

**27 years teaching in Lostant**  
*an Oral History*

Ora Curtis, Interviewee  
Of Lostant, Illinois

Interview Date: April 1, 1976

Oral History Tape Number:

Tape Number: 71

Number of Transcribed Pages: 20

Subject(s) Covered: teaching

Starved Rock Library System History Collection

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Narrator's Name: ORA CURTIS  
Tape Number: 1  
Date of Interview: APRIL 1, 1976  
Place of Interview: LOSTANT, ILLINOIS  
Interviewer's Name: WILLIAM J. LYONS  
For: STARVED ROCK LIBRARY SYSTEM ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Q: This is going to be an oral history interview with Ora Curtis, and this is William Lyons. Ora, you know -- I know that this year is going to be the seventieth year since you graduated from high school. Now that is -- seventy years is considered a lifetime, but when you think about graduating from high school seventy years ago, that's something else. I know that you graduated from a three year high school, so you must have started to school about eleven years before that.

A: I started in the spring of 1894. Course -- when they had high school then wasn't considered much. The principal taught seventh and eighth grades and whatever high school he could teach, which wasn't much sometimes. When I was ready for ninth grade, he couldn't handle all of it so he -- took two years for that. And then they hired a principal that couldn't teach anything above ninth grade so I lost a year.

Q: Well, now, what year did you say you started school?

A: In the spring term of 1894.

Q: 1894. Yes. Well, then, it was 1896 we had high school graduation here in Lostant.

A: Yes, that was the last class.

Q: What?

A: That was the last class until we did.

Q: Well, was there a regular class graduating every year before that?

A: I don't know if it was every year or not, but they had had graduation before that because Mrs. Morgan told me about that.

Q: Well, then in 1906 it started then, and we've had a class ever since.

A: Ever since. We started the ball rolling.

Q: That's right, we did. Now, when you were going to school, did you go to school always right here in Lostant?

A: Always, in that one building.

Q: Oh, you did? Do you remember before that building was built -- do you remember when there used to be a little sort of a one room school just south of where the building is now on that street?

A: Well, there was a building -- according to history there was a building in there after they laid out the town. Block 10 was designated for a school building. They had a building that was church and school and town hall.

Q: Yes, I've heard that.

A: And then in [1862?] --62 they built the building that burned.

Q: Well, now, when you started to school here in Lostant in the first grade, how many teachers were there in the school?

A: Three.

Q: Three.

A: Primary, intermediate, and principal. The principal taught seventh and eighth grades and just whatever high school he was qualified to teach.

Q: That's when you started school. It was the same way. It was run that way all the time.

A: It was run that way until I got up to the -- well, the last two years, they had other teachers.

Q: Did you have the three lower grades in one room and the three upper grades -- or the intermediate grades \_\_\_\_\_ and seventh and eighth.

A: Seventh and eighth were upstairs, that one big room that was used for

A: everything. It was classrooms, study hall, and program room.

Q: Then when you started -- got about ready to start to high school then -- that would have been 18 -- what 1903 would it be or you graduated in. . .

A: I lost two years in there.

Q: So you started to high school in 1901. Five years going through a three year. . .

A: Yes, because we had two years to ninth grade, and then they had a teacher that couldn't teach the tenth grade at all so I stayed at home. And then they hired Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ that could teach tenth and eleventh, I went back.

Q: Well, it took that long. Well.

A: My mother and the mother of one of the other girls was very upset about not having that year. They went to the school board -- this was always funny to me -- they went to the school board to talk to them about it and one of the school board members said, "Well, he didn't care if there was any high school there or not. He was going to send his girl to Ottawa."

Q: Well, then. . .

A: And he did.

Q: Then when you finally got graduated then from high school, did you start teaching right away?

A: I did. We took the examination that spring of 1906, and of course we didn't have any preparation at all. I went right out and got a school two and a half miles from home; 24 pupils in all eight grades, and I had never been inside a country school.

Q: Well, then in 1906 that was the first year that W. R. Foster became County Superintendent.

A: Yes, we went to work together and we retired together.

