
- JO: Would have Marjorie started school that year?  
MP: *She started school here the first year, then we took ’em to the ranch, and we had, by that time, got the bus.*
- JO: Now, about how far would it have been from your ranch to Ritch School?  
MP: *I believe, if I remember correctly, I believe it was 23 miles.*
- JO: And, of course, we’re talking on a gravel road, not a paved road.  
MP: *It wasn’t a gravel road even. It was just two tracks of . . . .*
- JO: Well, what did that first school bus look like? Was it . . . ?  
MP: *Well, we eventually got a regular school bus, but at first it was a pickup with a thing built over the top of it.*
- JO: And the children would pile on into the back and . . . .  
MP: *And they was seats, a bench of a thing on each side of that, uh, pickup and it was so cold in there in the wintertime that they nearly froze. They wore long handles, they wore heavy coats and, um, (laughing) Velma Ruth, one of the girls . . . .*
- JO: Now, that’s a name I recognize. Velma Ruth was a Wood.  
MP: *Was a Wood. And, uh, she got so embarrassed wearing those ol’ long handles.*
- JO: Well, who, do you recall who drove the, that pickup made into a bus at that time?  
MP: *J.D. Miller drove it some, a guy, now, he was a teacher, too, Sitze drew it, drove it sometimes.*

## MELLIE POTTER'S EDITED NARRATIVE

*They didn't have Bear Den school when mine started to school. They went on past Wood's to Gililand's Ranch. They went on a bus. Thomas went to school in Tularosa his first year. We had to bring him in town for school and I stayed with him. My husband didn't want him to go to Ritch; he thought he was too young to go that far on a bus. Besides, if there were big floods, the road would wash out and they'd have to stay over there with some of the neighbors. He started at Ritch when he was in the third grade. Marjorie went to school in Tularosa her first year, then we took 'em to the ranch, and we had, by that time, got the bus. I believe it was 23 miles from our ranch to Ritch School on a two-track road. We eventually got a regular school bus, but at first it was a pickup with a thing built over the top of it. There were bench seats on each side. It was so cold in there in the wintertime that they nearly froze. They wore long handles, they wore heavy coats. Velma Ruth Wood was so embarrassed wearing those ol' long handles. J.D. Miller drove the bus some and a teacher by the name of Sitze drove it sometimes.*

### *Student Reading 1: Rural School During the 1930s— Hazel Potter Johnson*

In just a few short years, life in rural New Mexico has changed dramatically. Today we hop in the four-wheel-drive truck, bounce on down the dirt or gravel road that has been bladed by the county, and breeze into town on the highway. Just two generations ago a wagon ride to town was a grueling and lengthy affair over ruts and washouts. Today we phone ahead for any special orders, or even communicate by e-mail from ranch to ranch. Just 50 years ago it took half a day just to get to and from the mail box! Technology has vastly changed our lives, but in our excitement to jump into the future we should not forget the slower-paced lifestyle of years gone by. Have the class read the Hazel Potter Johnson reading and discuss the following:

*Hazel Potter was raised on a goat ranch in the foothills of the San Andres Mountains, in an area that became part of White Sands Missile Range in the early 1940s. As a young child (from 1935 to 1941), she attended Ritch School, a one-room rural school house located 23 miles (a two-hour trip over a dirt road) north of the family ranch. Later, like many ranch children, she moved into what is now Truth or Consequences to attend Hot Springs High School. Hazel has fond memories of her years at Ritch School. She enjoyed her studies and the opportunity to play with other children when the nearest neighbors often lived many miles away, and she recalls how the school was finally closed when Socorro County could no longer afford to pay the teacher.*

Have the class read the Hazel Potter Johnson extract and discuss the questions that follow.

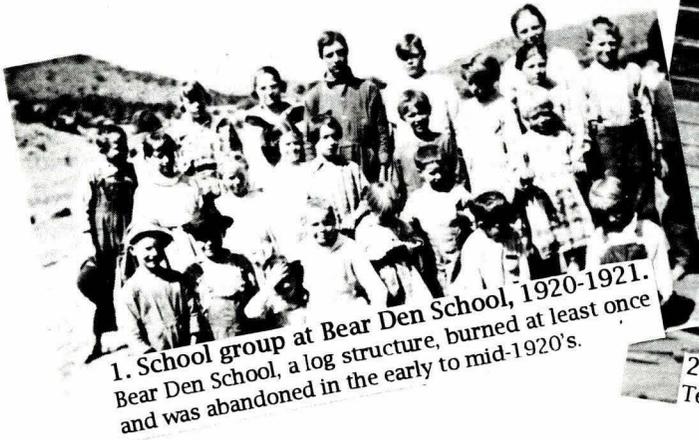
#### Things to Think About

- What was it like to travel 23 miles to school each day in the back of a truck or piled one on top of another inside a car? Do you get car sick?

