

# Teaching from an Early Age

By Rick Carpenter  
ALUMNEWS Editor

Kathleen Hemry's first teaching experience came as a five-year-old child. Now, at 82, she is being honored as a UW Distinguished alumna for 1986 for her career as a school teacher and as a community volunteer and lobbyist for a variety of causes.

Hemry was born on St. Patrick's Day in 1904 as the daughter of a pioneer sheep rancher who lived in a one-room cabin in Wolton, Wyoming. Wolton has since changed its name to Hiland.

When she turned five, Hemry attended a small one-room country school. When she came home from school each day, she would teach her brother, Charles, what she had learned in school that day. Charles was four-years-old at the time.

After a few months, her parents and the teacher found out she was teaching Charles everything she knew and allowed him to begin school early. Those early years may have indicated a natural instinct and ability for teaching because 17 years later she began a teaching career that lasted for 42 years before she retired in 1969 from Natrona County High School.

Kathleen's childhood is filled with memories of horseback riding, shooting guns, caring for injured lambs, killing rattlesnakes, fishing and running along the tops of boxcars in the moonlight.

Her parents had good ideas on education, she says, and would take family trips to visit mines, canneries, lumber mills and other places where their children could actually see things being done. It provided an important link in the education process between book knowledge and practical knowledge.

And the years spent in the log cabin before her parents built a large, more luxurious home were important developmental years for her.

Of those years in the log cabin, Hemry said the greatest thing she learned was how to adapt to change. "You learn to take what you have and adapt it to the situation," she said from



From her Casper home, Kathleen Hemry thumbs through a scrap book put together by her brother that helps her relive her moments at UW. Hemry is proud, at 82, to still have all her teeth, which are indeed just as pearly as a youngster's.

her Casper home.

One of the biggest adaptive changes she had to make in her life came in the ninth grade. Most of the rural schools only went through the eighth grade and if parents wanted their children to attend high school, they had to move to a larger city where high school was offered.

"There was no high school out in the country and my parents didn't want us (her and her brother) to come to the city alone," she said. "So they waited until they had someone to take care of the ranch before they moved the family to Casper."

Adapting to city life wasn't hard for Hemry and her family, but being victims of stereotypical views was hard to take.

"When we came to high school, we were country kids and they just automatically thought we were dumb," she said. "So they registered my brother in woodworking classes and me in sewing and cooking.

"I wasted a whole year in high school taking the classes

and I just couldn't do it (cook and sew). I remember trying to make a blouse one time and I put the sleeves in backwards. It was impossible for me to function on that level. I should have been taking Latin or something."

Hemry said there were no guidance counselors at that time to give her advice on which classes to take. And, as if the class schedule wasn't enough of a shock, the social situation was even worse.

"I was scared when I came to high school from the ranch," she said. "Those glamorous girls with all their buttons and bows ... I was scared."

But her parents moved to Long Beach, California for her junior year in high school and she quickly became an academic success with her male counterparts taking turns during physics lab to be her partner during experiments.

For her senior year, her parents moved back to Casper and Kathleen had a little different perspective on her fellow students.

"When I came back, those people I was scared of looked like awful small peanuts," she said.

After graduating from high school in 1922, Hemry entered the University of Wyoming.

Although Wyoming is known as the "Equality State" for first giving women the right to vote, Hemry had a hard time finding a job to work while she was attending school.

"There weren't many job possibilities for women back then," she explained. "You have no idea how put down women were back then."

Kathleen remembers how her family used to drive a covered wagon. When they finally got a car, she said her brother was so small they had to stack books for him to sit on so he could reach the pedals. And even though she was much taller and a year older, they never even considered allowing a girl to drive.

On a warm July afternoon in Casper, Hemry pulled out a  
**(Continued on Page 25)**

## Kathleen Hemry, Recipient *UW Distinguished Alumni Award*

(Continued from Page 24) scrapbook her brother put together for her and began to talk about some of the experiences she had while attending UW.

"Fraternities were really important to us," she said. "We used to say we'd look as high as a man's lapel and see what pledge pin he was wearing before determining who we would go out with.

Dotted in the scrapbook are dance invitations to fraternity and social dances on campus. Inside the invitations were places for the men to sign their name to reserve a dance for each song played. Kathleen said she could remember who she went to the dance with by either looking at the first name on the list or by judging whose name was on the list the most.

Her first year on campus she had to live in a dormitory. The next three years she spent in the Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority house which was an old Army building near Fifth and Grand.