Q: Is that right? (Laughter) I'll say that's something because that was the year I started school. That was the year 1906. He was County Superintendent all the while I went to school, all the while my two daughters went to school. Over forty years he was County Superintendent. Yes, that's right. You had him all the time. Well, then when you took that examination, you must have took it up at Ottawa at the county seat.

A: Yes, we did. Two days of it. On Friday and Saturday we had for that examination.

Q: And then before school started, did you kind of attend a little teacher's institute or a little. . .

A: Well, we had an institute at Ottawa. Just a one day meeting.

Q: Just a one day. Well.

A: For the teachers.

Q: When I started teaching, why, we had five days, the whole week.

A: We just had a good start \_\_\_\_\_ after then we had five days.

Q: That's quite interesting thing at that. When you were going to grade school before you even started to high school, I've often heard that, you know, that they went by terms. Like winter term, the spring term, and the fall term. . .

A: We went by quarters. There was eight months school and it was divided into the four quarters. Two months in each quarter.

Q: Well, did like different people kind of enroll in different quarters like the boys maybe in the winter term?

A: Not too much.

Q: Not too much.

A: At that time.

Q: I've heard about it. It never happened in my time but I thought. . .

A: Well, it did when I taught. When I taught, the farm boys came in the spring but here in town we didn't have that.

Q: Well, then when you taught then, you taught your first year out in the country school. Was it very close to here?

A: Two miles and a half. The Foote school.

Q: Oh, the Foote school.

A: Mud roads.

Q: Mud roads all the way out there.

A: Sometimes you could hardly get through and when they froze up you couldn't stay in the buggy. Horse and buggy days. I would walk then.

Q: You walked two and a half miles?

A: ~~Oh, yes, two and a half.~~

Q: You did?

A: Many times.

Q: Is that right! I walked two and a half miles to high school but I wouldn't think of -- think about walking out to teach school for you anyway.

(Laughs)

A: I did all along the hedge fence. It was so rough I couldn't walk on the road.

Q: (Laughs) [U.S. Route] 51 wasn't in then, was it?

A: No, I'll say it wasn't.

Q: That's right. Do you remember any of the names of pupils you had in those first years?

A: Oh, yes. There was Emma Harris and Henry Walzenbach and John and Tom

A: Dunne and Dewey Nelson's -- some of their family. Kahn's, Nina and Frank Kahn.

Q: Were the Weber's going to school out there then?

A: Yes, I had all the Weber's -- all four of them.

Q: Oh, you did? I heard, too, once that Theisinger's lived out in that country too. Did they?

A: They weren't that year. I've just kind of forgotten who they all were. I wish I had a list because I do here in town. But I didn't think about it then.

Q: Well, that's quite a lot of history at that, education. Now when you started to teach -- or another thing I was going to ask you though is how many graduated with your class in high school?

A: There were four girls.

Q: Four girls. Were there any boys during the time you were in high school? Were there any boys in the class?

A: Not in my class.

Q: Not in your class.

A: And there were five girls in the class below us. And no boys.

Q: Well, that's in 1907.

A: But they didn't think high school was very important at that time, and the boys just didn't bother about it.

Q: Well, most of the boys even when I went to high school, most of the boys they needed them for work on the farms, you know. They took a man's place about the time they were fourteen years old, and they just -- when they got through with their grades, why, that was it. That's the way it was then, too.

A: That's right.

Q: We were talking about teaching. Now what salary did you get the first

Q: year you were teaching?

A: I got \$25 a month the first four months and \$35 a month the second four months.

Q: How come they raised your salary in the middle of the year?

A: Well, they told me when school started that I would start at \$25, and if it was satisfactory, then for the last four months they would raise it to \$35. And they did.

Q: And you taught -- how long did you teach out in that school?

A: Just the one year.

Q: Just the one year.

A: Then my eyes failed, and I didn't teach only substitute work again for the next ten years. I was out ten years. I substituted here in Lostant and in Oglesby and McNabb and out in the country two or three times. I did quite a bit of substituting.

Q: Well, then what did you do though in towns -- didn't you operate a central office -- telephone central for a while?