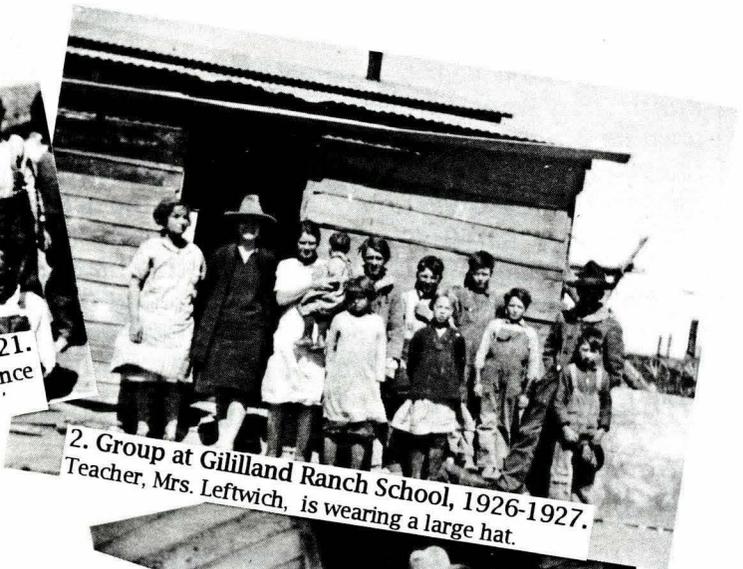
- Examine some New Mexico maps. Topographic, rainfall, vegetation, and land-use maps are available in *New Mexico in Maps*, edited by Jerry L. Williams, and *Historical Atlas of New Mexico* by Warren Beck and Ynez Haase. What factors required students to travel so far to attend school? Some possibilities:
  - distance to larger towns or cities;
  - poor quality of roads to towns and cities;
  - low population in ranching areas.
- Based on Hazel Potter Johnson's comments, how did going to Ritch School in the 1930s and 1940s differ from what school is like for you?
- Did Ritch School students receive a good education?
- Would you have enjoyed going to Ritch School? Why?
- Look at Hazel's 4th-grade report card (Photo 6). What subjects were students graded on? Would you have done as well in school at Ritch? Why/why not?
- Did your family ever have to move for you to attend school? Could they do this today? Who would go with you and who would stay behind?
- Did Ritch School students have much free time? What kinds of chores might you have had at home and at school if you had lived on a ranch and attended Ritch School? How is this different from today?
- Today, the turn-of-the-century ranching lifestyle seems long past; however, in remote areas of the United States ranching continues, and children still attend small rural schools, traveling for hours to and from, or spending the school year in town. What chores might you have if you were living in a remote area and attending a one-room school today? How might the school day differ from that of the 1930s? What teaching tools might be commonplace today that were not available during the Ritch School era?
- Why is it important to interview people who once used or occupied certain areas? Why would historians be interested in a place like Ritch School?
- Do history books tell us all there is to know that is important about the past?

**VISUAL EVIDENCE—a picture is worth a thousand words.**

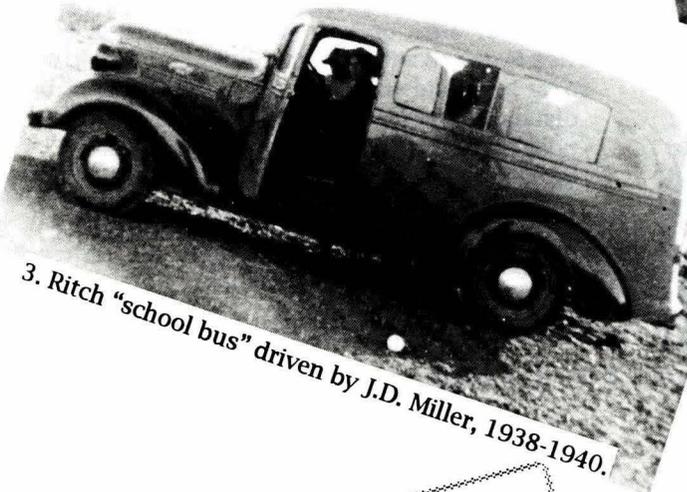
...hauled nine kids in that car....the weather was a problem drivin' the school bus...I'd slide off the road and get stuck...



