

Elm Slough Unincorporated, Pottawatomie County, Kansas:
The School that Formed a Community of Neighbors



Elm Slough School Circa 1949
Source: Dolores Lambrecht personal photos and documents

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In rural Pottawatomie County, Kansas, along Flush Road leading north from the town of St. George and adjacent to a shallow creek-bed lies a vacant, tree-bordered lot. To the naked eye, this lot is nothing more than an acre of unused farmland, left to cultivate a variety of Kansan weeds. Yet, every piece of land has a story to tell, including this one, as I learned on my recent adventure into the old Elm Slough neighborhood of Pottawatomie County.

The lot in question once housed a schoolhouse, dubbed Elm Slough School, and provided a playground for neighborhood children living on scattered farms, especially to the south and west. By the 1920s and 1930s, only a small handful of children were attending the

school as rural landscapes and families changed. Elm Slough harkens back to a time when schoolhouses dotted the countryside, serving the children who lived within a walkable radius, usually, two miles. In general, these schoolhouses were small, one-room frame or stone buildings serving students through the eighth grade, and presided over by a single teacher. One room schools served not only as spaces for educational pursuits, but also provided a central gathering place for the widespread rural community that they served.

The Elm Slough School, likely established around the turn of the 20th century, was a roughly 20 X 40 foot structure built entirely of native Kansas



Figure 1: Dolores Weinman Lambrecht and classmates, October 1940. Mrs. Lambrecht is standing at the end of the back row. Source: Dolores Lambrecht

limestone, with the exception of a small wood-framed cloakroom. These cloak or mudrooms were commonly attached to the front of the school, as seen behind the students in Figure 1 to the above. Today, students who attended such schools still have vivid and sharp recollections of them. A raised platform in the rear of the building served as a stage for productions put on by the students and housed the teacher's desk during normal school days. Wooden desks lined the hardwood floors behind the small, wooden recitation bench placed in front of the stage, where students repeated their lessons. Lessons were also written on the blackboard lining the back wall. A pot-bellied stove provided warmth in the wintertime, and a Coleman lantern provided light on gloomy days, as there was no electricity. A school bell in the belfry signaled the beginning and end of the school day, which ran from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.¹ Unfortunately, the Elm Slough school building was

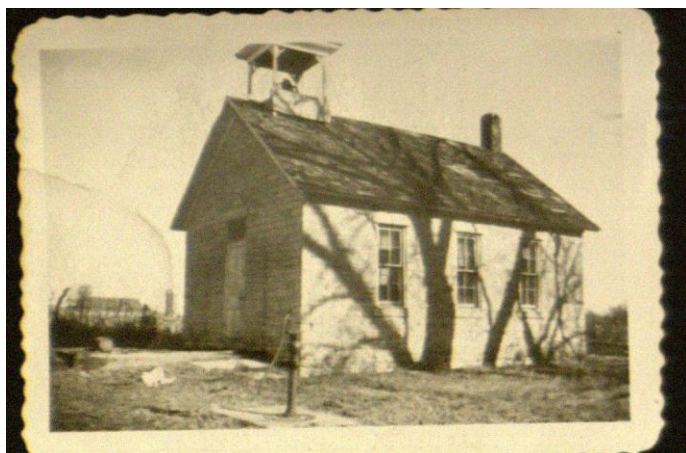


Figure 2: Photograph of Elm Slough School circa 1949.

Source: Dolores Lambrecht personal collection

destroyed after it was closed in the mid 1940s, leaving not even a single stone or part of a foundation behind to provide evidence of its existence.²

Gone also is the large elm tree that once shaded the school building, whose shadow can be seen in Figure 2. Gone are the outhouses constructed by the WPA during the Great

¹ Dolores Lambrecht, "Memories of Dolores Lambrecht," April 2012

² Field notes by author, July 16, 2012. Additional information provided by informal recollections of local people state that the stone blocks of the school were removed by Pottawatomie County to use in other buildings.

Depression. Yet, the land still remains, holding onto the long forgotten voices of children playing baseball and sliding along the frozen creek bed during the coldest months of the year. The school also persists in the memories and stories told by those who once attended the school, such as Dolores Lambrecht—a 1941 graduate of Elm Slough School—with whom I had the pleasure of visiting the Elm Slough neighborhood. Mrs. Lambrecht believes that the school stayed open only one more year, through 1942. From her stories, I was able to grasp the significance of this weed-covered plot of land in the lives of rural farm families like her own.