A: My eyes were so bad they wouldn't let me do anything. So I went to work at ~~the Farmer's~~ switchboard, and I was there five years. Then when they put in -- the independent company had their board in there. Sam Hill left, and they wanted an operator and I went up there and took that as a chief operator for five years.

Q: I can remember going up there and seeing you in that, too. I can remember that.

A: Yes, I was up there five years. And then I -- they got me back into teaching. (Laughs)

Q: I can't remember just exactly when -- I know we had two different telephone



Q: companies but I can't remember when that just was discontinued. We only had one. I don't remember what year that was.

A: Well, I don't remember that either. But I left there in 1920. Started teaching in town here in 1920.

Q: Then after that ten years that you were out of teaching and when you came back teaching, where did you teach then?

A: I taught 27 years here in Lostant.

Q: Here in Lostant. Is that right! And the only other experience you had was just that one country school for that one or two years?

A: And the substituting. That's all.

Q: And the substituting. Well, you went to college and got some degree and everything.

A: I don't have my degree. I had to stay home and teach during the year so I could get money to send my sister to school. I took my work by correspondence and summer school. I had a little over three years of it that way. When we graduated, we were fortunate enough in a three year high school to have all the entrance requirements at Normal except chemistry. We had to take chemistry. That was one of them. We had to take four extra subjects for the extra year of high school, and chemistry was one of them. And the other three just anything we chose.

Q: So your high school wasn't too bad at that.

A: The high school was pretty good after he got started \_\_\_\_\_ when he came he immediately started to organize a high school. That was in tenth grade and organize a curriculum so there was certain subjects for certain grades. And that was the beginning of our organized curriculum that they have now.

Q: And that started about 1901.

A: No, 19-- (PAUSE) 1901, 1902, 1903, 1904.

Q: 1904.

A: He came in 1904.

Q: Do you remember his name?

A: \_\_\_\_\_ Levegue. L-E-V-E-G-U-E. He's from the southern part of the state.

Q: Oh, yes. And he was your high school teacher then for how long, three years?

A: Two years.

Q: Two years. And then you graduated in 1906. How do you feel about this being your seventieth year?

A: Well, in some ways it seems like a long time; in other ways it doesn't seem so long. When I look back on the changes in the school since then -- there's quite a bit.

Q: That's right. There sure has been a lot of changes in education since then. There's no question about that.

A: I don't know how many teachers they have right now. I expect around twenty. We had three. (Laughs)

Q: Now what about the enrollment when you were going to school in the grade school. The enrollment -- about how many pupils were in the grade school or in your room or something like that?

A: Well, we had three grades in a room and there were probably around, oh, twenty-five to thirty in the room.

Q: There was that many? Is that right!

A: Yes, we had a pretty good enrollment.

Q: That would be about -- all together that would be about 75 or more in

Q: school all together. That was more in each room than I thought because -- well now do you remember how -- you told me how many, I guess, graduated in 1907. Did you say five graduated in 1907 the year after you. . .

A: Yes. Five girls the year after us.

Q: How long was it before any boys graduated from high school?

A: I don't remember. I think there were some the next year but I'm not sure. One or two.

Q: That's another thing you know. The boys they were working on farms and one thing or another, and they'd just quit, you know, and that's the way that worked.

A: There were several boys in our class when I was ready for tenth grade and, of course, when they didn't teach it, why we were all dropouts and they didn't come. They didn't come back.

PAUSE

Q: That was in the second year of your high school.

A: First grade.

Q: Oh, you're in the first grade.

A: First year of high school.

Q: Yes, you said you had a teacher that -- how was that again?

A: They hired an extra teacher for the winter quarter, January and February. At the end of that quarter they dismissed her. The board said it cost too much.

Q: Then you had two teachers in high school. Was that it?

A: For two months.

Q: For two months. Oh, well, yes, I see. But it cost too much.

A: So the rest of the time the principal had to take all the high school.

Q: Did he also at that time teach the grades?

