Dear Readers:

This issue is all about one-room schools, so let me tell you about mine—or what was almost mine.

Guess they planned on having new school done by fall,” my dad wrote to his recently married daughter in April 1956, “but think it is impossible. Would have to have fast contractors.”

Well, they did get the new consolidated school done by that fall, and I started kindergarten in Walcott Community School, a flat, sprawling, brick building with linoleum floors and wide hallways, a gleaming gymnasium and an asphalt playground. Every morning I boarded a bus, took a seat with other neighbor kids, and rode five miles to school.

So by only one year, I missed attending the one-room school that my dad, his siblings, and my own siblings had all attended. That schoolhouse, Blue Grass #5, sat on the corner acre adjoining our land. A plain white building, the school was only three-quarters of a mile from our farmhouse—though it might have seemed much farther in the dead of winter.

I visited the schoolhouse once or twice before I was five, and I remember the evening Christmas program there when my sister played Susie Snowflake “dressed in her snow-white gown.” But what I remember most is a feeling, very early on, that I had missed out on something by not attending at least a year in the one-room schoolhouse.

After the schoolhouse closed, my family acquired the acre (which had been part of our original farm) and the schoolhouse and emptied it out. I remember its cool, musty air and the rows of empty desks. Sometimes I rode my bike to the schoolhouse corner, (that’s where our mailbox was) and poked around in the schoolyard. Wild roses grew in the ditch, and daylilies bloomed in the shade of silver maples bordering the acre. The place was quiet and still.

Even after the schoolhouse had succumbed to an arsonist, Blue Grass #5 still served a function of sorts. The custom in our neighborhood was to give surprise parties for weddings, anniversaries, and occasional birthdays. With great secrecy, all the neighbors (except the family to be feted) would meet according to plans “up at the schoolhouse corner” and then drive with headlights off, slowly down the road and into the farmyard. Even though our neighborhood schoolhouse was gone, the gravel-road intersection—the schoolhouse corner—still served as a gathering place.

Today, when I pay bills at home, I sit at one of the school desks saved from that building and wonder if the initials carved in it are my cousin’s. My brother has the school bell. He and my sister helped plan a reunion. My three siblings and I each treasure our allotment of the bricks that had been laid outside the front of the school. (One sister has moved her allotment from house to house, Iowa to South Carolina to North Carolina to Iowa to Virginia.) We love those bricks.

That schoolhouse means something to all four of us kids—even to me, who never attended. It appears in my dreams regularly, and it may be why I was particularly drawn to the material in this issue.

Perhaps that one-room schoolhouse fits, with thrashing and workhorses, into the category of “missed farm experiences.” Not that the old ways were better or worse, than what I experienced as a 1950s farm kid. It’s just that I wish I knew what it was really like.

Which is why, I guess, I just can’t get enough history.

—The Editor

Readers’ write about the last issue
Margot Copeland Goode, of Evanston, Illinois, alerts us to a misidentified photo (page 69, Summer 2001). The women outside the Gardner Cabin are (left) Hulda Johnson and Ellen Johnson Copeland; Goode’s grandmother and mother (not Abbie Sharp’s daughter-in-law and a friend). Thanks for the correction.

Missy Johanson, of Peterson, Iowa, reminds us that besides the Kirchner log cabin, local historical attractions include a “farm machinery museum, an old school, part of the old armory that was here,” and more. She says that Peterson Heritage, Inc., a 30-year-old history and preservation group, recently purchased the building that was the town’s first bank. Best wishes on your newest project!

The “log cabin” article by Greg Olson mentions Iowa pioneer novels including Hamlin Garland’s A Son of the Middle Border. His book was autobiographical, not a novel. I can’t forget his telling of the drudgery of day after day of fall plowing in those early days.

Gordon Marshall
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Editor’s note: By the way, Garland’s book also relates to this issue, in its descriptions of his 19th-century rural school. Another Iowa author, Herbert Quick, wrote about early 20th-century school reform and consolidation in his novel The Fairview Idea (1919). Check them out.

Once again you’ve produced another keepsake issue! The articles on Abbie Gardner thoroughly explored the events and issues and brought back many childhood memories of visits there. But what particularly tweaked my interest was the review of Iowa dairies and your revealing insight from growing up on a farm. Thank you to Lori Vermaas on the great coverage of Brooklyn’s Co-operative Creamery. Wish I’d had a photo of the Brooklyn butter box for our recent book on Brooklyn’s history! Thank you, thank you, for the great job you’re doing telling us about Iowa’s fascinating history!

