

FIRST DRAFT

AN EXPERIENCE LEARNING



BOB SILBERNAGEL/Special to The Daily Sentinel

The Elkhead School, also called the Rock School because of its construction, sits on a hilltop in the Elkhead Mountains about 20 miles north of Hayden. The Green Family, which owns the Elkhead School building, has been gradually restoring it, and frequently allows groups, such as this one from the Hayden Heritage Center, to visit the school. The view is looking south toward Hayden.

Routt County teaching duo left a legacy for their students and their granddaughters

On July 27, 1916, two women from Auburn, New York, arrived by train in Hayden, Colorado, and began a nine-month adventure. Dorothy Woodruff and Rosamond Underwood were to be teachers at the new Elkhead School, also called the Rock School.

They would have approximately 30 students, ages six to 16. Dorothy would teach the younger students while Rosamond taught the older ones.

They were among the thousands of single women from the East and Midwest who traveled west in the 1800s and early 1900s to take teaching positions in small communities.

The schoolhouses where they taught — mostly one-room frame structures — became important local assets.

"A community's construction of a school building often reflected not only a belief in the importance of universal education but a desire to lend an aura of permanence to the community itself," according to History Colorado.

The Elkhead School certainly met that criteria, constructed of rock and lots of volunteer labor.

However, Woodruff and Underwood were different from many teachers in pioneer settlements. They had grown up in well-to-do families in Upstate New York and had attended Smith College. Together they had made the Grand Tour, a year-long visit to Europe.

They were both 29 when they arrived in Hayden, old maids by the standards of the time.

The school in the Elkhead Mountains was 20 miles north of Hayden by very rough roads. It took several hours by wagon or horseback to reach the school from Hayden, the nearest town.

"The girls," as the two teachers were called, boarded with the family of Mary and Frank Harrison, two miles from the school. They rode horseback to the school each day.

Additionally, Dorothy and Rosamond wrote frequent letters to their families during the months they spent at Elkhead. Those letters became the foundation of a book called "Nothing Daunted: The Unexpected Education of Two Society Girls in the West." It was written by Dorothy Wickenden, former executive editor of *The New Yorker* magazine and Dorothy Woodruff's granddaughter.

Wickenden recalled her grandmother as "white haired,

impeccably attired and sometimes stern." But she was also "spirited and funny" and told wonderful stories to her grandchildren.

Wickenden received a folder of her grandmother's letters from Elkhead when she was a young adult, but didn't delve into them immediately.

That changed in 2008, when Wickenden pulled out letters "and I read them all in one setting," she said. "Reading her voice as a 29-year-old, I saw my grandmother from a different perspective. I thought, 'This is a story I can tell.'"

When Wickenden also found Rosamond Underwood's letters from Elkhead, through Rosamond's descendants, she was able to tell their story in her best-selling book.

Subsequently, a second book was published that deals in part with the Elkhead School. Titled "Only Connect," it was written by Belle Zars, one of Rosamond Underwood's granddaughters.

In June, Judy and I were fortunate to visit the Elkhead School and hear from both authors about their books and their experiences related to the school.

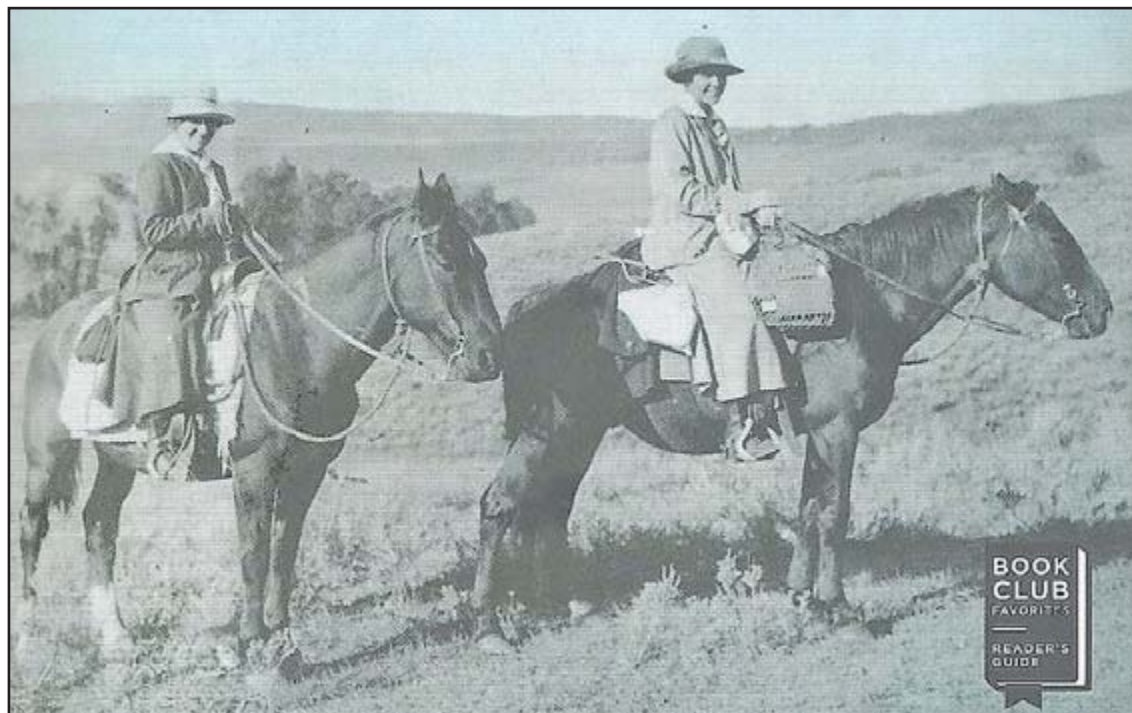
The building is now privately owned by the Green family, but they allow people to visit the school, which they are restoring and maintaining. Our visit, with a dozen other people, was a fundraiser for the Hayden Heritage Center in Hayden.

