

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

1990

Review of For All Those Pupils Whose Lives Touched Mine

Courtney Vaughn-Roberson
University of Oklahoma

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Vaughn-Roberson, Courtney, "Review of For All Those Pupils Whose Lives Touched Mine" (1990). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 500.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/500>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

For All Those Pupils Whose Lives Touched Mine.

By Stella Gipson Polk. College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1989. Illustrations, prologue, epilogue. v + 95 pp. \$14.95.

For All Those Pupils Whose Lives Touched Mine, by Stella Gipson Polk, is a touching autobiography that tempts the reader by offering only a glimpse into the author's life. It is a series of vignettes primarily about Stella and the school children who, from 1918 to 1965, she taught and nurtured in several one-room country schools on the West Texas prairie. Thus, the book's organization flows from Stella's own remembrances, includes few pointedly personal insights about the author, and evades self-aggrandizement.

Born in 1902, when Stella began teaching in 1918 she was only sixteen years old. Virtually untrained, she became a skilled educator through the "trial and error method," while her students bore "the brunt of my mistakes" (p. 80). Yet, her successes were rewarding. Often, they occurred on "days when history or reading lessons became so interesting that I made no effort to separate the classes," she writes (p. 62). A case in point is a history class on the Oregon Trail when Stella put all of the children on an imaginary prairie schooner, and they invented their own simulation exercise to relive a part of a historic Western American saga.

As the story flows from one of these intimate settings to another, the outside work seems almost an intruder. When economic depression or world war steps through the school room door, it is because it has become an inextricable part of a student's life. One of Stella's more haunting recollections is of a pitiful boy whose mother has abandoned him and whose father is cruel. The boy becomes fixated with Stella but eventually drops out of school, joins the army, and is killed fighting in World War II.

Recording few personal events, the author does report that on Christmas Eve 1921 she married Jack Polk, and nine years later they had one son, Jackie. Stella stayed home with him briefly until hard times encouraged her to return to the classroom, but she gives no clue as to whether she and Jack consciously limited their family size so that she could work outside of the home or if having a career was a matter of principle for her. It is clear, however, that until consolidation destroyed the one-room school after World War II, being a teacher provided Stella with much fulfillment beyond a pay check.

Nevertheless, the author's expressions of pride in her work pale in the presence of forces greater than herself. Near the end of the book she writes, "my most rewarding moments came when my husband and I sat under our yard oaks and watched a wagon-wheel moon rise majestically over the treeline . . ." (p. 91). Such pleasures faded when Jack died of cancer, probably in 1977, and her son was killed in a plane crash three months later. But Stella perseveres, warmed by the friendship of her daughter-in-law and granddaughter and enlivened by the memories of the extended familial scenes of her teaching days.

COURTNEY VAUGHN-ROBERSON
Department of Educational Leadership
University of Oklahoma