

Of the one-room schools that fed into the Kremlin School system, we have the most information about Columbia, Valley Center, and Wild Horse schools, because the Mennonites of our parents' generation that we grew up with left behind photos and other memorabilia from those schools, plus their own memories that they or their children have shared with us. For Columbia, we also had strong connections through our own families, both our father's Toews family and our mother's Voth family. Our mother attended grade school at Columbia, our father's sister taught there, and our brother Galen attended first grade in the building after it was moved into Kremlin to become an auxiliary classroom building there. It is the only one of the Kremlin area one-room schools that we were privileged to know personally as well, having attended activities in the building in its Kremlin town location.

Special thanks to the following for their help in paying for the Columbia School marker sign: Dennis Toews, Bob Thesman, Jodi (Thesman) Gossen, Debbie (Thesman) Wright, Carol (Thesman) Wink



Special thanks to the following for their help with stories and photos: Our parents, David and Rosa Toews; James and Beverly Buller; Bertha (Toews) Thomas; Carl Hays [in part via Janet (Hays) Bradbury]; Robert Dale Gray; Galen Toews, posthumously, for interview documents; Ellis Toews; Dennis Toews; Terry Thesman; Elfrieda Buller

1. Facts.

District number: 17

Location: Two locations, both 2 miles west and 1½ miles south of Kremlin; on the west side of Highway 81, ½ mile north of Great Lakes Road and ½ mile south of Holden Road; GPS coordinates for locating the school are 36°31'44" N and 97°52'23" W; see map next page

Started: Presumably 1894

Last year of classes: 1944

Fate of building: Moved to Kremlin town school, torn down around 1965

where we knew it to be, in the northeast corner of 30-24-6. Our GG-Gpa died in early 1903, less than two years after coming to Oklahoma. His family sold their farm east of the highway, where the school was originally located, we presume to **Rauch**, as indicated on the 1906 map (**I need to get the documents for Voths selling that farm after GG-Gpa Voth died; for me more than for Columbia!**). But they retained his farm west of the highway, and his widow Anna Voth is shown as the owner of the school location west of the highway on the 1906 map. Whether his death and the sale of his farm east of the highway were the reason for the school being moved to his farm on the west side of the highway is unknown. It is only speculation, but it may be that the family liked having the school on their property and somehow made arrangements for it to be moved. Or perhaps that the new owner of the farm east of the highway, Frank Bogert, did not like having the school on his property, wanted it moved, and our GG-Gpa's family agreed to have it moved to their farm west of the highway. Regardless, that location west of the highway was where the school was located from sometime between 1901 and 1906 until it ceased operation, with the building being moved into Kremlin sometime in the late-1940s. That farm passed from our GG-Gpa Voth to his wife Anna, who lived on that farm herself and with some of her unmarried children until around 1932. That farm then passed to her daughter, Anna Voth, who married Jacob J. Thesman; Jacob and Anna Voth Thesman lived on that farm until their deaths in 1974 and 1985, and the family still owns the farm.

The photo to the left below is an aerial photo of the Columbia School from 1937, showing its position in the northeast corner of the farm on the west side of Highway 81. The school location is in the blue box and its former location is indicated with the red star. The school grounds area from a 1945 aerial photo are shown to the right below. It appears that most if not all of the buildings from the 1937 image are still present in 1945; this agrees with its likely closing in May of 1946; see more below.



Multiple buildings are visible in the aerial photos above – at least the school, the stable, and one or two outhouses. Carl Hays mentioned the nice grove of evergreen trees at the south edge of the school grounds, and those are clearly visible in the 1945 aerial photo.

4. The school building and grounds

In addition to the aerial photo above, we have important memories of the school from Carl Hays. He said that the building faced east, to the highway. There was a single front door into the building at the east end. Beside the porch on the left as you entered (to the south) was the cloak room. On the right, symmetrical, was a similar room, which is where there was a bucket or jug of water carried in from the well. Presumably this was for both drinking and washing hands, and likely there was a dipper and wash basin there as well. The doors into those two rooms are visible in the photo to the right from the building's years as the Shop classroom at Kremlin, from the 1956 Kremlin Bronc yearbook.



There was a stage on the north wall, but Carl did not remember if it was full-length or not. This stage is also visible in the photo above. He was not certain but thought there was a piano, likely on the stage. The teacher's desk was in front of, or on, the stage; the student desks faced north. Carl said the school had a coal stove until its end. The stove was toward the west but not at the far west wall. He said it was "a prominent feature" in the room.