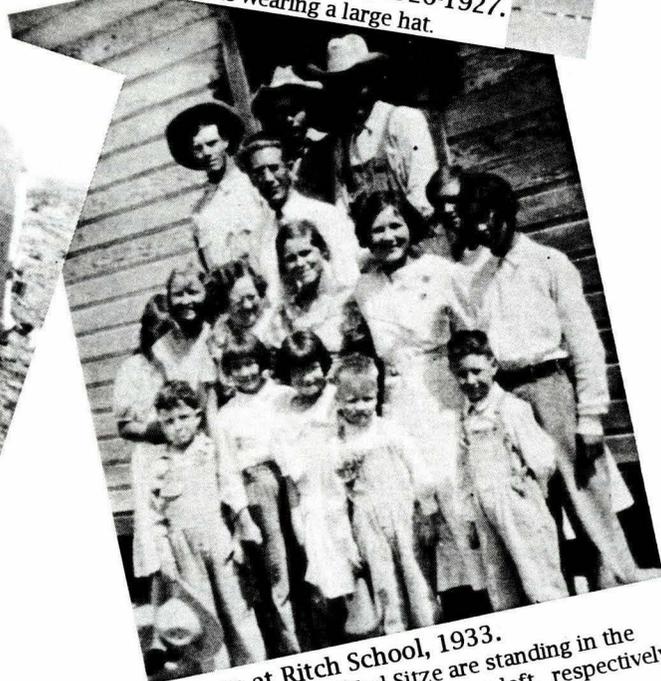
1. School group at Bear Den School, 1920-1921. Bear Den School, a log structure, burned at least once and was abandoned in the early to mid-1920's.



2. Group at Gililand Ranch School, 1926-1927. Teacher, Mrs. Leftwich, is wearing a large hat.



3. Ritch "school bus" driven by J.D. Miller, 1938-1940.



4. Group at Ritch School, 1933. Teachers C.C. And Ethel Sitze are standing in the second row, alone, and third from left, respectively.

**PARENTS or GUARDIANS—PLEASE READ**  
 A copy of each child's monthly report will be sent to you. It will show the child's progress in all subjects and in habits. It will also show the child's attendance and any other information that may be of interest to you. We hope you will find it helpful in your own home.

Name Hazel Potter Grade 4

Spelling	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A
Language	C	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B
Geography	C	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B
Arithmetic	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B
Hygiene	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B
History																			
U. S. Civics																			
State History and Civics																			

**Socorro County Socorro, New Mexico**

**REPORT to PARENTS**  
 for 19 24 1927.

Note: Habits and attitude are equal in importance to subject matter and skills. The school and home should co-operate in developing these within the pupil. Habits and attitudes are marked the same as subjects.

PERSONAL HABITS	
Month	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
Cleanliness	A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A
Posture	A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A
Orderliness	A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A
SOCIAL HABITS	
Courtesy	A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A
Truthfulness	A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A
Co-operation	A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A
STUDY-WORK HABITS	
Independence	A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A
Perseverance	A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A
Neatness	A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A
Department	A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A A
Days Present	11 13 16 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31
Days Absent	0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

Collected by Arrela of Socorro Schools

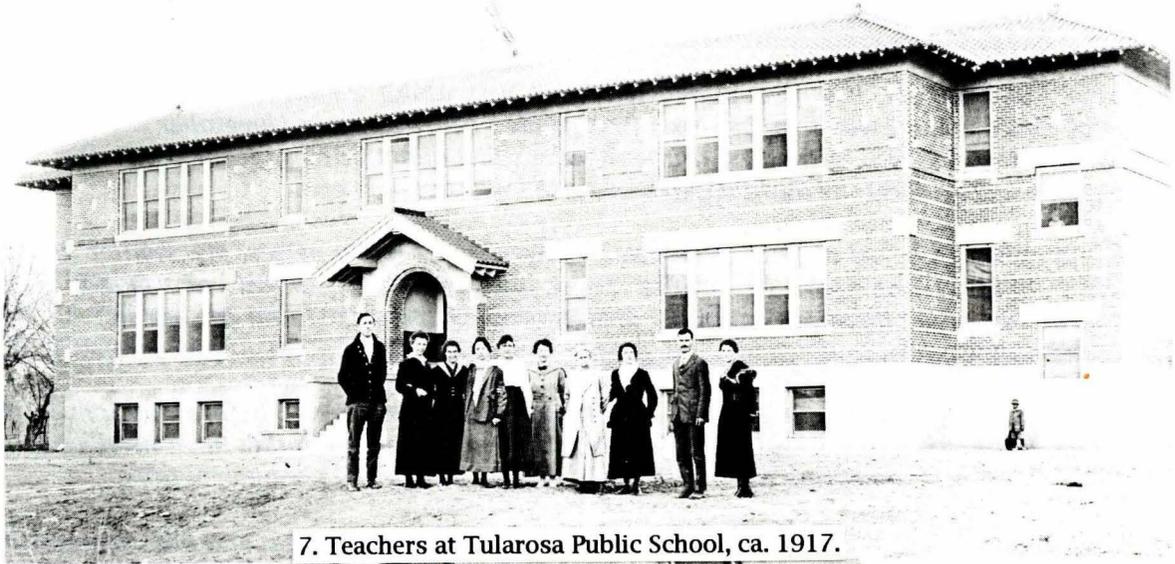
6. Hazel Potter's 4th grade report card filled out by teacher, Aggie Lu Hunter, 1938-1939.