A: He taught seventh and eighth until (PAUSE) 1916. They built that first north part. Then they put the seventh and eighth grades in the upper room there and divided the lower grades, the elementary grades, into two grades to a teacher. Then later on they built another addition on the west side of that one, a small one. And then they finally put all grades downstairs and used all upstairs. They were gradually adding more teachers. But I wasn't there when they did that.

Q: No. I was there -- I started to high school when there was only one teacher. The next year there was two, and then the year after that there was three. So you see, I got in just about the time they were making the change.

A: Just about.

Q: Yes, just about the time they were making the change. That's the way that goes. Well, we've had a lot of changes since then, too.

A: The young people now don't realize what they should be thankful for.

Q: That's right.

A: Now we had nothing -- no equipment, not a thing. We connected an electric bell in the physics class. And that's the only experiment in botony, zoology, or physics. Just read the book and with so many classes you didn't have long class periods. Talk about it in class and try to remember it.

Q: Yes, that certainly is quite a change. There's no question about that. Yes. You sure remember a lot of. . .

PAUSE

Q: Did you always live in town?

A: No, I didn't come to town until I was six years old. I lived out here in the country and about six or seven months in Toluca. My father had a store there. When I was six years old we moved into Lostant. And I've been here ever since.

Q: Your father had a store here, too, didn't he?

A: He came here -- he didn't like farming so he sold out everything -- thrashing outfit and everything. And went to Toluca and bought a store, hardware store. And when they tried to build up the new town, he saw that it was coming on the other side of the track from what he was, and he had a chance to sell and he sold right quick and came over to Lostant and bought in the hardware store with Will Phillips. No, Tom Williamson.

Q: Tom Williamson.

A: Will Phillips had got out. Tom Williamson had a store there for years and years where the Century is.

Q: I can remember that. I can remember Williamson and Curtis. I remember that. And so then you didn't get a chance to go to country schools at all. Your six years you were in the country -- had lived in the country but. . .

A: I was only five and a half when we left the country.

Q: Did you ever live in Toluca when your father was running that store?

A: Did we live there? Yes; Yes, we lived there about six or seven months.

Q: Oh, just a short time.

A: Just a short time. Then when he bought over here we moved right over here down there south of St. John's Hall in that house.

PAUSE

Q: Now when you mentioned that there was ten years that we had no graduating class from Lostant, but in 1896 then there would have been a class. Would they have graduated from a three year high school?

A: Two year.

Q: Two year high school.

A: Two year. There was no three year high school until we graduated. We were the first graduates of a three year high school and the first graduates in

A: ten years.

Q: I see. You remember those years, too, do you, when they had that class, 1896.

A: Well, when I was in seventh and eighth grades they had a few high school -- second year high school then -- but they didn't graduate. We were not -- they didn't know anything about freshmen, sophomores, and juniors. We were just ninth, tenth, and eleventh grades. When Mr. LeBake came he got it into first, second, and third year high school.

Q: Then did they call you freshmen, sophomores, and seniors or how did they figure. . .

A: No, it was just first, second, third year high school. That's all we had. That didn't come in until after we got out of school. (LAUGHS)

Q: Well, that's -- when I started there was only one teacher, too. But I can't remember that. I don't remember just exactly what we did call ourselves then.

A: I don't know when they started the change.

Q: That added -- to add another teacher meant an awful lot to the school though.

A: Oh, yes.

Q: We had -- she taught English and history and things like that. And the other man -- the man teacher taught science and mathematics and he really developed the school. Another thing I think that we should mention about that, that was about the beginning of the community high school. Do you remember that? I see that before that this was just a district school.

A: Just a district school number 25.

Q: Yes, District 25.

A: But I don't remember what year the community came in.

Q: Well, it must have been about 1913 or 1914, somewhere around in there.

A: \_\_\_\_\_ my father was on the school board at the time.

Q: Yes, because other towns around like Magnolia and Tonica and Wenona -- they were going back and they were putting -- going around surrounding their towns. They were taking in territory and putting it in the high school district. And of course Lostant got in on that, too.

