

Kern County Museum One-Room School in Kern County Learning Guide



Norris School, c. 1890

One-Room School in Kern County

A historical opportunity for students in grades 2 through 4

Background Information:

General

As families moved to the frontier areas of the growing United States, the need for schools to educate their children became apparent. Usually the settlers began their children's educations in their homes as time permitted.

Families often settled miles from their nearest neighbors, and animals that might have been used as transportation to a community school were needed for work on the farms. As more families moved to an area, they joined in their efforts to create a place for learning. The first schools were held in rooms of one of the homes, or a lean-to-added for that purpose. The first school in Bakersfield began in 1863 and was taught by Colonel Baker's wife Ellen:

Mrs. Baker taught the children of the five neighbors for two months in her own home which consisted of one room, the floor made of earth, the roof of tules, the wall of pickets. Having little or no material, Mrs. Baker's inventive genius helped out. She cut letters out of papers, made her own charts, practiced writing on old wrapping paper, utilized the Bible, the newspapers and whatever reading matter was available to give these children a start on the way to knowledge. (Edmund Ross Harrington, A History of School Organization and Administration in Kern County: 52)

When enough families lived close enough to each other, land was donated or purchased and a building erected that would house the school. Before 1866, local children were either taught in a home or in a private school. In 1866, public, tax-supported schools were organized in Kern County. The first two organized schools were Havilah School and Linn's Valley School. During their first term, which only lasted three months, the average daily attendance was ten pupils. The children ranged in age from 5 years to 15 years old. (Harrington: 31)

The first public-supported school in the Bakersfield area was the Kern Island School, which opened for the 1867-68 school year. Twenty-four pupils attended that year. (Harrington: 53)

Most of the early schools had only one room. In this one room, all grades were taught together as one class. These were called "ungraded" schools. When lumber was available, schools were made of wood, but in other places brick, rock, adobe, and even sod were used – whatever building materials were readily available. A former student described the Randsburg School of 1897-1898:

It had two rooms, a 6-foot partition dividing them, and a veranda on the east and south sides...The seats were homemade of redwood lumber and accommodated 6 pupils. I remember this redwood was nice for whittling, even with a dull knife, The boys occupied one side of the room and the girls the other.

The 100 gallon tank for drinking water was set on a platform in a shed at the back of the school house...This tank had no top on it and the liquid was brought up in long-handled dipper, from which everybody drank. (Harrington: 36)

The teachers of many of these early schools are unknown, but it is likely they were young. Oftentimes, teachers as young as sixteen were hired. One of Kern County's early teachers was Miss Louisa M. Jewett, who taught for five months in Tehachapi in 1867. The school was composed of the following pupils: five of the Dozier family, five of the Wiggins family, four of the Brite family, one Hossick, two Hart children, four of the Cuddeback family, three of the Tyler and one of the Hale family, and Nellie Calhoun. Like most teachers, Miss Jewett boarded with the family of one of her students. At first, Miss Jewett boarded with the Dozier family, but when their house was destroyed by fire she was taken in into the Wiggins home, from which place she rode on horseback to her school. (Wallace M. Morgan, History of Kern County: 1046)

The duties of the teacher far exceeded that of teaching the students. Teachers also had to clean the schoolroom, be sure the wood stove was well supplied with wood and the ashes removed. In cold weather a fire had to be started early to warm the freezing cold room. Blackboards had to be cleaned, windows washed, and lessons planned for each grade. Students often were assigned some of the chores. In many communities' families shared the responsibility of furnishing the wood for the stove. In areas with very cold winters this was a sizeable task, as the wood stove provided the only heat for the school. Nearby farmers' animals were often allowed to graze the grass around the school to keep it cut.

Small, one-room schools had both physical and instructional issues. The physical problems with schoolhouses and grounds included lack of space, poor seating equipment, lack of play equipment, lack of water, inadequate sanitary conditions, lack of pest control, poor lighting, little protection from vandals, lack of fencing, poor fire protection, and lack of adequate maintenance. Teachers also complained it was impossible to meet the needs of each of the children when there was such a spread of grade levels to cover.

Because of the remoteness of schools and the difficult working conditions, many teachers in these small, ungraded, rural schools only taught for a few years. Many teachers moved to growing towns like Bakersfield to teach in larger, graded schools. Some left teaching entirely and moved to a different profession, or they married and chose to devote their time to their families.