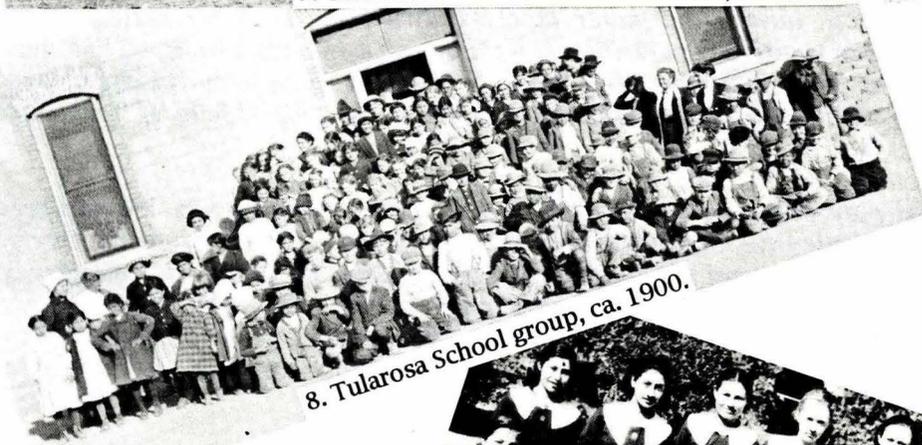
5. Students at Ritch School, Easter, 1940. Hazel Potter is standing second from the right in the front row.

...we didn't study history that year....Mr. Sitze, he didn't know algebra...

*...cows to milk before we'd go to school...hit a high lope to get there by eight-thirty...*



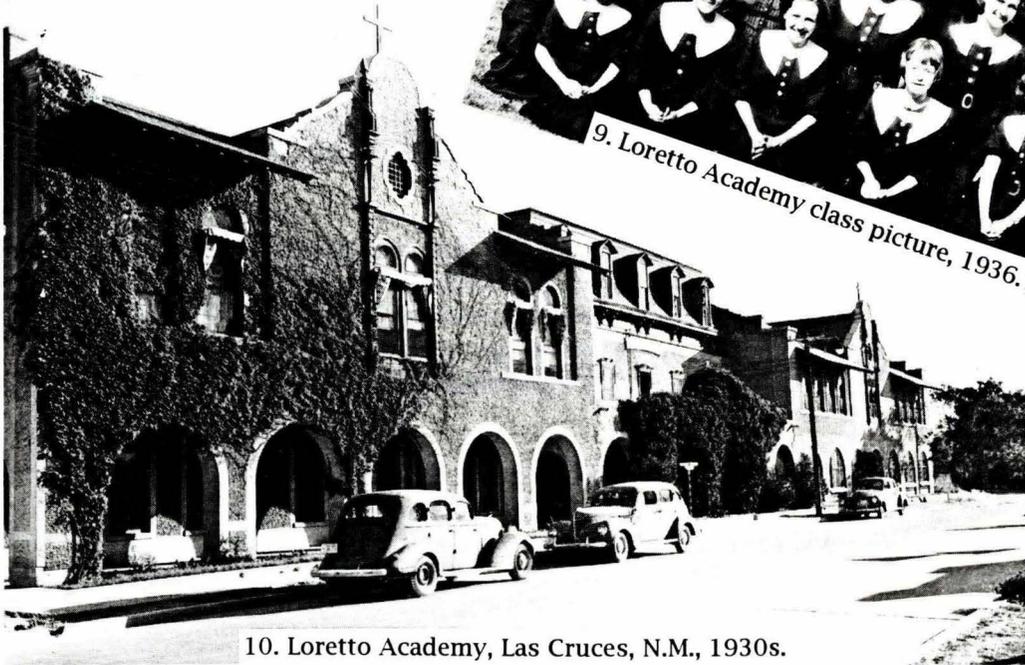
7. Teachers at Tularosa Public School, ca. 1917.