A: Lostant took it when they could! (LAUGHS)

Q: Yes, that's right. And some of the other towns got pretty close to Lostant before Lostant got started. But I think it was this L. C. Wolf was then the principal then, and he kind of got it organized as a community high school and it's been that ever since.

A: I substituted for him in high school when he went to his grandmother's funeral.

Q: I don't remember you substituting and I was going to school there. I don't remember that.

A: Well, I guess I didn't have your class. Just his subjects was all I had.

Q: Sure, I know.

A: And I was back in that little west room.

Q: Would that be the one they called the laboratory? We used to have a laboratory.

A: Yes, when I was there they had it for just a storage room for school supplies.

Q: I can remember we had some very meager equipment for a laboratory.

A: Oh, yes. That became the laboratory.

Q: We had several things in there, I know, and remembered. Do you remember the skeleton that was in there?

A: Oh, yes. (LAUGHS)

Q: The one they called Suzy, wasn't that what they called her?

A: Yes, they called her Suzy.

Q: How did that get to the school, do you remember?

A: I never knew how it got there.

Q: I think some doctor donated it.

A: I understood something like that but I don't know just what it was.

Q: It was quite a thing. They used to get her all dressed up for Halloween and different things like that.

A: It was quite a relief to start teaching in town where I didn't have the janitor work to do. I used to have to, of course, do all my janitor work, and the one thing that irked me the most was to bring in my kindling and my coal and everything on Friday night and go out Monday morning and a tramp had been in and used it all. (LAUGHTER) I was only a half mile, you know, from the railroad. And invariably tramps would go in there over the weekend and use all my kindling.

Q: Well, I'll be darned. I've heard of that, too, in our school. They've mentioned that different times. We were a little over a half mile, but that would have been a nice, warm building for somebody to camp in over the weekend.

A: Yes.

Q: That's right. Well, when you started teaching in Lostant right here in the town school, that must have been about 19\_\_ . . .

A: 1920.

Q: 1920.



A: When I came back it was the fall. I had taught out in the country \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ college when Hattie Lundgren had resigned. I taught there once  
before and finished out the term Harry Miller resigned. Then when Hattie  
resigned at the holidays, they came after me again and I went out and finished  
the four months. And then they -- well, it was the teacher's fault I got in  
\_\_\_\_\_ she \_\_\_\_\_ here. And the third and fourth grade  
teacher was leaving. The first and second grade teacher wanted me to apply  
for it. And at that time the board wouldn't think of hiring a home teacher for  
anything. Oh, no. And so they persuaded me, and the school board was going to  
meet that night, and I went down and put in my application and got it.

Q: Well, now, what classes did you teach?

A: Third and fourth.

Q: Third and fourth.

A: All the time I was here.

Q: Well, then you taught third and fourth then for how many years? Twenty  
years?

A: Twenty-seven years.

Q: Twenty-seven years. That's quite a long service at that, isn't it?  
That's really quite a record.

A: In one place.

Q: Yes, in one place. I should say.

PAUSE

Q: Now you mentioned that this teacher that you had when you graduated from  
high school was a real good teacher. Isn't that what you said?

A: The first year he was here he was an excellent teacher. Then, as I said,  
he went home -- his father died -- and he took charge of the farm and we don't

~~As~~ know what happened. When he came back he was a different man entirely.

He was very touchy. We had to be very, very careful what we said or did.

Q: And you were telling me, too, something about that you asked him questions that he couldn't answer.

A: Well, I asked him a question in class one day, and he didn't pay any attention to me. Didn't answer me so pretty soon I asked it again and still he didn't answer so I just leaned back and thought well, I'll wait until the next day and maybe he'll be in a better mood. And then in a little while he asked me the same question, and I couldn't answer it.

Q: Gave you a good bawling out.

A: I got a good bawling out. I sure did.

Q: And then he went to Oglesby, you said.

A: He went up to Oglesby as a superintendent up there.

Q: He called on you to teach.

A: Yes, he called down here one day and said he couldn't get a substitute for him. So I went. I could go up on an eight o'clock train in the morning and come home on an eight o'clock train in the evening. So it was quite convenient.

