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PHOTO BY NICOLE BUTZ

## *Bearspaw Historical Society records local history*

BY STACY MCGUIRE, COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR

Attending school today is entirely different than it was less than 100 years ago. In the early 1900s, there were **no school buses** to pick up students, **no running water and no electricity**. Students of all ages and grades often **shared a communal room** and had **one teacher** in a schoolhouse. The Bearspaw Historical Society members were inspired to capture the experiences of those who taught and attended the one and two room schoolhouses, and they set out on an **ambitious oral history project** spanning from the early 1920s to the 1960s.

**IN 1998, THE BEARSPAW HISTORICAL SOCIETY**, intent on preserving the one room Bearspaw Schoolhouse, purchased it from the Bearspaw Lions Club and moved the school to its present location. They later moved and renovated the teacherage, and created a replica of the horse barn where students and teachers kept their horses during the school day. The society wanted to document the history of the school and way of life of those who attended it. To assist them in the task, they asked researcher Elisa Hart to locate and interview former teachers, trustees and students who attended the school, and so began Phase One of the oral history project to record the cultural heritage of Bearspaw.

### **Phase One: 1920s – 1950s**

Elisa Hart began the oral history project in 2009, with three goals: to document the experiences of those who attended or taught at the Bearspaw School; to gain insights into the rural way of life in Bearspaw; and to document the process of moving and renovating the historic school. Hart began the project by interviewing a limited number of people to see what type of information she could gather.

Former students shared their experiences about travelling to and from school, and the features of the schoolroom such as the desks, the piano, lighting, heating, washrooms, drinking water and their experiences with school concerts, lessons and play.

The former students also shared experiences with dairy farming and the types of chores they did on the farm. The Bearspaw area did not receive power and telephone service until the early 1950s, so the chores were quite different as children were required to help cut, carry and pile wood, carry water and bring in coal.

Hart conducted the interviews often accompanied by Louise McAuley, the president of the society, and she photographed each participant. She recorded and transcribed the interviews using excerpts in the report. Fifteen people were interviewed resulting in hundreds of pages of transcripts. Local Bearspaw resident Tim Bancroft was interviewed for the project. He attended Grade 1 at the Bearspaw School in 1930 along with about 16 other classmates. He recalls riding to school about three miles on horseback, but with no saddle.

“We envied the children who had a saddle,” says Bancroft. “My brother and I shared the horse, and we switched horses every week to give them a rest. The horse’s names were Kitty and Charlie. When we arrived at school the horses went into the barn for the day. We thought the children in Calgary who rode bicycles to school every day were very lucky.”

First thing in the morning, one of the students would bring in wood for the stove and a bucket of drinking water from the farm

next door. Bancroft says the students shared one tin cup for the drinking water. When they arrived at school, the students hung up their coats and lunch containers on the hooks as they entered the room. Unless of course it was winter and their lunches were frozen. The little stove which heated up the room would have a cover put over it and the lunches would be set on top to thaw.

Students from Grades 1 to 8 shared the classroom, with the first grade students nearest the window progressing up to the eighth grade students nearest the blackboard. The assignments were written on the blackboard each morning, so the students could continue with their work while the teacher taught each grade.

“We learned a great deal from listening to what the other students were being taught,”





PHOTO COURTESY OF GLENBOW ARCHIVES, NA-5162-2

Left and below: Bears paw School, then and now.  
 Top right: Bears paw School teacher Helen Scott with students in 1962. Recognize any of them? Contact the Bears paw Historical Society.  
 Bottom right: Back row, left to right, Louise McAuley, President of the Bears paw Historical Society, Tim Bancroft, former student, Elisa Hart, researcher for project. Front, Fran Bancroft, volunteer.