To tell the girls' story, one must also mention Ferry Carpenter, in securing financing for the school, and in hiring Woodruff and Underwood.

Although he later owned a large ranch just east of Hayden, Carpenter's first property in Colorado was a 160-acre plot he homesteaded in 1907 in the Elkhead Mountains.

By 1910, many people had homesteaded in the Elkhead Mountains. So, Carpenter and others began stumping for an Elkhead School District. It was chartered in 1911, encompassing 226 square miles and listing 44 school-age children. Classes were initially held in two drafty cabins.

In 1915, Carpenter and a ranch wife named Paroda Fulton persuaded Elkhead residents to pass a \$5,000 bond issue for a new school to be situated on a mesa near the center of the district. It wasn't easy. Some thought the cost exorbitant for a school.



COURTESY OF DOROTHY WICKENDEN

Dorothy Woodruff, left, and Rosamond Underwood, right, on horseback near Hayden, Colorado, likely heading toward the Elkhead Mountains.

But the measure passed. Stonemasons and a construction overseer were hired. Homesteaders provided volunteer labor and embraced the school.

"I think it goes back to why they moved here from all over the country," said Zars. "They had dreams to own land and have a better life, a different life for their children."

She cited the Mitchell family, homesteaders who had previously been sharecroppers in the Oklahoma, and whose six children had rarely attended school.

"They were shocked when they were told their kids had to go to school," she said. But they supported the school, and their children loved the opportunity to learn rather than spend all their time on farm work.

With the school was under construction, Carpenter contacted his sister back east, who placed an advertisement in a teacher's magazine for prospective teachers. Among those who responded were Dorothy Woodruff and Rosamond Underwood.

After exchanging letters with Carpenter, they were hired and moved to Elkhead. They rode to school each day, pushing through deep snowdrifts in winter, sometimes using skis. They maintained the school building, organized community events and taught themselves to become teachers.

"What they didn't know about teaching methods, they made up in zeal," said one former student.

At the end of the 1916-1917 school year, the girls returned to New York. Underwood's fiancé, Robert Perry, joined her. He owned a mine in Oak Creek, Colorado, 45 miles from Hayden. They were married in Auburn, New York, on June 30, 1917, then returned to live near Oak Creek, and later, Denver. Robert died in 1934, but Rosamond remained in Colorado.

Four days after Underwood's wedding, Woodruff married



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Authors Dorothy Wickenden, left, and Belle Zars, right, outside the Elkhead School in June 2024 during a fundraiser for the Hayden Heritage Center.

Lemuel Hillman of Grand Rapids, Michigan, whom she'd met six months before moving to Hayden. She lived with him in Michigan until his death in 1930, then eventually moved near her family in New York.

Ferry Carpenter married an Elkhead School teacher named Eunice Pleasant. When Eunice died in 1955, Carpenter turned to an old friend. So it was that four decades after "the girls" arrived in Hayden, widower Ferry Carpenter married widow Rosamond Underwood Perry.

The Elkhead Mountains proved to be poor farming country. Most homesteaders sold out or abandoned their land by the 1930s. Elkhead School was boarded up in 1938.

Even so, several of Dorothy and Rosamond's students went on to successful careers. Lewis

Harrison, who as a teenager escorted the two women from his family's ranch to the schoolhouse, later became chief forester for the state of Montana.

At a memorial for Rosamond, Harrison recalled the two teachers "who came riding into our lives in a spring wagon late one afternoon." He added, "Little did I realize at the time the important and lasting influence it was going to have, not only on me, but on most youths and many adults of the Elkhead community."

Sources: "Nothing Daunted," by Dorothy Wickenden; "Only Connect," by Belle Zars; author interviews with Wickenden and Zars; "Rural School Buildings in Colorado," www.historycolorado.org/rural-school-buildings-colorado.

Bob Silbernagel's email is bobsilbernagel@gmail.com