Dan Tredway:

Dan Tredway, in red box, in his one-room school in 1950.

fifty years in rural public education

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Tredway in 1957.

In the classrooms, in the halls, in the principals' offices – by the time he retired last year, Dan Tredway couldn't go anywhere in a school in the Colorado Rockies without bumping into a former student, one of the thousand or so educators he had helped launch into the field.

His half-century career spanned what has probably been the most interesting and turbulent era in the history of public education. And he didn't even intend to be a teacher.

His mother was a teacher in the Flint Hills region of Kansas, where he grew up, so he knew how hard teachers have to work. He went all the way through college in the late 1940s at Southwestern College in Winfield, Kansas (in southeastern Kansas, of course), without really considering teaching as a career.

But the summer after graduation, he found himself working 80-hour weeks as a laborer on a powerline project. He was eating lunch under a tree in a farmer's front yard one hot day, when the farmer came out and started visiting. Learning that Dan had gone to college, the farmer asked if he had ever considered teaching. He was the board president of a two-teacher school district there.

Teaching looked pretty good that day, and that fall he took on 25 kids in five grades, for $10 a day, plus some travel money for using his car as a bus to haul some of the kids en route to school. He was all of four years older than the oldest eighth-grader. Having no formal preparation, he said, "I fell back on doing what I remembered having done as a student when I was in a rural school. The kids were very tolerant."

Five months into that school year, however, Dan got a draft notice for the Korean War. The school board appealed for a deferment till the end of the year, but it was denied, and Dan's first year of teaching was interrupted. He spent most of the next two years in Alaska as a soldier – "plenty of time for reflection and decision making about next steps."

He decided that teaching was what he wanted to do, and, on the advice of his cousin Alma Brown, also a teacher, shortly after his discharge in 1953, he enrolled in the graduate certification program at Colorado State College in Greeley – "one of the best education schools," his cousin said.

Fully certified to teach the next year, he considered going back to Alaska, but returned to rural Kansas instead, where he became a fifth grade teacher in El Dorado. He also renewed acquaintance with a Southwestern College student, Nancy Livingston, and at the end of his first full year of teaching, they got married.

Public-school teaching then was no more lucrative than it is today, and in his third year of teaching – with a family well underway – Dan applied to graduate school at the University of Wyoming, planning to move up to college teaching. They survived the grad-school years in Wyoming by "teaching part time in the lab school, selling tickets for the athletic department and whatever else was available."

He completed his terminal degree there in 1958 and headed back into the plains for an education faculty position at the Municipal University of Omaha – just about the time the "Baby Boom" began to hit the colleges.

"The job was very demanding," he said. "There were huge numbers of students, large classes, and teaching loads were almost twice the standard college load." His last term there, he had two three-hour graduate classes with 60 students in each, a two-hour non-credit seminar and 130 students in a five-hour methods class, for which he was part of a team of three instructors. He was also supervising 20 student teachers and advising most of the non-traditional students.

"I learned my trade thoroughly there," he said.

One of the highlights of those years was running a big science in-service program for elementary teachers in the Omaha public schools – a response to Russia's Sputnik satellite. He coordinated a staff of 10 and a lot of community resource people in a quantum leap in science instruction for 120 public school teachers.

But by the fifth year, he said, "the job was getting the best of me." He and

Nancy had four sons by then – Mark, Matt, Doug and Dave – and he was hardly seeing them. So he began sending the résumé around, and was offered the position of Director of Student Teaching at the University of New Mexico.

"Life in Albuquerque was as different as one could imagine from Omaha," he said. "It was sunny and pleasant, and there was time for writing and recreation." He got to develop another elementary science in-service program – in Los Alamos – where community resource people were abundant.

But Dan's interest was primarily in training and working with teachers, and the University was a research school, so he began scouting for schools whose focus was teaching. After his first year, he was offered a five-week stint at Western State College. He returned the next summer, and coincidentally, a full-time teaching position came open – with a 20 percent increase over the New Mexico pay – and in the fall of 1965, the Tredways had found the place they wanted to stay.

Western was growing rapidly then; Dan was one of 30 new faculty in 1965. There were another 30 the next year and 20 more the year after that. There was also an element of culture shock in coming from Omaha and Albuquerque to Gunnison, where most of the streets were not yet paved, and the only radio station went off the air at 6:00 p.m.

In addition, the school was experiencing the general unsettlement of the 1960s. Dan was one of half a dozen new education faculty with a greater level of public-school experience than most of the College's education faculty, and they began to push for some changes in the selection process for teacher candidates, and in their training, too.

One thing they pushed for was getting students who wanted to be teachers into the public schools early in their college careers.

"There were a lot of old-school people," he said, "who felt that early contact with the public schools might contaminate college students." But the new education faculty pushed for, and got, practicum time in the schools for elementary teacher candidates well before they were plunged into student teaching – although it wasn't until the 1980s that this was extended to secondary teacher candidates.

In 1970, Dan got his first sabbatical and went – where else? – back to a multi-grade primary school in Albuquerque, mostly Hispanic, to teach.