Carol Carpenter Hanson
Waukee, Iowa

Share your thoughts with the editor and readers here on the “Front Porch” page. Send letters to Ginalie Swaim, editor, Iowa Heritage Illustrated, State Historical Society of Iowa, 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, IA 52240. Or e-mail at: gswaim@blue.weeg.uiowa.edu. Letters may be edited for length and clarity.
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On the Cover
The resilient spirit of one-room schools in mid 20th-century Iowa
is reflected in this photo of a Jackson County school, District #4 in
Otter Creek Township. Elsewhere on this page, a Muscatine
County school southwest of Stockton in April 1938 (photographed
by the WPA), and Hawkeye School students in 1918, in Haron
Township, Des Moines County. This issue is devoted to Iowa’s
rural schools and their teachers, students, and communities.
Iowa’s Rural Schools in the 20th Century

Working for the WPA, Lee E. Hill photographed this rural school, Mercer #4 in Adams County, on March 26, 1934. The school yard has only the basics: outhouses and coal shed, swings and flag pole.
hey once were commonplace. Spaced every few miles across 640-acre sections of farmland, Iowa’s one-room country schools stood through prosperity and depression. Like knots on a comforter, they anchored a landscape and held a neighborhood together. Like other iconic rural structures—mills, log cabins, depots, barns, churches—they were basic to everyday commerce, culture, and community.

Since the mid 20th century, thousands of Iowa’s one-room schools have vanished. Yet state and community efforts are now under way to document and research rural schools and to find new uses for them. Funds are available (see page 141) to supplement local energy and ideas.

The rural schoolhouse was usually a simple structure, but its history is not. One-room schools have always evoked arguments and passions in Iowans. Should they be closed or improved, they debated? Were they as good as some people have contended, or sorely inadequate, we ask today? Do we honor and celebrate them because they reside in childhood memories, where nostalgia can run deep, or because they modeled useful ideas for current teachers?

The historian in us asks: What can the phenomenon of one-room schoolhouses tell us about Iowa and Iowans of the last century? And to apply that to today, how does our education shape us, as a people and a society? Or, how does it reflect who we already are?

These questions might occur to you as you delve into this issue of *Iowa Heritage Illustrated*. We offer you the voices of former students and teachers who speak with wit and candor of their 20th-century rural school experiences, and the perspectives of others who have stepped back to look at larger issues, like teacher autonomy, standardization, and consolidation. Enjoy comparing your own schools and classrooms, teachers and recesses, with those described in this issue. And why not invite a youngster to join you, as a modern-day schoolroom expert?

Perhaps what is most exciting about this issue is that it looks at a population often ignored or underdocumented in history—children—and glimpses the communities they built day by day within the small universe of a one-room schoolhouse.

—The Editor
HOW MUCH DIFFERENCE can a decade make in the experiences of rural students? Did the roaring twenties, the grim thirties, or the warring forties change what farm children were taught or how their schools looked and operated?

Consider this as you look back with three brothers—Harvey, Lowell, and Loren Horton—who all attended the same one-room school, though in different decades, in Clarke County, in south-central Iowa.

In 1925, Clarke County's population was just over 10,000. For nearly 4,000 of those five and older, a one-room school, through eighth grade, was the full extent of their education. It was a universal experience in many ways, yet one of the benefits of autobiographical accounts like these is that the differences, as well as the similarities, become evident. (One similarity you'll note is the authors' vivid and detailed memories of recess.)

Many of you will recognize the name of Loren Horton, former senior historian with the State Historical Society of Iowa. Over the last several years, thousands of Iowans have attended Loren's numerous presentations on state and local history as he traveled through Iowa. Here Loren travels back to his own past, as he reviews his rural school experience in the 1940s. His essay follows that of his two brothers, who write about earlier decades.

—The Editor

"You learn about people"
Attending a One-Room School in the 1920s

by Harvey R. Horton

I attended Brushwood School #5 in Doyle Township of Clarke County, Iowa, for six years, from the fall of 1922 until the spring of 1928. Our one-room school was located at the foot of a steep hill less than a quarter of a mile from East Long Creek, which overflowed in the spring—hence the school’s informal name, “Frogpond.”

In late summer before school started, the neighbors with children would spend a day cleaning the place up. The ladies would scrub the floors, wash the walls, and tidy up the inside. The men would mow the weeds, cut brush as needed, fill up the woodshed with firewood, check the pump, and make any necessary repairs.