Carl Hays said that there was a small stable at the northwest corner of the school lot, near the boys' outhouse, and he thought there was a basketball area in between; the girls' outhouse was nearby, but the stable was closer to the boys' outhouse. He remembered a playground to the south of the school, and also a row of evergreens to the south.

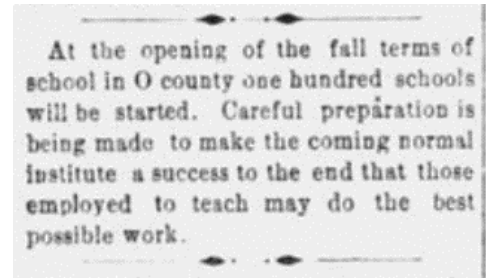
Carl's memories were of the World War II years, and he mentioned a tall flag near the trees to the south; perhaps always there, but perhaps because his memories are from those war years. As for the playground, he remembered a "May-pole" style merry-go-round, teeter-totter, swings, and basketball goal, I think all to the south. The entire layout seems very similar to that for Spring Valley three miles south, and I suspect perhaps for all of the schools.

The Columbia schoolhouse bell shown in the photo to the right is one remnant of Columbia from its location on Highway 81, preserved by Terry Thesman, grandson of Jake and Anna Thesman; the bell was likely removed before moving the building to Kremlin, and the Thesman family likely kept it.



4. Years of operation

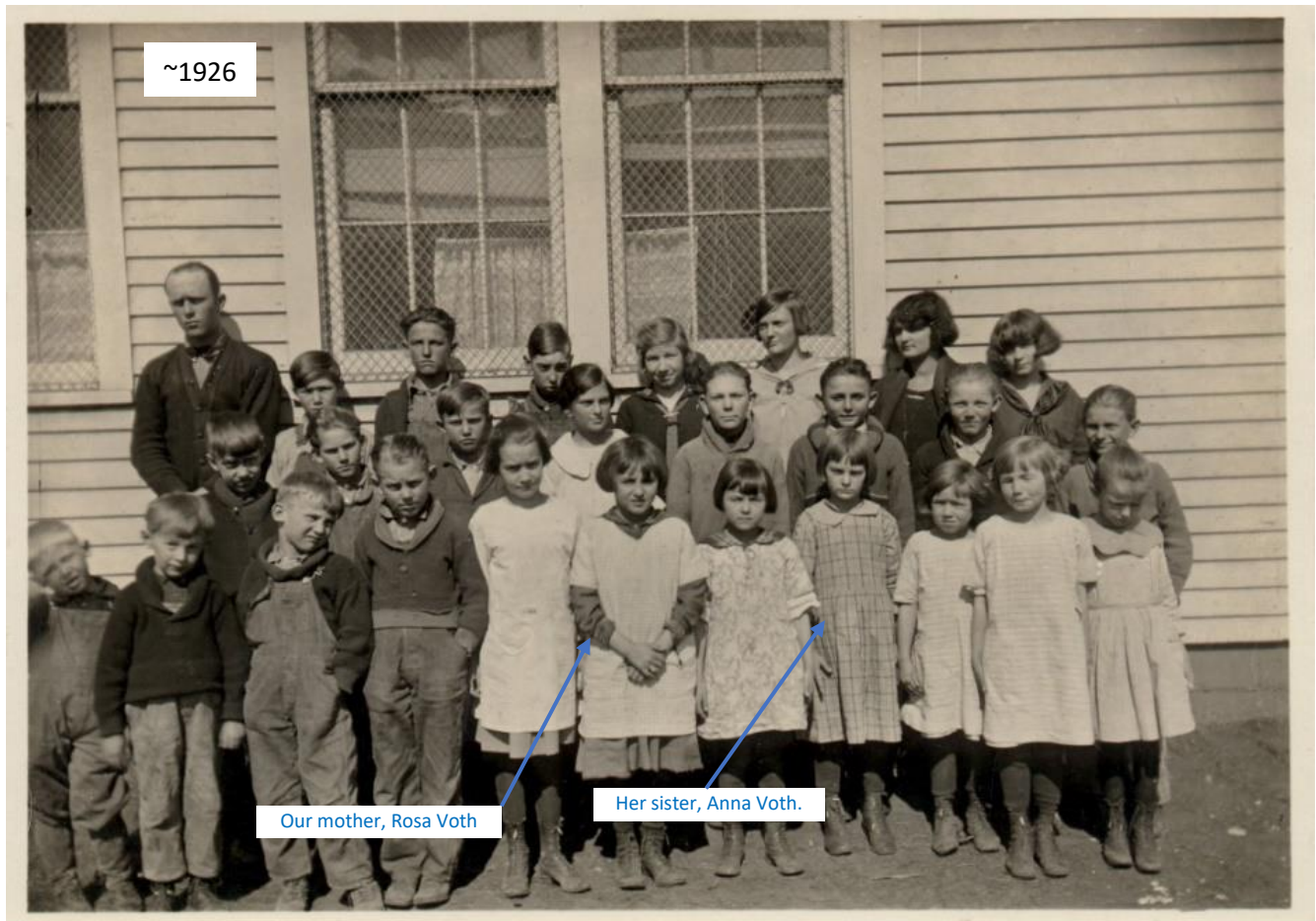
We do not have precise dates for when any of these one-room schools started, but the clipping to the right from an issue of the early Kremlin newspaper “The Cherokee Cosmos” from May 1894 states that “one hundred schools will be started” in the fall of that year. We cannot be certain, but it seems likely that this means “started for the first time”; this would be one year after the Cherokee Strip Land Run opened up this area for settlement by non-natives. The date 1894 shows on the front of the Pleasant Valley School in its photo, lending credence to the idea that 1894 was indeed the first year for these schools in Garfield County.