8. Tularosa School group, ca. 1900.



9. Loretto Academy class picture, 1936.



10. Loretto Academy, Las Cruces, N.M., 1930s.

*...two hours from our house to school...little ones would sit on the bigger ones' laps...*

*...got to draw in our Big Chief tablets...played kick the can....got one of her pigtails stuck in the inkwell...*

## Student Reading 1—HAZEL POTTER JOHNSON

*I went to the Ritch School. It was a public school. It was about 23 miles away by country road. In September of 1935, when I was five, I started first grade. I turned six in November after school started. Velma Ruth Wood and I were in the first grade together. She didn't pass, so for the next five years, I was the smartest in the class. And the dumbest, too, because I was the only one.*

*Daddy always said he got up at four o'clock year round, but I know better. My mother got up at four o'clock. She started putting wood fire in the stoves and cooking breakfast, and Daddy got up after Mother did. We had to get up so we could get dressed and eat breakfast and get our lunch together and go. School was from nine 'til four.*

*It took two hours or so to go from our house to Ritch School. We'd leave before daylight in the winter time, and a lot of times it'd be getting dark by the time we got home. We didn't have no electricity. We had some homework; we had something to do with the lamplight at night at the kitchen table.*

*The night before, if we had apples or oranges or something, we'd cut them up and put them in Jello. They'd be ready in the morning for our lunch. And potted meat sandwiches! I don't like potted meat. It was in biscuits. Unless Daddy had been to town, we didn't have light bread; it was biscuits. If we had meat, mother would fry meat when she was fixing breakfast. We'd have some type of meat in our biscuit and my brother Richard and I'd split a can of Pork and Beans, and then we'd split the pint of Jello. If it was nice outside, we'd go and eat outside.*

*In the morning, we would play ball before nine o'clock and then we would go in. We had recess in the morning and then we ate and then we had recess before school was out. We'd play Annie Over. That was throwing a ball over the schoolhouse and we caught it. We played Kick the Can, Hide and Seek, Wolf Over the Ridge, and, how did it go?, "Red Rover, Red Rover, send somebody over," and we'd be standing with our hands together and they come running from the other side and they'd try to break through. If they couldn't break through, they'd have to get on our side. But if they broke through, they got to take one to the other side. We played Hop Scotch, too, and Baseball.*

*The teacher had different books for each grade. Now there was one year they didn't even send a History book down. I didn't have a History book; the teacher didn't even have a book. We didn't have History books, so we didn't study History that year. We had Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, and we had Geography and was supposed to have History, and we got to draw in our Big Chief tablets. We'd have contests in Arithmetic, or to see who could find stuff in the dictionary quicker, and some with spelling for the whole group. There wasn't anybody else my age, so I had spelling bees with the other kids. We used to write on the blackboard. We had pencils and pens with inkwells, and we got to draw in our Big Chief tablets. There were regular desks with a seat to them, best I remember. The big rectangular wood stove was in the middle of the building. We did have a school bell. It was mounted on the south end by the door, and there was just something metal that rang it.*

*We had a cistern for water on the north end of the building—and then the gutters from the building, the water went into the cistern. In the later years, we had two cisterns. I don't know if the water lasted the whole nine months, or if somebody had barrels so they could come dump it in if we run out. We did have water the whole nine months, but I don't know if it was from the rain water or if somebody supplemented it. It was drawn out by bucket. They'd take a bucket and set it inside, and we each had a cup that we'd get water with. We all knew whose cup was whose.*

*We started school the Tuesday after Labor Day, and then I think we had Armistice Day off—is what they used to call it. Then we had off for Thanksgiving and Christmas and Easter. They didn't have all these teachers' conferences that they have now. They have Spring Break and then they go back for three or four days and then they have Easter. One year we had a school play—cartoon stuff from the Katzenjammer Kids. We all dressed up like those kids and we gave this little play. It must have been about Halloween time, because hunting season started the next day. I liked school. We got to play at recess with the other kids. Otherwise, it was just us, unless we walked the mile over the hill to play with our cousins.*

*Student Reading 2: Boarding School in the City—  
Elma Hardin Cain*

Most ranch kids moved into nearby Tularosa, Hot Springs (Truth or Consequences), or Carrizozo to attend high school after completing eighth grade at the rural ranch schools. Attending boarding school in the big city for the primary grades was a bit out of the ordinary.

*When Elma Hardin's family moved from Hope, New Mexico, to the San Andres Mountains in 1934, her parents chose to send her to Loretto Academy, a religious boarding school in Las Cruces, rather than having her attend nearby Ritch School. Elma's vivid recollections of her eight years at Loretto provide a sharp contrast to experiences of those who attended the one-room ranch schools, including her husband, Leonard Cain. Leonard graduated at Ritch and entered high school in Tularosa just as Hazel Potter started climbing into Wilber Sitze's truck for that 23-mile ride.*

Have the class read the Elma Hardin Cain extract and discuss the following topics. If any of the students in your class have attended a boarding school, ask them to tell the class a little bit about their experiences.

