



Eulaine Benda



Opal Bryan



Amy Rehm



Violet Schissler



Elaine Cody Thomas

Women graduated during Depression

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The Great Depression was in full swing nearly 72 years ago when five residents of the Decatur County Good Samaritan Center were classmates at Decatur Community High School, graduating together in 1937.

Elaine (Van Vleet) Cody Thomas, Opal (Castle) Bryan, Amy (Anderson) Rehm, Eulaine (Erikson) Benda and Violet (Henningson) Schissler were all country girls and shared many memories of the Dust Bowl Days and the hardships families endured during the 1930s.

Mrs. Thomas said that she was born at the farm home of her parents, Weaver and Alice (Ambler) Van Vleet in Harlan Township. She attended Locust Grove country school. Ruth Nicodemus was her first teacher, she said, and she usually had more than 15 students in the eight grades.

"I rode a horse to grade school and sometimes the mothers would bring hot lunches to school at noon," said Mrs. Thomas.

With three daughters in the family, she said that she was "dad's girl," and helped him with chores, milking and even drove horses in the field. Her mother taught the girls to cook, but refused to let them make an angel food cake or homemade bread because they might fail and waste the ingredients. Mrs. Thomas said that when she tried making bread on her own after she was married, it was so bad she had to throw it down a hole in the privy.

When she started as a freshman in the old high school, she and several others stayed in town during the week and "batched," bringing food from home. She said she stayed at the Clayton Diehl and Ross Chilson homes. Her favorite teacher was Martha Douglas, who taught Latin.

"Our weekends at home were spent washing our clothes on the old push washing machine, ironing, baking and preparing food for the next week," she said. "I played French horn in the band and we had to wash those white band uniforms. My folks would give us 25 cents for the week to use in case we ran out of kerosene for our four-burner cook stove."

"A highlight I remember is when the band got to go to Enid, Okla., to play for a college football game," she said. "Daddy took a carload and it was so cold we had to wear long underwear!"

She said she remembers the first time she really noticed a classmate, Elden Cody, was in the band room. She said that morning on the way to school, she and her sister, Barbara, had a flat tire and though they managed to fix it, they were late.

"When I walked into the band room," she recalled, "Mr. Pillar was showing Elden how to hold the violin properly. When he saw me come in, he really chewed me out for being late."

She said her first date with Elden was at the FFA date hike. He wrestled in the 97-pound weight class and many of their dates were attending sports and school events. They married on Aug. 7, 1937, and lived in Oberlin all of their married life. They operated Cody Furniture and Funeral Home for several years. They had three children, Roger, Leland and Connie.

Mrs. Bryan said she was born north of Oberlin at the farm home of her parents, Walter and Gertie Castle. She attended Liberty grade school, where one of her teachers was Mary Preston.



OPAL (CASTLE) BRYAN, (above) stands against the 1936 Chevy, owned by Vic Bryan, which they used when they were married and went on their honeymoon.

helped with the milking and other chores, as well as helping their mother with household work.

"A vivid memory during the dust-storm years was seeing my mother put wet towels over the windows to keep the dust out," she said.

When she was ready for high school, she said, she rode to school with her sister. Grace in their old Dodge car. She took normal (teacher) training and a few business courses. She remembers Ruth Elvin as one of her favorite teachers.

After graduating, she taught at the rural school near her home. She said she usually rode to school on a horse with her brother, Walt.

"I started dating Vic Bryan in high school," she said, "and that is my favorite memory."

They were married Nov. 9, 1941, at the Methodist Church in Oberlin and later bought a farm 13 miles southwest of town on the Rexford Road. Besides milking cows and raising chickens, Mrs. Bryan said she often helped her husband in the field. They had two daughters, Sharon and Jeanne.

Mrs. Rehm said that she was born on a farm east of McCook in 1920, the daughter of Andrew and Chloe Anderson. She attended a country school south of McCook through fifth grade. Her father died when she was 10, so her mother moved to McCook with her four children. The family moved to Colorado after her mother married Jess Drake and she completed eighth grade at Laird, Colo.