As a student, Hemry made exceptionally good grades except in typing. She blames a lack of counselors for her "C"'s she made for two straight years in the course she later found out she didn't need.

"I just couldn't do it," she said of her typing ability. "I couldn't play the piano either, despite taking lessons for seven years. But, I noted at an early age that the people who played the piano played the piano while other people danced. I decided I'd much rather do anything than play the piano."

After graduating from UW with a bachelor's degree in 1926, Hemry taught at a branch school in Natrona for two years to get the required experience before going on to teach at Natrona County High School where she taught for more than 40 years.

Her first year's salary was \$1,250 a year. But, Hemry said she probably did her best teaching during those early years.

"When you're fresh out of college, you're all full of bright

**"When we came to high school, we were country kids and they just automatically thought we were dumb. So they registered my brother in wood-working classes and me in sewing and cooking ... I remember trying to make a blouse one time and I put the sleeves in backwards."**

ideas," she said. "I probably did a better job that first year than I ever did after that because I was just so full of spark."

Through the years, Hemry taught English, algebra, geometry, history and Spanish. But the majority of her teaching duties came in the form of English related subjects, something she really didn't plan on.

"The reason I had a major in English was because they (UW) had an interesting professor down there named Dr. Smith," she said. "I followed all of his courses ranging from literature to drama and poetry. Consequently, I ended up with a lot of English credits and I had an English major without realizing it."

Hemry never forgot the shock and fears she experienced when she moved from the one-room school house to the larger school in Casper. So when she began teaching at Natrona County High School, she made a special effort to welcome the students who came in from farms and ranches to get a high school education.

The groups of students she helped make the transition from small towns to large city schools eventually developed into a club she called the Newcomers' Club.

"I had a big Newcomers' Club," she said about the club established for new kids who came to the school from out-of-town. "I had a double-sized room plus a classroom across the hall. The big room had study

tables and supervisors and newcomers were the only ones allowed to come in the room."

The club allowed the students to meet with other students who were new to the school and provided an access for teachers to work with the students on an independent basis.

After retiring from teaching in 1969, Hemry began to get more actively involved in a variety of activities including supporting retired teachers

Her motivation to campaign for more state support for retired teachers came after a grocery store incident left a bad taste in her mouth.

"When I first retired, I was standing in a grocery line and there was a young woman in line with a bunch of kids with lovely groceries and expensive things in her basket," Hemry remembers. "Behind her in line was this little old lady all stooped over with white hair who was a retired teacher.

"The old lady had a package of crackers and a half-pound of hamburger meat which she paid for with coins from a little coin purse. The big, boisterous woman with all these kids paid for hers with food stamps."

Hemry said when she found out the little old lady's retirement pension was less than \$50 a month, she decided to do something about it.

She became the state president of the retired teachers and lobbied in the state legislature for higher pension

**"When you're fresh out of college, you're all full of bright ideas. I probably did a better job that first year than I ever did after that because I was just so full of spark."**

funds for retired teachers. She surveyed the older retired teachers and found out over half of them were receiving less than \$100 a month in pension funds.

Thanks to her work along with the dedication of others the pensions were raised substantially to a more acceptable level.

Following her work for retired teachers, Kathleen was named the Outstanding Retired Teacher of the Year in Wyoming in 1974.

But her work for retired teachers is but a drop in the bucket of her total community service activities.

Hemry is a charter member of the AAUW, a member of the Mental Health Association, the Suicide Prevention League, WCTU, Wyoming Historical Society, a member of the Silver-Haired Legislature, the Health Fair and has kept memorial books for the Blue Envelope for over 20 years.

In 1985, she was president of DUVs, president of the retired teachers in Natrona County, president of the Natrona County Historical Society and the local coordinator for 55 Alive, a driver improvement class for senior citizens.

In Casper, she is on the advisory board of the Senior Citizens' Recreation Center and was on the Senior Center Executive Board. In 1984, Hemry was awarded the Outstanding Senior Award from the State of Wyoming.

She has also been awarded the Community Service Award from Beta Sigma Phi and in 1980 she received the State Humanitarian Award.

One of her more noble deeds that Kathleen has done is to donate her parents' home, at 523 South Beech in Casper, as the Youth Crisis Center.

She said she was renting the house and heard her preacher ask for help for the Youth Crisis Center so she donated the home to the Center. When she dies, the house deed will go into a trust account for the city. The City of Casper has put over \$60,000 into the huge house, called the Hemry Home, and now houses 11 youth between the ages of 14 and 18.