

Building a Business Building a Life

A Memoir
& Workbook

by Karen Lorene



CHAPTER ONE IN THE BEGINNING

Business skills? Certainly not immediately apparent.

My employable skills were those of a grade school teacher. I had taught elementary from the winter of 1984 through summer of 1991. I taught third grade in a private school, fourth grade in a public school, kindergarten in Chicago's south side, and third and fourth grades at The University of Chicago Laboratory School.

In 1896 John Dewey founded The Lab School. That school grew from the principle of hands-on learning and exploration. Dewey's philosophy came to fruition in a building he designed next to the Mid-way in Hyde Park, Illinois. Generous windows spilled light into spacious rooms. Tables and chairs were not attached to the floor and could be moved and rearranged at will. Science was taught in rooms equipped for experimentation. Play areas were provided indoors and out. A large library contained quantities of books available for touching, perusing, and reading.

The teachers at The Lab School recognized that children learned in different ways at different speeds with different learning capabilities. Teachers embraced Dewey's philosophy. The Laboratory School was an incubator for learning and both teachers and students were constantly examining, changing, analyzing, and evaluating how knowledge was absorbed.

Grounded in Dewey's philosophy, I filled Room 204 with microscopes and an ant farm; dictionaries, novels, and biographies; tape recorders and books-on-tape; maps, encyclopedias and a globe; new-math books, workbooks, and work cards; paints, pastels, crayons and easels. My students and I converted a closet into a projection room. Around the classroom were areas called "stations" filled with stuff: toys, puzzles, broken appliances, parts of a hand-set printer, nuts and bolts, hammers and nails, wrenches, screwdrivers, calipers, wooden rods for math, boxes of word games, books from the library. The stations changed regularly, but were grounded in developing reading skills, math skills, and social skills.

The children were free to choose what to learn and when—with the caveat that they were to visit at least five stations a day and keep a written record of their work. Learning happened at each individual's pace, based on interests.

Every child had individual consultations. Each reported his or her accomplishments and I encouraged the students to delve ever more deeply into the subjects that interested them most.

At the end of the year the State of Illinois Standardized Tests proved Dewey right. The children excelled.

I loved being a teacher, but after seven years of teaching, I was ready to enroll in graduate school. I'd become a teacher of teachers. I was full of ideas and ideals.

Except. Graduate school wasn't what I expected. Professors droned and spoke of children they hadn't seen in twenty years. I changed from one class to another, never finding the joy and excitement I had experienced in the classroom. One day I left campus and didn't return.

The year I quit graduate school, 1971, was also the year teaching positions in the Seattle area disappeared.

I needed employment. I needed an income. I needed a challenge. Why not start a business?

Setting up a business when you know nothing, has some advantages. Mistakes are memories before you realize you've made them. Anything and everything seems possible!

On a trip to Spokane, Washington, an opportunity arose. The opportunity resided in my parents' attic.

"Why would you want that junk?" my mom asked.

"I think I'll start an antique business," I said.

"Be my guest," she answered, pleased to be rid of a lot of useless stuff.

I can see what you are imagining. The magical attic. Believe me, mom's attic was not like a calendar picture. It was not full of antiques. It wasn't a treasure trove. It was a small space full of the discards of some thirty years. Nothing had much value. Except for one trunk. That trunk—leather strapped, press-tin-roofed, with wooden stays, had been my grandmother's gift to my dad. That trunk became the touchstone by which I

learned to measure the age, quality, value, and importance of the merchandise I began to acquire.

Here's what else was in the attic:

- 1- a rocking chair (not a Windsor, not a prairie- style, not a shaker-type, not much of anything, just a thirty year old rocker which needed a new seat)
- 2- six wooden frames (ornate to plain) and twenty copies of Life Magazine, 1948-1958
- 3- a mahogany side table/magazine holder with coffee-cup stains
- 4- doilies crocheted by my grandmother
- 5- six or seven wooden kitchen utensils
- 6- a cross-cut saw

That was it. Thank goodness for the trunk.

Once I started packing the antique trunk, mom scurried around the house finding more items she wouldn't have to take to the Goodwill: a waffle iron with a broken handle, wooden clothes pins in a cross-stitched cloth bag, a wash board and a copper kettle. We piled everything into the van and headed home to Seattle.

I was ecstatic! I had begun a new career.

On the drive home, about the time we crossed the Columbia River into Vantage, I had listed each item in the van and had assigned prices to all but the tin-topped trunk. Most items seemed to me to be worth about ten dollars (small items) and thirty dollars (larger items).

But how much for that gorgeous, turn-of-the-century trunk? Driving home, Between Vantage and Ellensburg the price for the trunk grew from \$50.00 to \$120.00. By the top of Snoqualmie Summit the price grew to \$160.00. By North Bend, \$180.00 seemed more appropriate. By the time we turned into our driveway at home, I decided on the largest sum of money that only the richest person in the world might consider: \$200.00!

It wouldn't be the last time I was wrong.