



Zella Mae Williams was born and raised in Kentucky. She and her husband came to Steamboat as a young couple because one of her daughters had asthma. She made a career of teaching. She taught for a total of 36 years, 11 in Kentucky, 4 in Tow Creek, and 21 in Steamboat Springs. She loves people, especially kids, which is why I chose her as a subject for *Three Wire Winter*. Here's how her story began:

"I was born in Owensboro, Kentucky, on June 15, 1908. My family lived on a farm, and I went to school in a one-room school house, but I stayed in Owensboro with my grandparents through all eight grades. I had to take an exam to enter high school in Owensboro, where I stayed with my grandparents through the four years.

"In March of my senior year in high school my principal was to be promoted to county superintendent of schools. He picked four students from my class to go to college to earn 16 semester hours, so that we could teach in one of the schools where he was going to be superintendent. So four girls were chosen, and we went to college.

*"Get your children
to love you
and then you will
get something
out of them."*

By Kalli Sanders

"I didn't get to go to my senior prom, because I was away at college. I did come back for graduation though and graduated with my class. We had a week off, so we could come back to graduate; then we had to go back to college and stay until the end of August, to get in all of our hours.

"I taught two years before I bought my first car. It was a little Ford coupe. It was so cute, and I was so proud! Also in 1935, I bought a Chevy coach. I would pick up the teachers and we would go to KEA (Kentucky Education Association) meetings. I used to travel a lot with my own car.

"I ran around with these eight girls, and one weekend we decided that we didn't want to have any dates. I had my car, and one of the other girls had her car; so all eight of us went together to this ice cream supper. On our way home, my car started skipping and jumping like nobody's business. I was so darn mad at that thing! I thought some sort of strange thing had happened because it was skipping and jumping so much.

*"All eight of us went together
to this ice cream supper."*

"The next morning we went to Sunday School, and a bunch of the boys that we were dating were there. But, Herschel, who is my husband now, wasn't there. One of those boys said to me, 'Zellie, how do you like that little coupe?' And I said, 'Well, I like it just fine, Bill, but lately it's just been skipping so bad I don't know what's wrong with it.' Well, he raised the hood and put the distributor cap back on. Herschel had done it, you see, and maybe that's why he wasn't there. Herschel and I weren't going together then.

"Herschel used to go out with a really cute girl named Toots. One Saturday night Herschel went to get Toots to take her to an ice cream supper, but she had already gone. So he called and asked me if I would like to go. So I went, and when we

got there we found out that Toots was already there with someone else, but she was mad at me for a long time after that.

"The young people had so much fun in those days. When it came time to harvest watermelons, the boys would go into the farmers' watermelon patches and harvest some. We used to play Chinese Checkers and many other games. Now, I was brought up to believe that it was wrong for girls to play cards, but lots of kids did. So when I became a young woman, I said to my dad once, 'Now Papa, there's a bunch of youngsters coming over here to play cards; they're coming to play Rook.' He didn't like it, but after that I played cards.

"After high school I went to school at Kentucky Teacher's College. This one girl, (Mary Ruth), and I were good friends in high school and roommates in college. We were rooming in a big rooming house, and there was another girl (Opal) living with us. We called her an old maid. She wasn't old, of course, but anyhow, she wanted to go to college, but her parents were afraid for her to be away from home. So she went with us to college. She had long hair which she braided around her ears and head. She wasn't there two weeks when she went down and got her hair cut and got a permanent. The first thing we knew she was having dates.



"There was another girl living with us that we called an old maid."

"Anyway, we three girls were taking psychology together. Opal Cline, the old maid, Mary Ruth Waltred, my roommate, and I were

always together. My name at that time was Zella Mae Young. Anyway, we went to the psychology class, and this old guy was real high-headed, at least 80 years old with white wiry hair sticking straight out from his head. He was so gruff, I didn't dare ask any questions. There were 140 of us in the class, and he told us the very first day how many of us would get As, how many would get Bs, how many would get Cs, how many Ds, and how many Fs. He had it all figured out how

he was going to do it. Well, we three studied together, and we took our tests and compared grades. We also compared answers on the returned tests. You know how the tests came out? Opal got an A, Mary Ruth received a C, and Zella Mae made an F. Well, I was just crushed.

"I didn't have the money to go to college; I had borrowed money, and my dad had signed the note. Of course, I was to pay it back when I started teaching. Anyhow, I went to the Dean and said I had to have that psychology course to graduate, but I told him that if I had to take it under that fellow again, I would just go home. So he let me take the class again, and that was extra hours. I shouldn't have had to take the class over; anyhow, I came out with a B."

"Get your children to love you and then you will get something out of them."

Next, Zella Mae talked about her early teaching experiences, "I first started teaching when I was eighteen years old. I taught grades one through four, and another teacher taught five through eight. Those first summers I went to school in Bowling Green to finish my college. That was when I was single. I was able to pay back my bank note that first year, because I lived at home with my mother and father and I didn't have to pay any board. Since the two room school house was three miles away we rode to school on horseback. I had 30 some odd students. That was quite an adventure. The children brought in the wood and I made the fire.