Students walked to school if they lived within a couple of miles. Those who came from farther areas often rode horses, mules, gentle cows (usually led by an older student with the younger ones riding), or came in horse-drawn wagon. The students would take care of their animals when they got to school and make sure they were safe and had feed and water for the day. This was always done before class and during playtime. Students usually checked on their animals during the day, at any recess, and at lunch break.

The attendance of the older students (and sometimes the younger ones as well) often varied with the seasons and the needs of farm and home. Older boys were needed to stay at the farm to help with plowing, planting seed, and harvesting crops. Girls often had to stay home to help with younger children and do household tasks if the mother was ill or needed in the fields. The first official record showing Tehachapi with a public school was in 1868-1869 with forty-seven pupils enrolled and an average daily attendance of only fifteen. (Harrington:53)

As communities grew into towns, larger schools were built and students became sorted by

grade level. More teachers were hired, and sometimes a principal was added. The principal often taught one of the classes with the older students.

Norris School

The Norris School District was formed in September 1880. The school was held in a private home for the first two years, then, in 1882, the one-room schoolhouse currently at the Kern County Museum was built. The Norris School was located on Calloway Road on land donated by Robert Norris, for whom the school was named. The school served the children of farming families of the area for 32 years. The school had an average daily attendance of 10.5 pupils during its first year, and it remained quite small throughout its early years. Students of all grades were taught in the same room. As an early resident, Mrs. Hazel Snow recounts:

Many students came by horseback and horse drawn vehicles over the narrow dirt roads. Within the school eighth grade was made up of the youngest pupils while the first grade was the equivalent of the present eight. Drinking water came from a hand pump, bucket and communal dipper took the place of the modern fountain. A wood stove heated the room, wood furnished by Mr. J.T. Pfof, long-time manager of the Kern County Land Company who served as school trustee for years. Double desks were used and fire protection was provided by a row of lard buckets of water which hung along one side of the wall, while lunch baskets filled the other. A hand bell summoned the classes.
(Harrington: 495)

Several teachers taught in the one-room schoolhouse – most for only a year or two. Mr. W.C. Daub, who had his Bachelor's Degree from Stanford University, taught for two years – 1896 to 1898. From 1899 to 1902, Mr. Daub was the Kern County Superintendent of Schools. At the end of his term in office, he moved to San Francisco to enter into the publishing business. A later teacher, Miss Dollie Rowlee was a 1902 graduate of San Diego Normal School, a training facility for elementary school teachers. She became principal of Standard School, a position she held even after marrying a local Bakersfield businessman.

In 1914, a new building consisted of two classrooms, a library, auditorium, and a teachers' room was built. At that time, the Kern County Land Company used the one-room schoolhouse to store grain. In 1958, the old schoolhouse was donated to the Kern County Museum and moved to its present location. Today, the building is once again playing a part in educating students, not just with reading, writing, and arithmetic, but also with the history and way of life of many of our county's early residents.

Activities

Pre-Visit

1. Students in the early schools brought their lunches to school unless they lived close enough to go home for the noon meal. There was no refrigeration to keep foods cool, or a way to warm them up before eating unless a wood stove was in use. Most of the foods used were from the farms and gardens of the families, and bread was always homemade. Identify and list foods (no processed foods allowed) that could be used for school lunches. Plan a healthy lunch you would like to eat using the foods that might have been available to the farm families of the Southern San Joaquin Valley.
2. Students often sat on benches at long desks with four or five students to a bench. Create and solve math problems to see how many benches would be needed for their class. How many would be needed if there were two students to a desk as in the Norris School? Remember that boys sat on one side of the room and girls on the other. What changes might that make in their math problems and answers?