The school was a frame building (replacing a log cabin that the old-timers had attended), oblong in shape and fairly large, as I remember it. It was heated with a Round Oak type stove located toward the center of the room. (The teacher used to pay one of the older boys to come early and start the fire before the rest of us came.) In cold weather we clustered around the stove to keep warm, burning in front and freezing in back. We were all farm kids, and some of the older boys ran trap lines in the wintertime. When they gathered around the stove and their heavy wool and denim clothes got steamed up, it was real easy to tell if anyone had caught a skunk in one of the traps.

Besides holding a winter’s supply of fuel, the large woodshed to the back also had a high door and room for horses during severe, blizzardary weather. Our teachers sometimes rode horses in bad weather. So did some of the rest of us, but we usually just tied the reins when we got there, gave the horse a slap on the shoulder, and told him to head for home, which he did.

The grader ditch along the road was where the teacher had us go out and lie down on those occasions when a neighbor came tearing by on a horse or in a car, warning that a “cyclone” had been sighted and might be coming down along East Long Creek.

In those days the schoolteacher was one of the most respected and highly regarded individuals in the community.
One of the terms of the contract was that if he or she was not a local resident, he or she must board with a family in the community. Most of the parents had received little education beyond a one-room rural school, and they were determined that their children would get a basic education. Actually, very few of the schoolmates I had in Brushwood ever went on to graduate from high school. The distance, ten miles, plus the Great Depression, helped to account for that.

School board members were landowners with children or grandchildren in school. My father served on the school board for more than 30 years. Having your father on the school board then was like being a minister's son in a small town. Members of the school board frequently stopped in unexpectedly for a couple of hours when they were in the vicinity to check on the teachers and pupils and make sure everyone was "reciting" every day.

Candidates for office also would drop by and leave little tokens such as rulers, yardsticks, and pencils. Once in a while others did too. County officials—the superintendent of schools, sheriff, auditor, et cetera—were expected to stop by at least once a term and talk to us, tell us something of what they were doing and why. I can remember others, insurance men and the lumber yard operator, doing the same.

You might say the country school then had so much community interest that it was a community project, so to speak. The school was where the pie suppers and box suppers were held, also the recitals and spelling and ciphering contests. Grown-ups participated, too, and school board member John Brand could sometimes outspell a teacher.

All the students brought their lunches from home in lard pails or improvised dinner buckets. It was good healthy farm food—apples, pears, custard, egg and meat sandwiches, slices of pie, hard-boiled eggs, cookies, bottles of milk, and the like. The last couple of years we started making something hot at school—cocoa, or maybe a kettle of navy beans or vegetable stew, taking turns furnishing it from home.

The school ground itself was by necessity also the playground, no matter what the lay of the land might happen to be. Here and there a more affluent school might sport a store-bought swing set for the smaller children. Ours was not one of the affluent ones. Although there was no store-bought equipment of any kind, we did have practically unlimited freedom to unleash our own wild ideas of self-entertainment. At least we boys did. The girls either had to content themselves with simple games of their own design or join the boys in what were usually rougher endeavors.

One winter we chopped down some of the trees and built ourselves a small log cabin. It served as a fort or clubhouse or whatever came to mind. We also built a sapling and brush lean-to that was so snug when covered with a deep drift of snow that we boys sometimes ate our noon lunches in there on cold winter days.
Much of the time we indulged in somewhat rougher sports. “Cowboys and Indians” was considered harmless until one time the “Indians” captured a “cowboy” and started to burn him at the stake with a real fire. Bow-and-arrow fights were commonplace. So were snowball fights, and they could get brutal when the snowballs were dipped in water and stored out in some hidden cache overnight during subzero weather.

We made use of whatever we happened to have. A bandanna handkerchief knotted around a boy’s throat produced an instant cowboy, and pulling it up over the lower part of his face turned him into a stagecoach robber. A lot of things could be made with spools, corset staves, tobacco cans, rubber bands cut from discarded inner tubes, raw whang leather, shoe tongues, pieces of scrap iron, and old shingles. Harness rivets made a fine decoration for any old leather belt.

It would no doubt surprise a later generation to know what the average enterprising country boy could come up with in those days using only a jackknife as a basic tool. The whole area was pretty heavily timbered, so wood of any kind was never a problem. Any boy worthy of his salt could make a bow complete with straight arrows, a willow whistle, a shinny stick, or a rabbit snare. Corn cobs were quickly fashioned into corn cob pipes. The iron bands from wooden wagon-wheel axles made good rolling hoops, and most any discarded piece of farm machinery would yield enough strap iron to make runners for a bobsled. Lariats could be spliced out of old hitching ropes.