Things to think about:

- What would it have been like to move away from home to go to school when you were nine years old? Would you have been frightened, homesick?
- Why do you think Elma's parents sent her to Loretto rather than having her attend Ritch School?
- How did attending Loretto Academy in the 1930s and 1940s differ from what school is like for you?
- Would you have enjoyed going to Loretto Academy or an equivalent boys' boarding school? Why/why not? Remember, you couldn't just pick up a telephone and call home—communication was through letters that were monitored by the teachers.
- Why were the rules at Loretto Academy so strict?
- What might students at Loretto Academy have done during their free time? What responsibilities might they have had in addition to attending class?
- Would you like eating in a refectory (cafeteria) all the time? What if you didn't like the food?
- Elma comments that she wouldn't send her kids to a boarding school because they miss so many family activities. In what ways do you think it would have better and/or worse to attend Loretto Academy rather than one of the ranch schools?

## ***Student Reading 2—ELMA HARDIN CAIN***

---

*I was nine when I went to boarding school at Loretto, from '34 or '35 through '42. They took me down and left me. I stayed, but I didn't like it. I'd heard that if you weren't nice, the nuns put you in the basement. I'd heard scare stories and, of course, I cried and cried for two weeks. Mother came down, she and Daddy, and he told me, "You're gonna stay. You might as well get over it." Well, it wasn't long 'til I shaped up. When I came home Thanksgiving, I was so lonesome, I was ready to go back. I had adjusted.*

*School started after Labor Day. I usually rode the bus and the folks would pick me up. Then they'd take me to T or C and I'd ride it back to Cruces. It wasn't too awful far, probably an hour and a half or two hours; it wasn't too bad. We were off at Thanksgiving for two or three days, and about a week off at Christmas. Then Easter, usually we'd get off. Then go home at the end of school and go back in September.*

*When I first went to Loretto, there was 72 boarders from the first grade up to high school. When I graduated, there were 42. When I graduated, there was 3 that lived there in 'Cruces, and there was 10 of us that graduated, so there was 7 of us that were boarders, the summer, May of '42.*

*We had two dormitories; a little girls' dorm and big girls' dorm; the high school girls and the little kids. The dormitories were upstairs and the classrooms and things downstairs. The chapel was upstairs and the nuns' quarters were there. On the bottom floor was the cafeteria and the kitchen.*

*It was very rigid. We got up about six o'clock every morning. You could not talk at all, you know, visit with the other kids—it was in silence. We went to church every morning. You'd get dressed and brush your teeth and wash your face and comb your hair and you'd go to church. From church you would go directly down to the refectory—not cafeteria, the refectory. And we'd all stand behind our chairs and they'd say grace and ring a little bell and we could sit down. We could visit and talk when we ate breakfast. Whenever everybody was fairly well through, they'd ring the bell and you'd stand up and return thanks, and go in silence up to make your bed. Then you'd come back down at eight o'clock.*

*They'd ring a bell and you would go to study hall and your classes the rest of the morning. Then at noon you'd get in line and you'd go to the refectory and the same routine. You'd have recreation until one o'clock, after you'd had dinner. Then you'd have classes in the afternoon. At about three or three-thirty you'd be out and you'd have recreation 'til about four-thirty or five o'clock. We had tennis courts, and you could skate, or you could listen to the radio, or just read. Then you'd have study hall 'til about five-thirty. We'd go and eat supper, and at eight o'clock the little girls had to go up to bed.*

*When I got to be a freshman, I was a big girl, and then we got to stay up 'til nine. It was the same routine over and over everyday, except Saturday. Saturday, if you were lucky, they might let you sleep late if you were a big girl. Sunday you'd go to church and then they'd have study hall from eleven 'til twelve so you could write letters home. You'd write your letter and the nuns would correct it and then you'd have to rewrite it. They read all of your mail, coming in and going out.*

*And they taught you manners. It was very strict. It was always the same discipline. It never changed. The bigger girls had a little more leniency, but not a lot.*

*But if you failed a test, they would have you study and they'd give it to you again. They'd give you an opportunity to pass. We had one teacher that would give you the question and the answer. She'd give you 50 questions and answers, and she'd pick maybe 10 or 15 out of that. She wanted it word for word, and dot for dot. You had to have not only the question answered correctly; she wanted your penmanship and your spelling and your punctuation—everything—right. Everything she marked off, because she gave you the whole thing, and you were to learn it. She was very meticulous in that, and you learned pretty quick that she wasn't going to put up with sloppiness and not doing what she wanted.*

*The dormitories were all in one room, one big room. I don't remember how many beds were in there. I'd say there were maybe 40 beds in there— just rows and rows with just a little space in between. In the little girls' dorm we had a washstand, and we kept our toothbrushes and hair brushes and things like that in there. Each one had their own washstand. When you got to be in the big girls' dorm, you had a washstand and an alcove—three walls and a curtain in front. You had a little chest of drawers in there and you kept your little personal things in there. You wore a uniform, a navy-blue uniform with a big, white collar. I have my white collar from whenever I got out of school. I had it autographed and I kept it. But I didn't want a uniform. But you know, you get used to it. Its just, sort of like the Army, I imagine.*