Post-Visit Activities

1. Make a chart to list and compare the ways your classroom is similar to or different from Norris School. What is one thing that would have been hard if you had gone to Norris School in 1900. Draw a picture to accompany your writing.
2. Imagine you are living in 1900 and attending Norris School. Write a letter to a friend or relative telling what your day was like. Include some things that might have been fun and some that would have been hard.
3. Plan a week where you put into practice some of the things early students did such as standing to speak, always answering “Yes, Miss (Mrs., or Mr.)_____”, responding only in complete sentences, reading in round-robin groups, copying and memorizing sayings. Make and illustrate posters reminding you of what you have to do, and put them up for the week. At the end of the week write about your experience. What was the hardest thing for you to remember? What did you like best and why? Are there any things they did that you would like to continue for a longer period of time?
4. Students in early schools didn’t have playgrounds like schools today. Students made up their own games and taught each other games that were passed down from year to year. Do some research using internet sources, the library, and personal resources such as older family members, to find games that were played in the past. Write out the rules for the games and teach the class how to play the game.
5. Write about their experiences in doing all parts of this project. Share the results of some of the activities done by the students with the staff of the Kern County Museum. We love to get feedback from the teachers and students that visit and we share comments with our volunteers.

EARLY DAYS AT NORRIS

By Mrs. Cora Petty Gleason, June 5, 1930

Sooner or later we all learn what a small margin there is between pleasure and pain, between joy and sorrow, and although I am very glad to be with you tonight, still I miss the faces of those with whom I was associated in the years gone by.

I took charge of the Norris School early in October 1882, if you count the time between now and then you will see that it lacks only a few months of being forty eight years; but it does not seem that long to me.

There had been two teachers before me, Mrs. Gilliam and Miss Maggie King; but I was the first to teach in the new school house.

The trustees were Mr. Norris, Mr. Greeley –who was related to the famous Horace Greeley- and Mr. Jewett. The first two were Civil War veterans, and Mr. Jewett and Mr. Norris were brothers-in-law, having married sisters.

There were fourteen pupils – all exceptionally studious and obedient; but my heart goes out in a strange tenderness to the youngest, of the flock—to little Flora, Lottie, Clifford and Arthur.

Mr. & Mrs. Norris consented to make room for me during my stay here. They had two children, a boy and a girl. The daughter attended the school, but the boy was too young being near his third milestone.

Doesn't it seem strange what a lasting impression a small seemingly insignificant incident will make upon the mind?

The evening of my arrival we were out in the front of the house. The garden was filled with flowers, yet I seem to recall only the sturdy yet daintily colored blossoms that nestled at our feet. As they looked up toward us, they seemed to possess some of that individuality we ascribe to the pansies.

Perhaps it would not be amiss to tell something of the situation of the homes of the people.

After leaving the school house and going toward town, the Norris home was the first to be passed. A little farther on was the Jewett residence, and not far from these places, but off the road and in a field was the first school house. I think it must have been a residence at one time.

Going on along the same road we reached the homes of Mr. Nelson and Mr. Ferguson. They were nearly opposite each other but on different sides of the road. Let us go back to the old school house once more.

Perhaps a mile to the north west – I cannot remember distances very well – Mr. Greeley had made a home for himself and family. Near them lived a Mr. Childs. Three of the pupils lived in two of Carr and Haggin farm houses to west of school house. Mr. Norris and Mr. Childs both had good voices and I well remember something that happened while they were entertaining us at one of our gatherings.

The curtain suddenly shot across the open space. Some one tried to check its flight, but in vain. When we had adjusted matters, Mr. Norris who had a keen sense of humor laughingly told the people that they were not yet through with their song.

Mr. Childs was a graduate of the state normal school, I think, but at that time was engaged in farming. He was proficient in music so we placed ourselves under his care.

My father years before had told me that I wasn't much of a singer – that my voice was like his, and as much as I loved him I didn't care to hear him sing: so after I had gone back to

my people, my oldest sister told me one day that my voice had improved during my absence, and I gave Mr. Childs the gratitude due to him.

One night when we were on our way to our music class, something odd happened. The horses were traveling quietly along when suddenly they stopped.

Had I been in Mrs. Norris' place on the front seat, there would surely have been an out-cry; but she remained quiet and composed, even though we had come to the end of the trail so to speak. The road had been washed away. Some one had been irrigating.

I am glad that the old-time sandstorms are a thing of the past. It is no exaggeration to say that they were simply awful. The piles of sand that found their way into the houses were the despair of the housewives. One day soon after commencing school one of these came upon us. Two of the men in the district fought their way through the thick yellow air and the flying sand until they reached the school house. They were afraid that as I was not used to such a calamity, I might send the children home. Their eyes were red with exposure, and they bowed their heads upon the desks in order to get relief.

Alas one boy had been dismissed and I was fearful of the consequences but I am glad to say he came out all right.