I had a cast-iron capgun pistol, as did several others. But I also happened to be a real handy whittler, and using that pistol for a model, I carved out literally dozens of pretty realistic life-size wooden six-shooters that were used to shoot their way through scores of bitter gun battles between good cowboys and bad outlaws.

Each morning came the potential honor of being chosen to raise the flag. Then we all saluted it and recited the Pledge of Allegiance. Next, we sang two or three songs, picked out from a couple of old moss-covered song books dating back to Civil War times—songs such as “Red Wing,” “Marching Through Georgia,” “Old Black Joe,” “Massa’s in the Cold, Cold Ground,” “Swanee River,” and such. The teacher would lead us in song and the results are not to be remembered! I still can’t carry a note.

The studies were basic: reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic, history, geography—there may have been others. In later grades, civics was added. We memorized

“Everyone had a part”
Attending a One-Room School in the 1930s
by Lowell E. Horton

My tenure at Brushwood #5 (or “Frogpond”) extended from September 1932 to April 1939, during which time I maintained perfect attendance, being neither absent nor tardy. The school year ran for eight months from early September to mid- or late April. The student population generally ranged between 8 and 16 students, about equal as to boys and girls. Having only one student in a grade was quite common, and in many years not all grades between first and eighth were represented. I can still name 19 of my schoolmates between those years—4 Chipps, 2 Burchetts, 10 Wests, a Palmer, and my brothers George and Loren. I also remember a girl and a boy who lived up East Long Creek on the east side. They attended one year, were reputed to have the itch, and were treated shamefully.

All schools in the county were under the general direction of a county superintendent of schools, a position held by Ada Tillotson during all the years of my recollection. Supervision of the local school was in the hands of a three-person school board. Its function, at least in part, included hiring the teacher and arranging room and board if
poetry, some of it surprisingly good. I remember there were verses from “Hiawatha,” “Evangeline,” Poe’s “Raven,” “The Village Blacksmith,” Tennyson’s “Crossing the Bar,” and so on.

The “library” consisted of two small wooden shelves in the corner with a collection of donated or leftover volumes. I read them all and still remember that they ran something like this: Fox’s “Ing the Bar,” and so on. “Raven,” “The Village Blacksmith,” Tennyson’s “Crossing the Bar,” and so on.

Ivanhoe was another one.

We didn’t have a laboratory, but we had nature studies. And we could go as far during the noon hour as we could get back from by the teacher’s handbell (we were not blessed with a belltower).

Everyone recited at the front of the room, and if all eight grades were represented, everyone got a chance to learn ahead, or review backwards, as the case may be. We learned county government, state officials, federal officials, what the state produced, names of counties, the states, et cetera.

As for social studies, when you are thrown together at any given childhood age for eight hours a day with others—boys and girls, ages five to nineteen—you learn about people.

I guess long before now you have learned that I do not consider a one-room school any disadvantage. I am proud of having gone to one. The age differences were good for me. I was the oldest in my family, and when I started to school, the older girls sort of looked after me as a little six-year-old. Later, I was proud to have held my own with boys much older than I in the rough-and-ready arena of the school grounds and the long road home (where the fist fights always seemed to occur).

In my particular case, my father and mother had both taught in one-room schools briefly before I was born and so I naturally had some head start before school. With that and the advantage of listening to all grades reciting before me, I completed the eight grades in six years. I went on to be salutatorian of my high school class, had a couple of years of college, was an officer in World War II, and at no time ever felt any disadvantage from having learned the fundamentals in a one-room country school that no longer exists today.

Havre R. Horton is retired and lives in Denver, Colorado, after a 35-year career with the U.S. Postal Service, during which time he served as a regional transportation manager.
tending business college in Grand Island, Nebraska. He also had a spelling class and we sometimes exchanged word lists in our correspondence. His words were much longer than mine.

Report cards show my grades in music to have been fairly good, but I remember nothing whatsoever about the subject, and there is no evidence in later life that anything about the subject, and there is no correspondence. His words were much longer than mine.

Penmanship was not much better. My grades were fairly good and I remember spending lots of time doing practice sheets, drawing lines and circles, and that sort of thing, but my handwriting was and still is barely on the legible side.

Graduation from grade 8 was a requirement for enrollment at Murray High School. Occasionally a student had trouble making that hurdle and, if failure continued, usually threw in the towel at age 16 or so.

