

FIRST DRAFT

First teacher in Grand Junction faced unexpected difficulties

Every new teacher learns to expect the unexpected when it comes to education. But Grand Junction's first teacher, Nancy "Nannie" Blain, who also served as the community's first Sunday School teacher, faced problems unlike those encountered in the 21st century.

Her one-room schoolhouse was intentionally flooded by the school board president, causing the roof to collapse. Classes had to be moved that summer of 1882, first to a private home, then to a local club's building.

In July of 1882, Blain and several of her older female students organized the first Sunday School in Grand Junction. They recruited volunteers to teach, including an unnamed man who was to teach the adult Sunday School classes.

His tenure was brief, however, because "it was found he was teaching infidelity," Blaine told an interviewer in 1934. Although there was undoubtedly more to that story, Blain didn't elaborate.

Then on Sept. 2, 1882, the day the first session of classes ended at the school, Blain was recruited to conduct one of the first funerals in Grand Junction. All this occurred before her 20th birthday.

Nancy Blain (sometimes spelled Blaine) was born in Illinois in 1863, but moved with her family to Kansas when she was 6. After nine years of operating a small farm, the family moved again in 1878, this time to Cañon City.

There, Nancy attended a school for teachers, obtained a teaching certificate, and began teaching school in an isolated mining camp called Hell Gate, southwest of Cañon City. It's not clear how long she taught there, but it is known that the family was soon on the move again.

In the fall of 1881, as most Ute Indians were removed from Colorado and the Western Slope was opened to settlement, the Blain family began its emigration to the new community being built at the confluence of the Grand and Gunnison rivers.

Nancy's brother, Douglas, was the first to arrive, in the company of three other young men who had been living in Ouray. They headed for the newly opened lands in September of 1881, as soon as the news arrived that the Utes had been forcibly removed.

"It took them three days to make the journey" from Ouray, Nancy recalled 50 years later. "So, on the third day after the removal of the Indians, they crossed the Grand River into what has since been called the Grand Valley."

They were among the first settlers to stake claims on what was formerly the Ute Indian Reservation.

Nancy's father, Elam Blain, arrived in the Grand Valley in April of 1882. He is credited with planting the first fruit trees, although J.P. Harlow may have planted fruit trees a month earlier

Mrs. Nancy Blain Underhill, First School Teacher Here, Dies at 83

By FRANK H. REEDS

Nancy D. Underhill, widow of the late William Underhill, and a real pioneer of Mesa county and the west, passed away Friday evening at 4:40 at her home at 645 West Colorado, following an illness of about a month, of ailments incident to her advanced age. Mrs. Underhill was 83 years of age at the time of her passing, and during her span of life and residence in Mesa county she witnessed the growth of this area from a virtual wilderness occupied by Indians, to its present high state of development. Mrs. Underhill could justly claim the distinction of being a true pioneer of this valley as but few years out of her lifetime had been passed elsewhere than in the Grand valley.

Nancy D. Blain was born at Mason City, Ill., May 28, 1863. During her early childhood her parents moved to Kansas in 1873, moving later to Fremont county in 1880 and to Mesa county in 1882. Her father and elder brother, Douglas, had come on a few months before, to make a home and have a cabin for the family when they should arrive. Before leaving Cañon City, her father, Elam Blain had prepared a covered wagon to be drawn by two ponies and driven by his 16-year-old son, George. As there were no railroads or any other kind of roads except a few wagon tracks beside the Indian trails, in the country known as the Ute reservation, at that time, this was the best and most comfortable way to travel. Miss Blain, with her mother and brother, George, arrived at the Blain ranch about four miles east of Grand Junction May 20, 1882.

Mesa county was at that time just being taken over from the Ute Indians and Mrs. Underhill claimed the distinction of being the first school teacher in Grand Junction.

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MRS. NANNIE BLAIN UNDERHILL, who taught the first school in Grand Junction in 1882. (From a photograph taken at that time.)

THE DAILY SENTINEL THROUGH WWW.NEWSPAPERS.COM

The front-page news story/obituary that appeared in The Daily Sentinel in January of 1946, when Nancy Blain Underhill died.

on Rapid Creek, east of Palisade.

Nancy and her mother, accompanied by Nancy's brother George, left Cañon City in a heavy freight wagon in May, 1882, traveling to Poncha Springs, into the San Luis Valley, then over Cochetopa Pass, west to the Uncompahgre Valley and finally north to Grand Junction.

The journey took them 11 days.

The Blain family farm staked out by Douglas Blain was on the Grand (now Colorado) River about 4.5 miles east of what were then the town limits of Grand Junction.

On June 1, 1882, the first school board was organized, with Dr. Harrison E. Stroud, Grand Junction's first physician, as president. Nancy Blain applied for and was accepted as the first teacher.

One glitch occurred because her teaching certificate from Cañon City was not initially recognized in Gunnison County, which at the time included Grand Junction.

Dr. Stroud received permission from Gunnison County authorities to personally examine Blain, then grant her a teaching certificate if he found her acceptable, which he did.

It was Stroud who inadvertently destroyed the first school building. The wooden picket structure where Nancy taught her 20 school students initially the summer of 1882 had a dirt floor, which had to be wet down every night to keep dust to a minimum.

Stroud thought it would save time to divert irrigation water through the building.

Instead, when the floor was flooded, the upright

pickets separated and the building's sod roof collapsed.

The first term of the new school lasted three months, and Nancy received a salary of \$50 per month. Money for Nancy's salary and other school expenses were raised through subscriptions, not taxes.

Instead of money for her last month of work, Nancy received a lot in Grand Junction.

Rather than ride or walk from the family farm each day, Nancy boarded at the Randall Hotel, the first brick structure in Grand Junction.

Although there was as yet no church in Grand Junction, seven saloons were operating in the small community when Nancy began teaching.

However, they all agreed to close their doors for the first Sunday School service, and most of the saloon owners joined about 50 people who attended that service.

The first public school term ended on September 2, 1882, and a public program was held to commemorate the term, with speeches by several students and local dignitaries.

Immediately after the school event, however, Nancy conducted a funeral for a young man who had died and was a stranger in town.

There was no church in town at the time, no preacher, and no one else eager to perform the task. So Nancy, a lifelong member of The Brethren Church, agreed to handle it.

There was also no cemetery as yet, so after the service, the young man's body was hauled into the desert some distance

from town and buried.

As the winter session of the Grand Junction school was approaching, Nancy Blain was again offered the teaching position.

But she declined. She had more pressing matters. She returned to Cañon City and on Sept. 10, 1882, married William Underhill, whom she had known when the Blain family lived there.

She and William lived in Cañon City for 18 years, raising three children.

In 1900, they moved to Mesa County and lived near Collbran. William Underhill died in 1913, and two years later, Nancy Blain Underhill moved to California.

She returned to Grand Junction in 1922 and lived with her brother, George, on the Redlands.

Later, she moved to a home on Colorado Avenue in Grand Junction, where she was living when she died in 1946.

Sources: "The First School, Sunday School and Funeral in Grand Junction," as told by Nancy Blain Underhill to Frances Strock, The Colorado Magazine, March 1934; "Trekking to the Grand River Valley in 1882," by Nancy Blain Underhill, The Colorado Magazine, September, 1931; "Mrs. Nancy Blain Underhill, First School Teacher Here, Dies at 83," by Frank H. Reeds, The Daily Sentinel, Jan. 19, 1946, through www.newspapers.com; "Nancy (Nannie) Blaine[sic] Underhill," Mesa County Libraries, https://mesa.marmot.org/Archive/person:8629/Person.

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