After the storm had abated in a degree, Mr. Greeley told us to get into his wagon and throwing a piece of canvas over us, took us to a place of safety – their home. My heart grew warm as we cuddled up under that canvas.

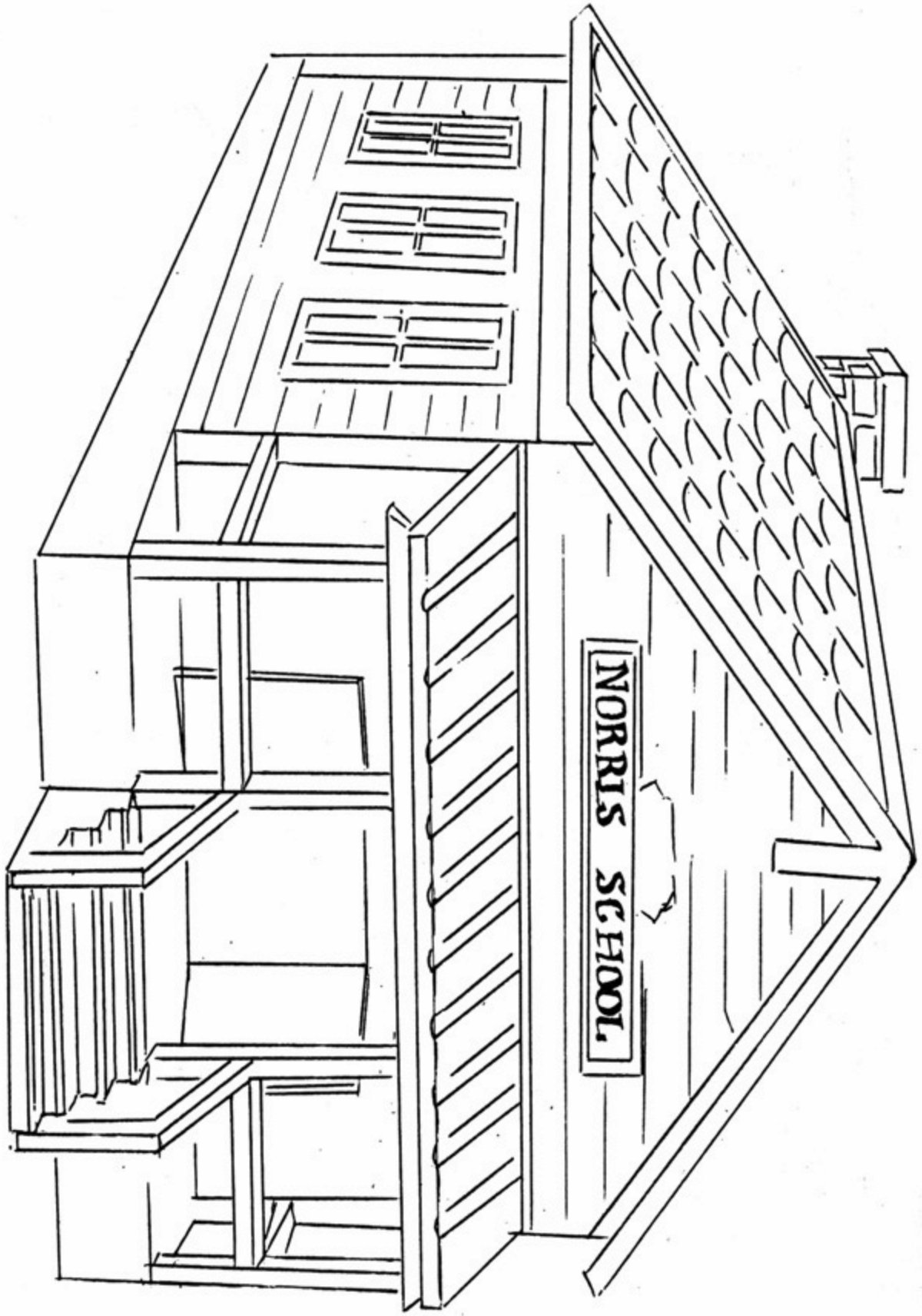
One morning I was the first to reach the school house. A slight snow had fallen. Snow always excites me, and seeing some of the scholars coming, accompanied by their father, I stopped down and made a snow ball, intending to use it when they got within reach. But I am so glad that I dropped the snow ball when I remembered that I had quite a number of birthdays to my credit.