"My two sisters, Alyce and Marylu, and brother, Jimmy, usually walked the three miles to school," she said.

They moved to Oberlin when she was a sophomore. She said she enrolled in the commercial course and took all of the business classes. One of her favorite teachers was Elizabeth Weber.

She said that one day after riding to school on a cold morning with no heat in the car, she was standing beside a radiator at the school trying to get warm. When Miss Weber saw her, she said, "You'll never learn anything that way!"

"I just loved school," she said, "and just wanted to learn. I had perfect attendance all four years of high school until I came down with the mumps my senior year."

During high school, she "batched" and if she and her roommates ever had 25 cents left, they liked to go to the movies on Thursday nights when they had giveaways, usually dishes.

"We had a 10 p.m. curfew in high school which was strictly enforced," she said. "One night Mamie

(Garver) Unger and I were going home after the curfew and hid in the basement stairway at the Presbyterian Church when her father, Frank Garver, who was sheriff, drove by so he couldn't see us," she laughed.

After she graduated, she said, she and Doris McGee received a scholarship to attend Dague Business College in Topeka, which was the only way they could have gone. Everyone was poor and the dust storms made the poverty more depressing. The only party she remembers going to in high school was at the home of Opal and Grace Castle.

"We worked for our room and board in college and got 50 cents a week," she recalled. "If we had 10 cents left at the end of the week, we would buy a milk shake or go the movies."

Her first job was working at a bank in Herndon, where the post office is now. Her family was living at Traer and she said her folks would take her to Herndon every Monday morning and she would ride back to Traer on the train on Saturday night.

Later she started working at the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service office in Oberlin.

She said one day in 1941 when she and a girlfriend were in a cafe in Oberlin, a soldier came in and she thought, "Who's that skinny kid wearing boot pants?"

It was Harold Rehm and even though they had known each other in high school, she said, they had not dated. She said that she sort of asked him for a date that day, mainly so he wouldn't ask her girlfriend. They went to the dance at Selden, then to the movies on later dates before he returned to Camp Barkley, Texas, where he was stationed.

After several months of dating, they drove to St. Francis on Jan. 1, 1942, and got married, she said.

"We spent our honeymoon night stuck in a big snow drift west of Atwood and had to wait for the snow plow to come before we could come home," she said.

Her husband first served in the Army, but later transferred to the Air Corps. After his discharge in 1945, they returned to Oberlin. When he was offered a job as parts man at Nitsch and Nitsch for \$39 a week, they decided to make Oberlin their home.

Over the years, Mrs. Rehm worked in several offices at the courthouse and later was secretary at the Oberlin Elementary School and the high school until she retired in 1982.

As a child, she said that she loved to play with dolls and her dream was



ALL DRESSED UP (above) is Eulaine (Erikson) Benda, who married her high school sweetheart, Wesley Benda. Both graduated with the Class of 1937 and will celebrate their 65th wedding anniversary on June 12. The three Van Vleet sisters, shown below by their dad's car are (from left) on fenders: Barbara (Van Vleet) Castor, and Elaine (Van Vleet) Cody Thomas. Their little sister, Beverly (Van Vleet) Eiler is standing in front.

to have six girls and that came true. They named the girls Connie, Linda, Carol, Luanne, Lora and Becky.

Mrs. Benda was born in Rawlins County at the farm home of her parents, George and Olive Erikson. She said she attended Linda Grade School, then started high school in Oberlin so she could take the normal training course, then teach.

"I remember when my dad would sometimes take me to school in his Model T pickup when he was hauling wheat, I thought we'd never get there," she said. "My sisters, Fern and Eula, and I had the job of picking up cobs in the pig pen after school each day and bringing them in the house to be used for fuel."

She said that she and Arlene (Carlson) Glad were classmates all 12 years of school and have remained close friends over the years.

She also "batched" in high school and stayed with Maurine Olson her freshman year. She said her first date with a classmate, Wesley Benda, was at the FFA date picnic when she was a freshman.