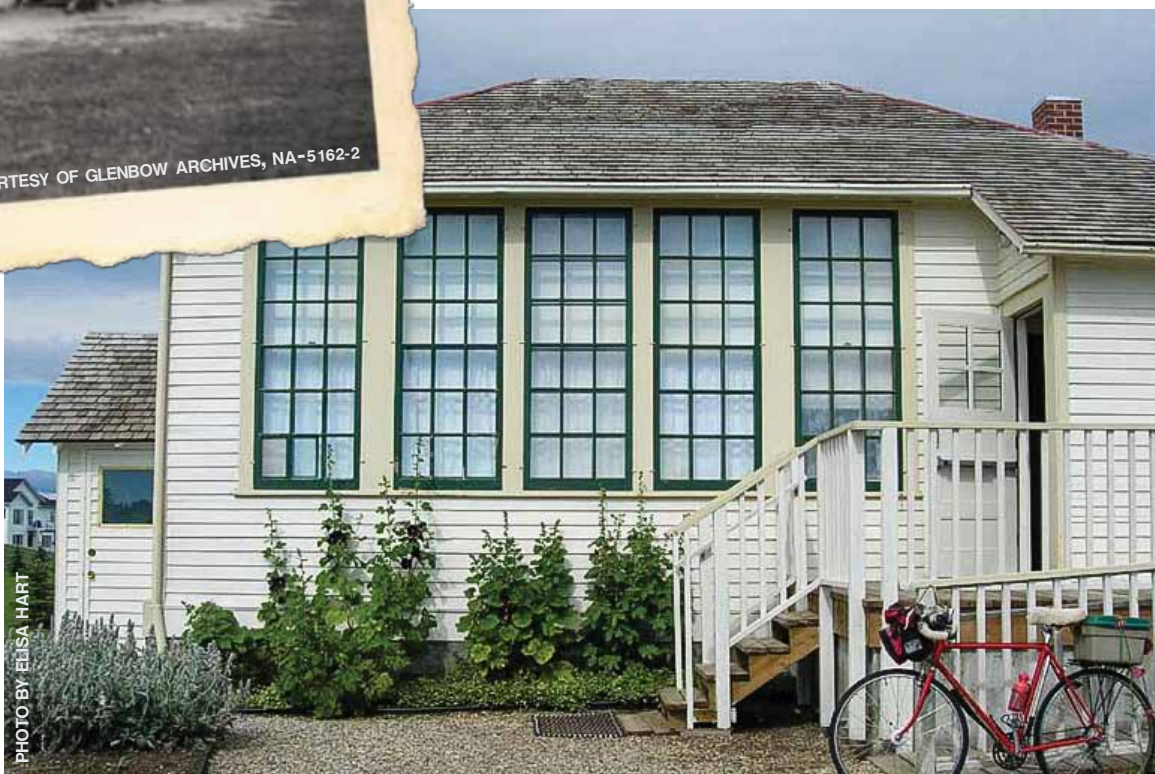


PHOTO BY ELISA HART

says Bancroft. "We knew what to expect the following year. I think we had an advantage sharing a classroom with older students."

Before the Bears paw School could be built in 1920, they had to have at least four people to pay school taxes, and at least eight children between the ages of five and sixteen, which they did. The proposed number of acres for the school district was about 12,000, with the school grounds consisting of native grasslands. The average price of land per acre was \$20 dollars; and the school taxes per acre in 1920 were 10 cents.

"It was difficult to stop the first phase, as valuable information was pouring in," says Hart. "It became apparent we needed to have a second phase to the project."

Phase One was completed in late 2011, and the full 156 page document is called, "The 1920 Bears paw School Oral History Project Report - 2011, Phase One (1920 to the Early 1950's)." With plentiful historic and modern day pictures, maps and stories, it is a fascinating and impressive read.

**Phase Two: 1920s - 1965**

The Bears paw Historical Society received the necessary funds in June 2012 to proceed with Phase Two of the oral history project. They once again asked Elisa Hart for assistance with the interviews and research,

but this time with the aim to extend into the years until the close of the school in 1965. They also want to finish interviewing any remaining students for the time period covered in Phase One of the project. Phase Two will include other historic schools: the Glendale School, the Westminster School and the Glenbow School in west Rocky View County.


"We are hoping to learn the context around attending school and learn the day-to-day aspects of rural life for the children," says Hart. "Rural life has changed a great deal and we wish to continue gaining insight into what it was like at that time."

Hart says the goal is to create a final report, a photo bank of images, and a bound set of interview transcriptions and written submissions. They are searching for former teachers, students and school trustees to provide information about school and rural life from 1920 to about 1965. The society is looking for items such as report cards, stories, poems, art work, trustee minutes, school registers, names of students,

photographs and anything representative of rural life.

Once they have collected all the documentation for the second phase of the project, they aim to create a photography exhibit in the Bears paw School Complex buildings; make a public presentation as a project windup on their findings; create reports on the oral history results of the three other schools; and present the results of the Bears paw school in a book. The society will also produce a manual on doing this type of research for the benefit of other groups who may choose to embark on a similar history project.

"This is not only valuable for the community, but provides information their children and future generations can learn from and enjoy," says Hart.

If you have information or pictures to share with the Bears paw Historical Society, please call Elisa Hart at 403.851.1440 or email the Bears paw Historical Society at [info@bears pawhistoricalsociety.com](mailto:info@bears pawhistoricalsociety.com). 



## THE COUNTY GETS READY FOR WINTER

**SNOW FENCING INSTALLATION**  
Rocky View County road crews will be installing snow fencing in the next few weeks to help diminish drifting of snow onto county roads.

- Installed before ground frost gets too deep
- Put up about 25 to 35 metres from the edge of the road
- 1.2 metres high
- Affected landowners will be notified to reduce disruption to farming operations while fencing is installed
- Crews will not enter lands where obvious farming is underway

For more information, call **403.520.6378** or visit [www.rockyview.ca](http://www.rockyview.ca).