Our best information about the final year of Columbia comes from Carl Hays, partly relayed by his sister and my classmate Janet (Hays) Bradbury, and more in person by phone. Carl said that he attended Columbia through the 6th grade and that his next younger sister Pat attended through 1st grade. Carl was born August 1933, so presumably started school in the fall of the 1939-40 school year. His 6th grade year would normally have been 1944-45, but he said he skipped a year ahead, around 3rd or 4th, making 1943-44 his 6th grade year, and last year at Columbia. This agrees with Kremlin yearbooks, with Carl in the 7th-8th grade photo in the 1945 yearbook (starting fall 1944), 8th grade in the 1946 yearbook, and freshman in the 1947 yearbook. Also in agreement, his sister Pat Hays appears in the 1945 Kremlin yearbook as a second grader. These memories indicate that Columbia ceased operation in May 1944.

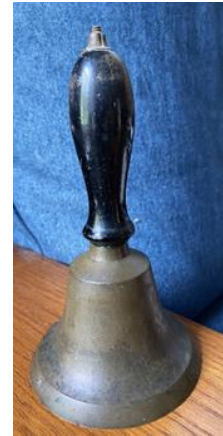
5. Students and teachers.

Our early ancestors and other relatives not only owned the farms where the school was located, but they attended this school as well. Our mother Rosa Voth grew up on the farm one mile north from the one with the Columbia School, and she and her siblings attended school there through Grade 8, when they moved on to the Kremlin Town School, District I-18 (I for Independent). A photo of our mother and her sister Anna beside the schoolhouse is shown here. This photo would be from about 1926, guessing from our old our mother appears to be.



Our family's next connection with the Columbia School is that our father David A. Toews's sister Anna Toews, nicknamed "Bush", was a teacher at that school. Aunt Bush taught at several one-room schools during her short career, from 1931 when she graduated from Phillips University until 1940, when she died an untimely early death from cancer. We do not have records of which schools other than Columbia, but we know Columbia is where she was teaching at the time of her death. Our cousin Gerry Toews Reimer, who was too young to attend that school herself, has fond memories of being allowed to go along with her "Aunt Bush" for a day at the school and to be allowed to sit in the front row to watch her teach.

My brother Arrel still has Aunt Bush's teacher's bell that she used at Columbia and other schools (see photo at right).



Of course, the Thesman children, cousins to our mother, went to that school also, since it was on their farm. The Dan Toews family, more distant relatives of ours, lived on a farm a mile and a half further south, and their children attended Columbia also. We have at least a few Columbia school memories from all of these families.