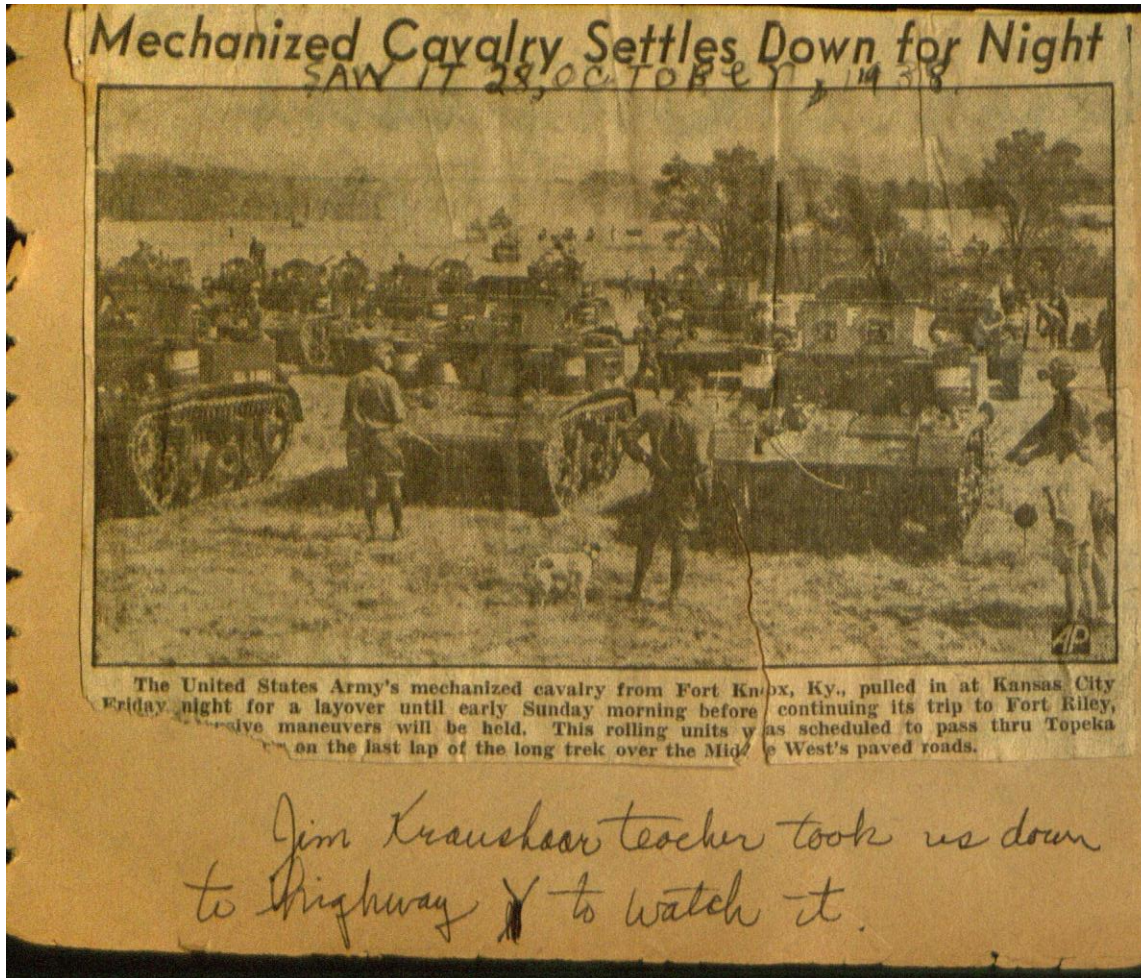
Like the majority of the children in her neighborhood, Dolores walked to school, although most families, including her own, owned automobiles in the 1930s. She recalled plowing through mud and snow from her home to the schoolhouse, down a path now known as Elm Slough Road.³ Automobiles were used to transport the students only under special circumstances, such as during a terrible Dust Bowl era dust storm, and for field trips to locations outside of the Elm Slough neighborhood. Children walked even in the worst weather.

Field trips provided new experiences for the students, connected them with the world outside their neighborhood, and provided a welcome break from schoolwork and farm life. On one occasion, Dolores recalled traveling to Manhattan in Riley County to tour the police and fire stations, as well as picnicking in a local park.⁴ Although many of the farm families traveled to Manhattan to shop and conduct other business, the fun nature of the trip locked it into the memory of a young schoolgirl. Another memorable, and perhaps more

³ Dolores Lambrecht, personal interview and field notes by author, Pottawatomie County, Kansas, July 16, 2012,

⁴ Dolores Lambrecht, “Memories.”

significant trip involved driving to Highway 24 to view an armored division of the U.S. Army traveling from Ft. Knox, Kentucky to Fort Riley, Kansas. The event marked the first time any of the children had seen an Army tank, and prompted young Dolores to save a



newspaper image of the event, seen in Figure 3 below.⁵ Years later, Dolores can still recall the details of these trips because they provided an escape from the regimen of rural life.