"The third year I taught, there was a man who taught the high grades, and I taught the lower grades. He was the boyfriend of my roommate, Mary Ruth. In those days my parents didn't think it was right for me to ride to school with him in his car. My little brother, who was in the third grade, had to go along with us as a chaperone. My brother was a smart kid, but he was just the talk of everyone. The other children were jealous of him and they teased him because his sister was the teacher and he got good grades. That wasn't it though. I didn't help him at home; he was just good in school.

"I never really had any major discipline problems while I was teaching. Of course, you

could use a 'switch' then. At one time, I had forty five children in one room. Every year I tried to let the children know that I loved them all. I remember one year I had this child named Joe, who was 12 years old and in the second grade for two or three years. Everyone said that I would have trouble with him, because he couldn't learn. My dad had said to me, 'Whatever you do, get your children to love you, and then you will get something out of them.' Well, everything Joe did was not right, but I did not punish him in front of the other kids. Instead, I talked with him after school and tried to let him know that I thought a lot of him. Before the year was out, that boy did love me.

"After we had moved to Colorado, I went back to Kentucky for a visit and saw Joe at a funeral. He came up to me and said, 'Miss Zella Mae, I don't know where I'd be today if it hadn't been for you.' He was married and had eight kids. So, what my dad had told me meant a lot. I felt I was kind of hard on Joe, in a way, but it stuck with me that that child needed love, and he learned that I did love him. The children today are different from when I first started teaching, yet they still need love.



"I played ball with the fourth graders, I was their pitcher."

"In my fourth year of teaching, they did away with the two room schoolhouse. I started teaching in a school 12 miles away from my mother and father's house. It was out in a fifty-six acre wood, and the children and I had to walk to get to school. I had my own room and boarded

with a widow lady, you see. I ate in the kitchen with Mrs. Drewey and Uncle John. Uncle John was a bachelor. If it was a bad morning, he would walk to school with me carrying an ax, in case we came upon a tree that had fallen or something like that. At school, I had chores to do, and I would wait for the children to start coming.

"One year, a little six-year-old boy was to come to school. He had the longest distance to walk. His parents were worried about it, so they came to me and asked if his little five-year-old brother could come along. They said they didn't think Charles, the five-year-old, would give me any trouble. At that time, I was dating Herschel, who is my husband now, and I'd go home over the weekend to spend time with him. It's not like dating today; we would have dates, and couples would get together and either play cards or games. We'd have a lot of fun. It wouldn't be just one couple; it would be several couples together. When it came time to be back in school on Monday, I was just worn out.

"Well, this certain Monday, I was sitting in front of Charles, as I was turned around to talk to him, and I guess I nodded because Charles said, 'Miss Zella Mae, you sleepy!' I said I certainly am, Charles, I guess you'll just have to slap me and wake me up.' I had hardly even said it when he slapped me!! Well, I was to blame. His brother told his parents, and they came to school the next morning and were going to take him out of school and I don't know what else. I told the parents that they should not do anything to Charles because he was just doing what I had told him to do. Well, that was the best little boy in school, and he learned a lot just sitting there listening. I really didn't have him in class, you know, but when you're teaching in a one-room schoolhouse, your eighth grade pupils, or even your sixth or seventh graders, are so much help with the little children.

"I had hardly even said it when he slapped me!"

"I ran into a former student of mine in Denver after we had come here. He told me a little story about when I was teaching. He asked if I remembered sending him after a switch to whip Eugene. I said, 'Yes,' and he said, 'Do you remember how every time you would whip him, a piece of the switch would fly off?' I didn't remember that. Then the student told me that he took his knife and every so often he cut a little notch. Every time I whipped Eugene a piece would fly off."

I asked Zella Mae about courting. She said, "This fellow that I used to teach with and I were boarding at the same house. At the time I dated a boy named Lee-Otis from college who had gone to Pikes Peak to work and so I was writing to



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him. There was also another boy that I had gone with and I started dating his cousin. So, here I was writing to Lee-Otis, Joe and Eugene, and I was dating Herschel, too. One day, I was writing to these boys at Mama’s big desk in the bedroom because it was warm in there. Somehow the letters were switched in their envelopes. All the boys got a kick out of it, ‘cause you see, they all three knew each other. I didn’t write anything that hurt, but it was still a mistake. I was just one of those people who wrote about the weather and the things young people were doing at the time.