Yet another family connection to Columbia was discovered only recently, in a photo from James and Beverly Buller. That photo, below, and very clearly documented, shows that the Peter Buller children attended Columbia in 1915; note the photo title on the school slate in front of the children. We knew the Peter Buller family to have lived several miles east



*Columbia School
Dist #17
April 7, 1915*

*John P. Buller
Abe A. Buller
Sara M. Buller*

and south from Columbia, across the road from the Valley Center one-room school, but Peter's grandchildren remember being told that their parents had lived somewhere near Columbia for at last some period of time, obviously including 1917. We have other information to suggest that they lived for some time on the "half-section road" about a half mile east of Highway 81, where we later knew the George Janzen family to live. Peter Buller's wife's parents, the Abraham Sperlings, owned that farm at one time. We do not yet know whether the Peter Bullers owned that farm for some time or perhaps lived there with the Sperlings. [We hope that others might be able to help us identify the Bullers and others in this photo.](#)

Others that we know attended Columbia over the years were Bob Gray, whose family lived a mile west and a half mile east of the school, and Jimmy Hays's oldest children, Carl and Patsy, who lived a mile and a half west, across the road west from the Dan Toews family. Stories from multiple sources come together, as Carl Hays remembered riding to school with his friend Albert Toews, a son in the Dan Toews family, across Highway 81 from their house. Certainly there were many others for whom we have no information.

We believe that the photo here is also of Columbia School, and one or two years older than the photo above. This photo was in the family history collection of our cousin Ernie Voth and likely came from his father Peter

H. Voth, who grew up about ½ mile north from Columbia. We believe that Pete Voth is the third boy from the left in the back row. Pete was born in 1900, so guessing that he might be an 8th grader graduating in this photo, the year would be about



1914. We believe that the boy third from the left in the front row is the same one of Peter Buller's boys as in the 1915 photo above. Pete Voth does not seem to be in the 1915 photo, consistent with this photo being 1914 and his 8th grade year. I have not done a full and detailed analysis, but several of the other students seem to be in both photos. The windows in this photo do not have the metal gratings over them as in the previous two photos, but the siding and the brick foundation match the earlier photos.

6. Known teachers (From photos above and personal memories below; no official list available)

Early teachers were J.D. Koop (who also taught some years at Valley Center), Paul Romine, and A. L. Regier – these are from our mother's memories

Marie Janzen was listed as teacher there in September 4, 1930, Enid Events newspaper; she lived a half mile south and a half mile west

Anna Toews, our dad's sister taught there some years, at least in 1937 when her Grandpa Buller died, and maybe until she then died in 1940

Helena Janzen may have been the next teacher, before she was married (to Bill Toews), with her last year there likely 1941-42

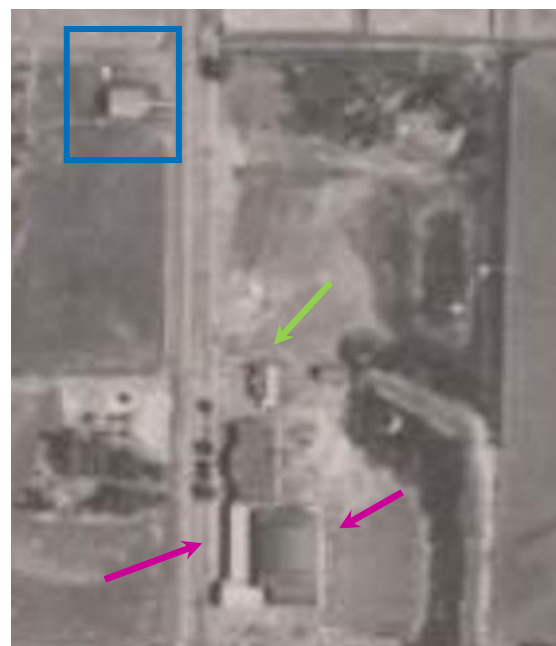
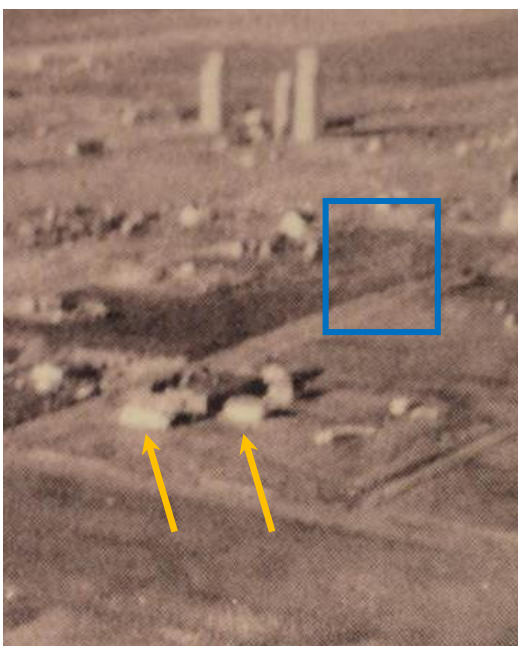
Opal Shockley for 1942-43 and 1943-44, we think, from Carl Hays memories