Q: Yes, I should say. Eight o'clock. That's something we -- hard to remember that we had public transportation like that. That was really convenient, too.

A: It was. Of course, we had two passenger trains each way that time.

Q: How long did you teach up in Oglesby then?

A: Oh, I just taught off and on I guess for either one to two years and then he went to Serena. And he got so bad there that they had to warn the children not to cross him at all or do things.

PAUSE

Q: Oh, yes, you should because you know that when we started right out of

Q: high school teaching I often wonder what kind of a job you think you did.

A: Well, it was pretty hard for us. We weren't A Number 1, most of us, because we didn't know anything about country school work at all.

Q: Now, when you did start though, now, you talked about having such a good teacher when you graduated from high school. Now did you find that you tried to imitate him when you were teaching classes.

A: Well, I think I did some. Because we liked him.

Q: Well, now, when I started of course, why we had Mr. Wolf, Mr. L. C. Wolf was a teacher here. And he was a very good teacher. He was very good. And I know that I started and Wade Eberly and Albert Wells -- we all started the same year. Often times when we were going to institutes and one thing or another, we'd often mention what a good teacher he was. And I know that I tried to imitate him just as much as I could. Well, that's the only thing -- you didn't have any other training.

A: We didn't have any training at all.

Q: No, not only him but I can go back into grade school and I can remember the good teachers I had in grade school. And I tried to imitate them, too.

A: I can too. Mort Stillwell's sister Olive was my second grade teacher.

And that Mrs. Dr. Meyers that used to be in Wenona \_\_\_\_\_ she was my third and fourth grade teacher. No, fourth and fifth.

Q: My second -- probably second and third grade teacher when I was out in the country was Myrtle Patterson.

A: Oh, yes.

Q: Fred Patterson's sister. And she was cross. She was the one that had a stick or she had a -- it was more like a broomstick, I think! And she used to use it, too. (LAUGHTER) But she taught -- she taught phonics. That was just

Q: about the beginning of the phonics, and she'd drill us. Of course, I was in the maybe third or fourth grade, but I hadn't had it. And she would just drill us, you know, hour after hour. She'd drill us in that phonics. And I know by the time I started teaching why they had it in school and so I know that's how I happened to learn how to teach it in a way. I remembered how she did. But I didn't use a stick though like she did.

A: Well, we taught phonics. After five or six years I tutored children here in my home. And one mother brought her fourth grade boy \_\_\_\_\_ this new reading was going in and her boy just was not learning to read. So she brought him to me and wanted to know if I would teach him and use the phonics method. Well, I had a record player, records for it, and a book. And we had our phonics. His brother was in the first grade and he was having an awful time with numbers.

Q: Was that after you quit teaching?

A: Yes.

Q: That was after you quit teaching.

A: After I quit teaching. That was after I'd been a den mother. You see, I was a den mother for awhile -- the oldest in the state and probably the United States! I said other mothers had more sense than to do it at that age. (LAUGHTER) He went to Sunday school in Tonica, and in the spring his teachers said that he was one of the poorest readers -- about the poorest reader in her class of the fall. And by spring he was not the best reader, but he was one of the better readers. So I think the phonics helped him.

Q: Well, they're bringing phonics back now, too. They finally decided they had to bring them back.

A: I've heard several lately say that they need to go back to the three R's.

Q: Yes, I've seen that, too.

A: Well, it's pitiful to hear the children read or spell or anything.

Q: Or try to write a sentence.

A: Try to write a sentence or figure. Guy Plakers' brother, when he was living, worked in the school at Peoria. And he said, "Well, they put in the new" -- he wasn't a teacher, had other work, he said, "They put in the new reading method and made poor readers of our children. Now," he says, "They've put in the new mathematics method and they've made poor mathematicians of them."

Q: Yes, that's right. And then another thing that I've heard, too, you know, these new watches that they've got that you press a little button and it lights up? They say pretty soon the children won't be able to tell time either.

A: No. There's too much machine work now.

Q: That's right.

Janet Kankaala  
Transcriptionist

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(INTERVIEWEE)

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