*Mother used to send me a birthday cake packed in popcorn; an angel food cake with seven-minute icing. When that package would come, well, we kids would sneak and get on what we called the devil steps—they were steps saved for visitors. They were hardwood steps. We'd get there and eat our cake and popcorn. We'd crawl out of the dorm; we got in trouble several times. We'd have to clean those steps—wax them and polish them and clean them up. Then lots of times we had to write "I will not do" whatever it was "again" maybe 500 times.*

*The meals were very well prepared. I thought we got too much parsnips; I never did like parsnips. But we'd have cream of wheat for breakfast of a morning, and if we didn't eat it all, they'd fry it at night and serve it with syrup for our evening meal. I liked the cream of wheat of a morning, but I didn't like that of an evening. We'd have prunes for breakfast, and I didn't mind those. If there were prunes left, we'd have prune whip at night for dessert, and that was good. I didn't mind that too much. The meals weren't bad.*

*You got a good education, as far as learning. We took music. You had Spanish and Latin and math, different kinds of math, and shorthand and history and English, and they had the business classes then, too—bookkeeping, shorthand, typing.*

*It's all right, but I would never send my kids. I don't think so. No, uh-uh, because I think you miss so much with your parents and with other things, other activities and things. I never saw a football game, a high school football game, or a basketball game, other than what we played there in the convent. You miss things like that. But sometimes you get a better education in a country school than you do in a public school. Even though there's maybe one or two teachers to a big bunch, they get more individual attention than you would in a bigger public school.*

### *Visual Evidence: A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words—Images from a One-room Mountain School*

Have your students examine the photographs from Bear Den and Ritch Schools on pages 6–7. Photographs can be valuable aids during an interview and in the formal presentation of information.

#### Things to Think About

- Does examining these photographs help you more fully understand the readings? Do they help you more clearly envision what the informants are discussing? Might having photographs present during an interview help the informant better recall an event, location, or individual?
- What can you tell about Ritch and Bear Den Schools from these photographs? What might you be able to infer about the students and their families (i.e., date/time period, location/terrain, economy)? Think about how clothing and automobile styles change over time. Books are available at libraries showing what styles were popular at certain times. Could some of these photographs be dated, even if someone hadn't marked the date on the back?
- How do these images compare with how television and the movies portray historic schools, teachers, and students?

#### PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

After reading the excerpts from interviews with Mellie Crawford Potter, Hazel Potter Johnson, and Elma Hardin Cain and examining the photographs of students attending Bear Den and Ritch Schools and Loretto Academy, select one or more of the following activities to tie the information together, giving your students a better feel for what it might have been like to attend school in rural New Mexico only 50 or 60 years ago.

##### *Activity 1: A Day in the Life of Ritch School*

Turn your classroom into Ritch School for a day. Ask the class to dress in something they think might resemble clothing of the period. Have students bring a sack lunch that might have been common in the 1930s and eat together outside on the school grounds. Set up a jug of drinking water and some cups to use in class, rather than sending students to the water fountain when they get thirsty. During recess, have the students play some of the games Hazel mentioned. Pretend the rest of the school isn't there. If your room has plenty of windows, turn out the lights—there was no electricity at Ritch School—and keep use of electronic equipment to a minimum (or don't use it at all).

##### *Activity 2: A Day in the Life of Loretto Academy*

Turn your classroom into Loretto Academy for a day. Consider asking the class to dress in clothing that might represent a uniform (dark skirt or pants with a white

blouse or shirt would be sufficient). Plan a simple menu and ask students to bring ingredients for a formal, sit-down lunch. Give the students a list of questions and answers for an exam to study the night before and test them in a mock exam like that described by Elma. Huddled in a small group on the school grounds, snack on angel-food cake and popcorn. Have students go everywhere in small groups, rather than individually.

##### *Activity 3: A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words*

In this exercise, students will be asked to recall and describe a specific school event. They will then be provided with increasingly detailed information upon which they can base their descriptions, in an effort to demonstrate the value of using photographs and other documents during oral-history interviews.

Take or obtain a photograph of a school activity in which your students participate. Have each student write a description of that activity, without looking at the photograph, as though they were reporting the event for a local paper. Then, allow them to examine the photograph and rewrite their description based on details that come to them as they look at the picture. Have several of the students read their "articles" to the class. Finally, allow the students a final revision.

Discuss with the class the details they had forgotten and then remembered after seeing the photograph or hearing another person's description of the event. Ask them how having photographs and other documents present during an oral-history interview assists in that interview process. Ask if there was any pattern in what people remembered. Generally, a person recalls most vividly the part(s) of an event that directly affects them; peripheral aspects will not be as easily recalled.