7. The Columbia school house's years in Kremlin

Perhaps immediately upon its closing as a "country" one-room elementary school, or soon after, the building was moved into the town of Kremlin, about a block north of the Kremlin town school; Columbia was on the west side of the street, and Kremlin's 6-room brick schoolhouse, built in 1932 and opened in 1933, was on the east side of the street at the south end of town. Other one-room schools were closing also, with those students joining the Kremlin town school. This exceeded the capacity of Kremlin's 6-room brick schoolhouse, so several other one-room school buildings were also moved onto the school property – at least one to the south of the 6-room brick school, one and possibly two behind the school to the east, and one across from Columbia on the east side of the street a block north of the 6-room brick school. More details on these other one-room school buildings at the Kremlin town school are provided in a separate document on the history of that school. [Put in link!](#)

We have gotten clear memories from multiple people of the role of Columbia School at the time that a high school and gymnasium were being added onto the 6-room brick school in 1950-51. First and second grades were in the Columbia school building on the west side of the street, with third and fourth graders in the (sadly still unidentified) one-room schoolhouse on the east side of the street. Again, for our family's history with Columbia, the oldest of the brothers in our family, Galen Toews, was in the Columbia school building for his first-grade year; James Buller was also in his class. Peggy Smith (later Guthrie, then Harris), who became my high school English teacher and remains a close friend, clearly remembers being in the Columbia school building for her second-grade year, which was our brother Galen's first-grade year; Jakie Lee Rempel was also in this class. Miss Carolyn Rathmel was the first- and second-grade teacher there, and for many years after. For how many years before 1950-51 Columbia may have been used, and for what grades or classes, we do not know at this time.

The left photo below is an aerial photo of Kremlin included in the 1949 Kremlin Bronc yearbook, with the school in the foreground. Columbia School is NOT yet there (blue box). Also note the two one-



room schoolhouses by the 6-room brick school, one south of the school and the other behind the south end of the school, to the east, indicated by the gold arrows. The right photo is a 1954 aerial photo of the Kremlin School area, with the Columbia School in its location north of the main school on the west side of the street (blue box). The one-room school that was on the east side of the street is now gone. Note also the addition of the gym and high school to the main school building (purple arrows), and the absence of the two one-room schools that were there in the 1949 photo; the green arrow indicates the bus barn at the north end of the school, NOT a one-room schoolhouse.

After the new high school addition was completed for the 1952 school year, we know that the Columbia building continued to be used. The 1955 Kremlin yearbook shows wood-working (shop) being taught in the Columbia school building. A shop classroom was added to the main Kremlin school building around 1960, moving the wood-working equipment and classes out of Columbia. In my own early years at Kremlin schools, 1957 to 1961 or so, the Columbia school building was used for various community events – some families had family reunion gatherings there, and I personally remember some 4-H activities being held in Columbia.

To the left below is a photo of the Columbia School in its Kremlin town location, from the 1955 Kremlin Bronc yearbook, where it is labeled as "Shop". Right is a photo of a wood-working shop class in the Columbia School from the 1956 Kremlin Bronc yearbook.



We note with interest that the Columbia school building photo here, when it was in Kremlin, shows double windows, rather than the single windows that are clearly visible in the earlier photos above. Perhaps larger windows were put in on the south side when it was moved to Kremlin, to let in more light for its use as the shop classroom?

[We would very much welcome any and all information from any other people who know of their own ancestors who attended this school!](#)

Individual memories

Rosa Voth, our mother, from documented family interview transcripts.

She said that Paul Romine was her first teacher. He used a rubber hose for spanking, and spanking was done often. Other teachers there were J. D. Koop and A. L. Regier. Classes were reading, writing, and arithmetic. She took her lunch in a pail; she liked chocolate pudding, but it often tipped over; other foods were sandwiches, fried chicken, fruit, cookies, and pie.