Dan Tredway, now retired, spends his time building furniture and creating works of art. Pictured here in the Johnson Building Gallery, which is run by his wife Nancy.

Returning to Western, through the 1970s, he got increasingly involved in "helping teachers use community and public resources to improve kids' understanding of their local environment and their place in the environment."

Rural public education, through the first two-thirds of the 20th century, had primarily been oriented toward what some parents characterized as "teaching our kids to leave."

The demographic trend in the United States from the early 1800s had been movement from the farm to the city; despite lip service to "our Jeffersonian roots" and the "family farm," the operant cultural belief was that those who were smart and well-prepared would leave the countryside and seek their fortunes in the city.

Probably never in history has a cultural group paid so much to undermine its own foundations and continuity as did the rural citizens in 20th century America – until around the 1970s.

Dan was also well aware of the difference between resources provided for urban and rural schools; in Omaha he had seen that "teachers in ghetto schools in the city had infinitely more resources available than those who taught the rural poor."

He saw the same thing in New Mexico – and saw that "Great Society" programs of the 1960s inadvertently increased the gap, with their focus on urban poverty.

From that experience – going back to his own rural youth – Dan developed a career goal "to work toward improving the education of rural kids." And because he saw that the overall cultural focus would continue to be "on schools in urban areas because this was where the problems and unrest were most visible," the challenge became: "How can one help schools in rural communities to help themselves?"

Mostly through his work at Western, Dan developed a threefold answer to that challenge.

First was "to provide the prospective teachers with some relevant experience in rural schools as a part of their preparation for teaching." This included time in rural classrooms, working with the teachers and students.

The second objective was to help teachers build lasting networks with other rural teachers who were miles away but who shared common problems, ideals and goals. This came out of Dan's own experience as a beginning rural teacher, "with my only support a supervisor 35 miles away over bad gravel roads who managed an annual 30-minute visit."

And the third objective was to help teachers develop resources in their local communities that would "help them and their students find out about and understand their community, its history, human and physical resources and how it related to the larger community."

Western seemed an ideal college from which to work on these objectives, and a big jump forward in the opportunity to work on them came in 1981, when Dan got the opportunity to develop an off-campus master's program that – over the next five years – brought him in contact with "every elementary and middle school on the western slope, except for a couple in Durango."

This experimental program focused on the development of the non-metropolitan school; it was based in Grand Junction (Mesa had no graduate programs) but drew teachers from across western and northwestern Colorado.

The program involved a huge amount of travel with a very demanding schedule.

The teachers working on their master's degrees spent 10 weeks on Western's campus in the summer; then during the school year, they were enrolled in a two-credit class in Instructional Improvement and a two-credit in-school practicum for which the teacher (usually Dan) came to them.

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So for five years in the 1980s, Dan spent his Mondays on campus; then, early Tuesday mornings, he headed for Mesa County, where he spent the day in various classrooms doing demonstration teaching and otherwise helping teachers – then taught a Tuesday night class and drove home for a Wednesday on campus. Then Thursday morning, up early again and off to Mesa County, where he repeated the Tuesday schedule and then stayed over through Friday, working with more teachers in their classrooms.

During those years, Dan also helped others in the department organize a Small Schools Institute at Western that met annually on a winter weekend, from 1979 through 1985, bringing nationally known rural educators like Paul Nachtigal to meet with administrators and teachers from the mountain region.

These programs came to an unfortunate end in 1986, along with the rest of Western's graduate program, as a fiat of the Colorado Commission on Higher Education.

This was a blow not just to the College but probably to rural public education in the mountain region, since it ended that major opportunity for formal interaction between the College and teachers out in the field.

By the early 1990s, Dan was pretty much the "Grand Old Man" of the Education Department, as his contemporaries began to retire, and he took pleasure in helping "identify and employ the next generation of education faculty."

He worked with Nancy Gaylen on a series of summer workshops in science and math education, funded by Eisenhower grants, and also worked with Gaylen on one of the College's most aggressive efforts to adapt the education program to the Scholars Year calendar – finding that it worked very well for their Methods courses: "We had our students' full attention for the six-credit winter term," he said, and they were able to take students on field trips without concern for missing other classes.

Throughout these efforts to help teachers develop local resources, Dan found strong support wherever he went, from the federal and state land agencies – the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Resource Conservation Service and Division of Wildlife.

An example was a nature trail set up with agency help near the Crawford School in Delta County, a trail over which Crawford students now guide visiting classes from other Delta County schools.

By the later 1990s, he had pretty much "graduated" from the classroom, spending most of his time on the road again, supervising student teachers: "I enjoyed being in schools where there were so many teachers and administrators who I had worked with over the years," he said.

When asked what changes in the field of public education he finds most gratifying, over his 50 years in the field, he points to the "increased competence of teachers" and "their willingness to try new things."

And there's also a new legacy in rural education that owes something to Dan and his work: throughout the mountain region, rural children are no longer being "educated to leave"; they are also being taught to "understand where you are right now." ■