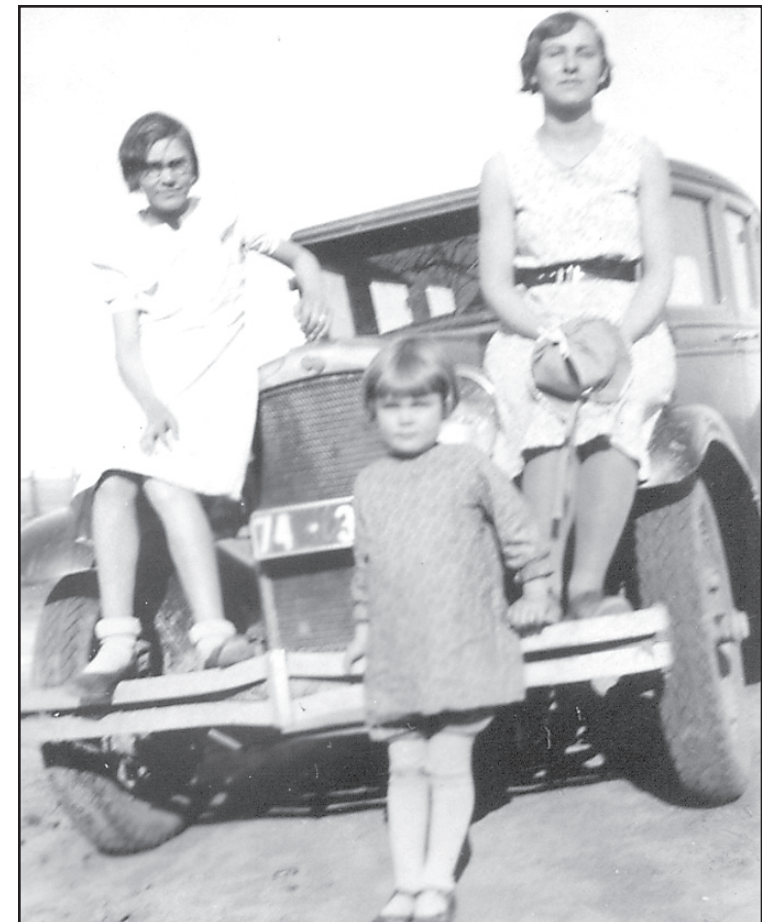
She said she enjoyed Girl Reserves, intramural sports and music in high school.

After she graduated, she taught her first year at Bassettville School. A very sad memory for her was when the school burned down. They had to finish the year in a nearby home, she said, but later the school was rebuilt.

"I remember crying every Sunday night when Dad would take me to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Bert Feaster, where I boarded," she said. "It seemed so far from home."

She said she later taught at Achilles, in Rawlins County, and her home school, Linda, just west of the Herndon Covenant Church.

She and Wesley married on June 12, 1944, and they had six children, Connie, Leanne, Gerald, Shirley, Beverly and Barbara.



home of her parents, Charley and Mary (Hokenson) Henningson, in Rawlins County and was delivered by Dr. Fleckenstein of Herndon. She started first grade when she was 5 at Fairview School.

"The one-room school was heated by a pot-bellied stove," she recalled. "Regina Brown was one of my teachers, and she always fixed a hot dinner for us when it was cold."

She said she graduated from eighth grade at the school gym in Atwood with other country school students on May 27, 1932.

She started high school in Oberlin and stayed with her mother in town. She said that when her folks moved to town, they lost four chairs from their dining room set. They never found them, but she still has the dining room set and the remaining two chairs.

She said that Elizabeth Weber was a favorite teacher, music was her favorite class and Viola (Paschke) Roper was her best friend.

After a courtship of several years, she married a neighbor, Carl Schissler, on Sept. 1, 1942, in Norton. They lived south of Midway in Rawlins County on a farm until they retired and moved to Oberlin. Their children are Dan, Carol, Steve, David and Cindy.

All five of the women remember the fun and good times at the Halloween Clean-up, sports activities, music events, prom night and also commencement, which was held at the Oberlin Grade School gym. Ethel Cathcart was valedictorian of their class and Bernice Larson, salutatorian. Honor students were Wesley Benda, John Laidig and Marjorie McGee.