##### *Activity 4: Conduct Your Own Oral-History Interview*

If time permits, ask your students to contact an older family member or friend who would be willing to be interviewed about their school days. Follow the guidelines for conducting an interview provided on page 3. Prior to the interviews, have the students work together to create a list of questions they would like to have answered about past school experiences. Keep it simple. The information obtained during the interviews can be shared with the class through oral presentations by each student. This material would also make an excellent exhibit for your next open house.

As an alternative, if you know an individual who might come to the school to be interviewed by your class about his/her school experiences, contact that person and arrange a date for the visit. Prior to the visit, have the students compile a list of questions they would like to ask the informant. Provide this list to your informant for review, so the answers will be more thought out. Don't forget to ask him/her to bring along any photographs or other material that might help illustrate the things being discussed.

### Activity 5: Writing About School

After having the class read about Hazel Johnson's experiences at Ritch School and Elma Cain's years at Loretto Academy during the 1930s and 1940s, ask the students to pretend they attend one or the other of these schools. The students should choose one of the following scenarios and write a letter about things they have been doing at Ritch School and at home, or in their classes and free time at Loretto. Encourage your students to use their imagination, as well as their deductive skills, when it comes to details that aren't provided in the transcript excerpts.

- A. You are a student at Ritch School. You live on a goat ranch nearly 20 miles from the school. Your older sister is attending boarding school in Las Cruces this year, leaving you as the only one from your family attending Ritch. You have also inherited some of her chores. Write a newsy letter to your sister about how school has been going and what you have been doing at home since she left.
- B. You are a student at Loretto Academy (or an equivalent boy's boarding school—make up a name!). Your parents managed to save enough money for you to attend school in the city this year. You appreciate their sacrifice, but sometimes it gets lonely being away from home and your horses and the baby goats. You want to tell your family you miss them, and about how you really don't much care for Sister Cecilia's English class. Write a letter home telling about what it is like under the watchful eyes of the Sisters of Loretto.

### Activity 6: Examining Old Textbooks

Contact local libraries, used book stores, museums, or historical societies and attempt to borrow one or more textbooks dating to the 1930s or 1940s. Social Studies or History and Science would be of particular interest because many of the events with which *we* are so familiar had not even taken place at that time. Changes in emphasis and teaching technique for subjects such as Math and English will also be noticeable. Have the class examine the books and discuss how studying these subjects in the 1930s and 1940s would have been different than studying them today.

### Activity 7: Historic Math

Today, we carry and use pocket calculators on a regular basis, thinking little of the fact that these represent a relatively recent invention. These handy-dandy little devices had their equivalent, however, in the days that Hazel and Elma were going to school. Have you ever used a slide rule? Maybe not, but you probably have a mental image of how one works. Your students may never even have heard of one. If you know how to use a slide rule, or know of someone else who could demonstrate this, show the class how mathematical calculations were made in times past. You might even want to elaborate and bring in or show your students a picture of an abacus, an *ancient* calculator.

### WHAT IS SIGNIFICANT, AND TO WHOM?

Today the Ritch School is in ruins. The walls have fallen and the roof has blown away. Most of the people interviewed about their years at this old one-room schoolhouse recalled those times as pleasant experiences. How do you think the former Ritch School students feel about the loss of a building filled with their childhood memories?

Was the Ritch School a famous place? Was it worth saving? Why might we want to save seemingly "insignificant" structures, when possible? Most people aren't famous and will never be written about in history books. Does that make their lives any less significant than that of George Washington or Martin Luther King, Jr.? What can we learn about our past by studying the lives of "everyday" people at "everyday" places?

### VOCABULARY

- Biography: a written account of a person's life.  
Boarding school: a school at which students are provided with meals and lodging.  
Cistern: a large, underground tank for storing water.  
Dormitory: a large room for sleeping, with many beds.  
Edit: prepare material (usually written) for publication or public presentation; alter, adapt, or refine in order to conform to a standard or to suit a particular purpose.  
Informant: a person who provides cultural information in response to questions from an interviewer.  
Interview: (n) a formal meeting at which information is obtained from a person; (v) to conduct such a meeting.  
Katzenjammer Kids: loud and ill-behaved characters from a comic strip of the same name dating to the late 1800s.  
Light bread: yeast bread, as opposed to biscuits or crackers.  
Oral history: historical information (usually tape-recorded) obtained in interviews concerning personal experiences and recollections; the study of this information.  
Refectory: a dining hall at a school or religious establishment.  
Study hall: a period of time set aside for study; a place where this activity takes place.  
Transcribe: to make a printed copy (handwritten, typewritten, or computer generated) from a tape recording.  
Transcription: the written copy made by listening to a tape recording of an oral interview.  
Washstand: a stand on which a wash basin (generally a ceramic or metal bowl) and a large pitcher containing water are placed for use in rooms with no running water.