Bertha (Toews) Thomas.

Bertha (Bert or Bertie) was a daughter of Dan Toews and lived across Highway 81 east from the Hays family on the west. Her story here is one of my favorites! As background, Bert's family was Mennonite, as was mine, and they spoke the Low German dialect Plautdietsch at home until WWII. She said that prior to her third grade year, her teacher had been Helena Janzen, also Mennonite and a Plautdietsch speaker, though she taught in English. Here is Bert's fun story.

"I went to Columbia. Dad was on the school board. We got an English-speaking teacher when I was in the 3rd grade, and we always talked German at home and in church. I kept answering the teacher in German, which was followed by a hit on my head. After I had been hit three times, my brother said that if she did it again, we were walking home! Needless to say, I slipped up again, and we got up and walked home! Guess what happened then???? Dad walked us all back to Columbia and had us apologize for leaving and going home!" In another conversation, she said her dad told the teacher that the school board had hired her to make sure the kids learned English, and if hitting me on the head was what it took to do that, she should go on hitting me. "Dad and the other school board members wanted us to learn to speak English- and I'm glad they did because we started going to Kremlin the next year or so, if I remember right!!!"

Kremlin yearbooks show Bert beginning at Kremlin in the fall of 1944 for her 5th grade year. So this new "English-speaking" teacher must have been at Columbia for its last two years. See the Carl Hays stories below for another strong remembrance of one of his Columbia teachers!

Carl Hays.

As already mentioned, Carl lived on the west side of Highway 81 just a little over a mile south of Columbia. Carl said that he was a friend of Albert Toews from across 81, about his age; Albert Toews was a brother to Bertha Toews in the story above. Carl said he would ride to school with them sometimes, especially on cold days. He would go to their house, hoping (knowing!) he could get a ride. But they had a mean dog, so he always had to climb a tree and wait there until Albert came out before it was safe to come down. But dealing with the dog was worth it to not have to walk all the way to school in the winter.

He confessed that he and Albert had one time crawled into the school when no one there and poked around, including looking at everyone else's grades in the grade book.

When he was about in 4th grade, his sister Pat started school. He did not think the teacher was being "responsible enough" with Pat. He perhaps got in trouble for complaining about it, because the teacher sent him to sit in the cloak room during recess. This was a blow to his ego, so he rallied the other students to walk out that day. As he was walking home, he thought "What have I done?" The teacher, sometime later, maybe not the same day, stopped by the house to tell his mom (Patsy) that she was

quitting. Carl's mom was on the school board at the time, perhaps the school board president, so she was the one for the teacher to notify that she was leaving. Carl did not think that he had "gotten her fired" – but he did think he was perhaps responsible for her leaving, that maybe she had simply had enough. This teacher was replaced by Opal Shockley, who he said was his only teacher whose name he could remember.

Carl's mom was on the school board because the Mennonites who had been on the school board up until WWII all resigned or were terminated because they refused to take an oath of allegiance to the US (or its armed forces?). The Mennonites were pacifists and did not support or participate in war; and they were not supposed to "swear oaths" regardless. Add to this the fact that the US was fighting Hitler and Nazi Germany, and that the Mennonites still spoke their Low German language at home, and it is easy to understand why "the Englische" would not be happy with them running their school.

Another fun story from Carl was about the pot-bellied coal stove in the school. He said some of the boys would shoot or trap raccoons or possums to sell the skins in town for a quarter in spending money, and occasionally they would get a skunk. One kid brought a skunk "smell sac" into the school and put it under the coal stove where it got toasty warm – the school had to be closed for the day or more.

Carl asked if students might have ridden horses to school in earlier years, because he remembered a small horse barn there. I told him yes; as told in the Ruben Thesman story below.

Terry Thesman.

Terry shared a story his dad had told him that made him laugh (both Terry and Ruben!). Ruben lived on the same farm where the school was located, so he had a little more than ¼ mile to walk to school. But he was frustrated that his classmates got to ride their horses to school for all to see, and he didn't. He begged his dad to let him ride his horse to school, and his dad finally said "OK". Ruben proudly rode his horse to school. When he got back home at the end of that school day, his dad said "Ruben, where is your horse?" Ruben was very embarrassed that he had forgotten his horse at school – he was so used to walking home!