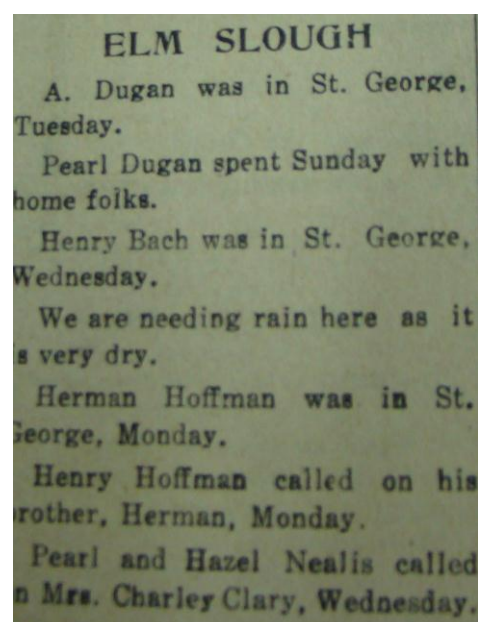
Figure 3: 1938 newspaper photo of U.S. Army Cavalry arriving in Kansas City
Source: "Mechanized Cavalry Settles Down for Night," AP photograph, Dolores Lambrecht personal documents and photographs.

⁵ Ibid.

While Elm Slough School primarily provided education, diversions and social connections for the children, they were not the only members of the neighborhood to benefit from its existence. The Elm Slough community often held “Literary Nights” at the schoolhouse, in which adults and children gathered to share readings, jokes, songs, skits, and a delicious meal. Neighbors also congregated to watch programs put on by the children to celebrate special events such as the ending of the school year. Because members of the community did not attend the same churches (there were both Catholic and Lutheran families in the neighborhood) and also, families had to travel elsewhere to shop, these gatherings served an important role. They connected neighbors and created a sense of community.⁶ Without the schoolhouse to bring them together, neighbors might not have been so congenial. The school gathered them together for watermelon feeds and impromptu ice cream socials.

Through meeting to support their children and enjoy one another’s society, the residents of the Elm Slough neighborhood formed a shared identity. Although their neighborhood did not have even a grocery store or post office and was not defined in a 1905 plat map of Pottawatomie County, Elm Slough was still recognized as a separate entity by people in the nearby communities of Flush and St. George -- so much so, in fact, that the community had its own blurb in the

Figure 4: 1911 newspaper column featuring Elm Slough news.
Source: *Westmoreland Recorder*, June 29, 1911



⁶ Dolores Lambrecht, personal interview.

local neighborhood section of the *Westmoreland Recorder* newspaper.⁷ A 1911 paper, seen in Figure 4, lists the local gossip under the headline of Elm Slough, but pieces at later dates are listed under St. George-Route 1, the name of the community's postal service.⁸



Figure 5: 1939 photo of Dolores Weinman Lambrecht and Elm Slough classmates.

Source: Dolores Lambrecht personal photograph collection

After the closing of the Elm Slough School, the community lost its strong ties. Many early residents left the community as their small family farms were

conglomerated into large commercial enterprises. Others remained in the area but saw the erosion of the social school world that had joined them to their neighbors. The children of Elm Slough, who went on beyond eighth grade attended St. George High School or Sacred Heart Academy in Manhattan, like Mrs. Lambrecht. People and lives dispersed. Dolores

⁷ In *the Standard Atlas of Pottawatomie County Kansas, 1905*, there is no label for the Elm Slough community.

⁸ "Elm Slough," *Westmoreland Recorder*, June 29, 1911.
 "St. George-Route 1," *Westmoreland Recorder*, April 24, 1941.



Weinman became a nurse and eventually married into a Jefferson County farming family.⁹ Today, in the age of Internet and smart phones, rural families no longer need to

rely on their neighbors for social connections, and community-gathering places like the Elm Slough School are no longer seen as the necessities they once were. Yet, at one time these schools that actually created and defined a neighborhood filled a vital need in the



lives of the people they served. For this reason, it is important to preserve their history, to remember just where they once stood, and to go there now and then.

Figures 6 and 7: Photographs taken of visit to Elm Slough School site. Dr. M.J. Morgan from Kansas State University listens as Mrs. Lambrecht describes the school. Also present are the author, 2012 KSU graduate and Chapman Center intern Erin Strathe, and Mrs. Benetta Foster, Mrs. Lambrecht's daughter (in hat).

Source: Photos taken by Angela Schnee, July 16, 2012... Pottawatomie County, Kansas.

⁹ Interview with Dolores Lambrecht, July 16, 2012, Pottawatomie County, Kansas.

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