One night we met at Mr. Ferguson's home and had an old-fashioned candy pull. One of the guests was a Mr. Morrison from the mountains, and I remember how the golden mass in his hands grew more appetizing in appearance the longer he worked with it.

Then there was the dinner which Mr. Ferguson gave in honor of two visiting ministers. The fried chicken and hot biscuits surely tasted good.

We were on very friendly terms with the people in the Beardsley district. This friendship caused them to give us their Christmas tree after they had had their celebration. I feel that I could go on almost indefinitely; but I will stop after I have congratulated the ones who are to graduate tonight. I surely wish them much happiness and success in life.

Norris School



Comparison Chart: School Life Today and in the Past

Compare what school was like in the early 1900s and what it is like today.

	School Life in the Early 1900s	School Life Today
Transportation to School		
School Building		
School Furniture		
School Subjects		
School Lunch		
Recess		
Teacher		
School Location		
Punishment for breaking class rules		
Class Size		

Looking at Photographs

Examine the pictures of early schools in Kern County. What can you learn from the pictures?



Norris School, 1890
Rosedale, California



Norris School, 1910
Rosedale, California
Mrs. Maude Kestler Cave is the teacher.



Linns Valley School
Glennville, California



Buttonwillow School
Buttonwillow, California



Maricopa School
Maricopa, California



Emerson School
Bakersfield, California
Mr. Metcalf is the teacher.



Keene-Woodford School
Keene, California



Havilah School
Havilah, California



Standard School
Oildale, California



Poso Flats School
Glennville, California



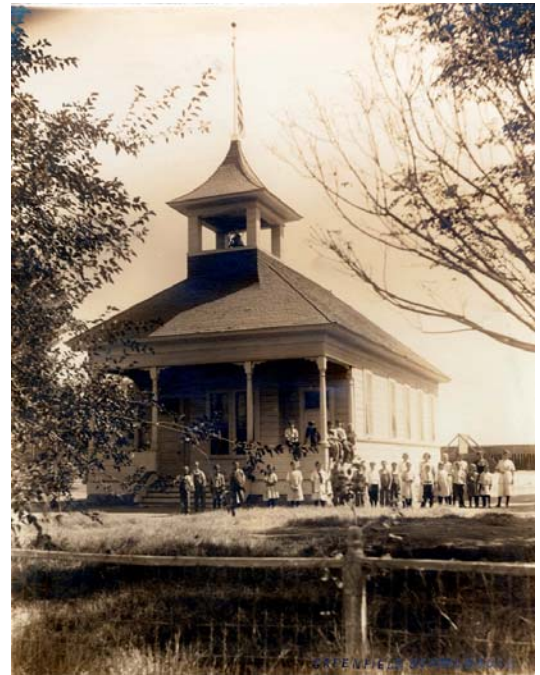
Bodfish School
Bodfish, California



Fruitvale School
Rosedale, California



Arvin School
Arvin, California



Greenfield School
Greenfield, California



Caliente School
Caliente, California



Mojave School
Mojave, California



Old River School
Old River, California



Aztec School
Oil Center, California

Looking at Photographs

Explore the photographs on the preceding pages by passing around copies or making transparencies.

Questions to Discuss

1. What is missing from the early schools that you have at your school?
Electricity, playgrounds, computer labs, gymnasium, cafeteria, library, buses, etc.
2. What does your school have in common with the early schools?
Bells (although your modern school bell is different than the early school bells), classroom, students, teacher, etc.
3. How were the early schoolhouses constructed? What materials were used?
4. Which schoolhouses look like they were in a rural area and which look like they were in a town?
5. What do you think the route looked like that the students took to get to school? Did they pass by buildings? Farmland? Trees? How is it different or similar to your route to school?
6. Locate the towns or school locations on a map. Are they located out in the country or in a town? What must the population have been like when the photograph was taken and what is it like today? Are there schools in those locations today? Are they current schoolhouses bigger or smaller than the early schoolhouses?
7. Would you have liked to attend school in one of these early schoolhouses?
8. What questions do you have for the students who attended these early schools?
9. Document your own school or class. What would you like the young people of the future to know about your school? Take pictures of your school and create an archive for your school library.