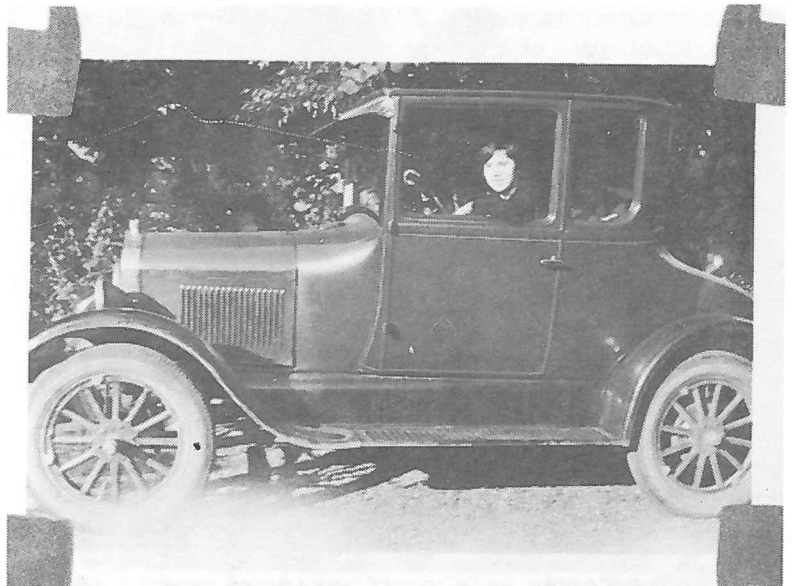
“I married in 1934, in Kentucky, and Herschel was a farmer. I didn’t teach for 10 years after we were married. We bought a farm, and after two years, Barbara Ann, our first child, was born. Four years later, in April, Neda Mae, our second daughter, was born. We came to Steamboat in 1946 because Barbara Ann had asthma, and we heard that the mountain air might be good for her.

“When we first came to Steamboat it was so nice. We knew everyone, and they were all nice people. The town was a lot smaller, the main stores were Routt County National Bank, Dorothy’s, Allen’s and F. M. Light’s. There were three car garages right downtown, Plymouth, Buick and Chevrolet. We bought a four-door Plymouth, and we were so proud. I wish this town was like it was then. There used to be an old grocery store where the Cantina is now and when

we moved here the man who owned it found out that our little girl had allergies and needed special things to eat. Whenever something we needed would come in, he would call me and let me know. Lowell Shear taught the children to square dance at the pool. People were so friendly. I could let my little girls walk downtown at night to the movies. We couldn’t have moved to a better place for our children than here. Nowadays, you just can’t do that. I would hesitate to walk downtown alone at night myself now. Of course, there are still many nice people here, like at the Dorothy Shop. This has been wonderful that we came here. The Lord has taken care of us. We didn’t know how we were going to make it, but thanks to the town and the people we did.

“I started teaching out at Tow Creek in a little two-room school house. The county superintendent at that time was Tommie Brannock and she was a wonderful person. Tow Creek is just past Milner. My time spent teaching out there was wonderful. You see, I only had five students so I could spend more time with each child and their individual interests. The older kids taught my two little girls to ski out behind the school house. There was a pony out there too, and they took my girls riding. I always looked forward to recess, because I played ball with the fourth graders. I was their pitcher.

“It stuck with me that children need love.”



“I taught for two years before I bought this Ford Coupe.”

“One day, I believe it was Good Friday, a man came to visit the school. He said that he was a teacher and had the day off, and he wanted to visit a one-room school. So I said, ‘Alright, you just sit down, but I’m going about my work like

I'm in the habit of doing.' Well, I found out later that he was Basil Moore, the principal of the Steamboat Springs grade school. He was looking for a teacher for the Steamboat School system and I got the job. I taught fourth grade, English and reading, and another teacher taught social studies and science. We each taught our own spelling and math classes. That was when I taught in what is now the old junior high school building. I always looked forward to recess, because I played ball with the fourth graders. I was their pitcher. I never did teach at Soda Creek Elementary School because I retired in 1972, after teaching for thirty six years."

I asked Zella Mae about her life now, since she retired from teaching. "I love to travel. In 1975, we spent four months in Florida, on the Gulf of Mexico. The next year we went to Apache Junction in Arizona, and one year we went to Washington state and I caught three salmon. Another year we went to Hawaii. This year we went on a tour of the Holy Land, and that was a wonderful experience. I'm also happy with my sewing.



"We came to Steamboat because Barbara Ann had asthma."

"My quilts are my hobby. I bought the treadle sewing machine that I have now in 1931, and I had a motor put in it later, and I wouldn't trade it for anything. All of my quilts are stitched by hand. I also sew for people. I keep track of the hours I spend working on garments, and then I charge by the hour. I don't sew much for the money as I do for the people that come to see me. I just love having people come to see me and visit.

"My husband Herschel and I are celebrating our 50th anniversary on July 8th. We're having a

lot of people come up and celebrate with us. Herschel is the "bee man" here in town. He raises bees and sells honey. In fact, the children knew Herschel as the "bee man" before they connected him with me.

"It hurts me to see adults make remarks about children. I never had any "pets" in school. Most of the children today are just looking for love. It does me so much good to have the kids that I've taught come up to me on the street and say hello. I used to teach Doug McGill; he's a junior in college now. He came up to me a while ago and said, 'Mrs. Williams, you look even younger now than you did then!'"

Betty Dawson originally started this story. I went with her on the interview, and really enjoyed Zella Mae's quaint stories. Betty then left and married. I continued the story from there. Zella Mae's 21 years of teaching here in Steamboat have greatly contributed to our community. I enjoyed writing this story and getting to know her. She was a wonderful teacher and is a wonderful lady with a lot of personality, the kind of "grandma" we would all like to have.



"He said, 'Mrs. Williams, you look even younger now than you did then!'"