During the early and mid-1930s, money was scarce, and many ingenious ways were devised to get around this problem. One was to extend the life of a pair of shoes by going barefoot during the warm months, and it was quite acceptable for the younger boys to go to school barefooted. We had an unofficial competition to see who could hold out the latest in the fall before freezing out. I distinctly recall one year going to school barefooted on frozen ground in order to win. I also recall that my feet were weather-cracked and sore, but winning was worth it.

The walk from home to school was one mile, uphill and down (over hill and dale, so to speak). I had to leave home promptly at 8 o'clock each morning and arrived at school between 8:30 and 9 o'clock depending on the weather and the distractions en route.

The trip home usually took longer unless the weather was bad. Most of the time I walked home with Ira Burchett and we often found that nature study matters were good reasons for delay. Bird nests had to be looked for, snakes caught, and other interesting things could usually be found. I remember when a big blue racer held us up for nearly an hour one nice afternoon.

I tried never to be later than 6 o'clock as Mom ran out of patience about then and punishment was apt to follow. One exception was when I got stuck in the clay mud in the middle of the road. This was within shouting distance of the house. After some hollering back and forth for a while, I convinced my parents that I couldn't get out and Pop came to my rescue. He almost got stuck too, so they knew I wasn't kidding.

In retrospect I think the afternoon dawdling of these early years whetted my lifelong thirst for learning about the natural world around me.

I remember two different events that were put on to raise money for needed school supplies. One was the annual pie supper held at the schoolhouse during the fall. Each of the neighborhood ladies brought a pie (sometimes a cake) to the early evening affair. Each dessert was auctioned off to the highest bidder, who then was entitled to join its baker and enjoy eating it with her. A couple of the ladies had established reputations as excellent bakers, and their pies produced some fierce bidding. Others were sometimes hard to sell, but since almost everyone came as couples, everything eventually sold and everyone paired up to eat.

The few older unmarried girls in the area also brought pies, and the bidding by older boys seemed to me at the time to be downright ridiculous. Sometimes the deal was rigged and a married man bought the girl's pie so the "wannabe" suitor had to bid elsewhere (just to teach the young sprout a lesson, as I understood it). The younger kids, including myself, always got a piece of pie by invitation at one desk or another.

The other event, a raffle, was conducted only once as I recall. The student who sold the most tickets would receive a prize, and school was let out early one afternoon so everyone could sell tickets. Most of the kids just went home, but I undertook a long journey to most of the farms within a mile. I sold several tickets, too, and prospects for winning the prize looked good. Unfortunately, another student's parents bought enough tickets to guarantee their child would win. Mom was highly critical of this tactic. I learned another of life's many lessons.

Each year about Christmas the students put on a program for parents and others. I remember almost nothing of the program content other than that everyone had a part and everyone had a stagehand duty. The preparation required six bed sheets supplied by parents; Mom usually furnished two. The teacher's desk was moved, and lengths of telephone wire were strung across the front and along the sides. Two sheets were hung loosely on the center wire so they could be opened or closed as the program required. The curtains on the sides made small, concealed areas for props and actors. The curtains were handled by older students.

The teacher was positioned behind the curtain at the front of the stage to handle the prompting job.
Most of the actors were not too good at remembering their lines or entrances. It was all pretty traumatic for small actors and a great relief when it was successfully concluded. The audience seated themselves at the desks, first come, first served. Those at the bigger desks probably enjoyed the program, but everyone clapped a lot and had a good time.

I think older boys had the honor of getting the Christmas tree for the schoolhouse, but I remember tagging along as a younger kid. We went to a hillside a half-mile away that had red cedar seedlings and small trees scattered about. We had the owner's permission to cut one. The selected tree was taken back to the schoolhouse, mounted on a block of wood, and readied for decorating.

Many of the decorations had been made at home and brought to school to be hung on the tree. Popcorn strings and bunches of woodbine berries were made at school. I suppose tinsel and icicles were donated by someone, but that point has passed on. I don't recall that gifts were ever exchanged at school, probably because gifts were a scarce commodity at that time.

On St. Valentine's Day it was our custom to exchange valentine cards, and some aspects were rather traumatic for a young lad. The cards were handmade at home and taken to school for exchange. We cut out hearts and other designs from any colored papers we could find and pasted them up to decorate the card. Each card had to include a disgustingly mushy sentiment, such as "Sugar is sweet and so are you" or "Will you be my valentine." This is where the trauma began. The valentines were exchanged with everyone at school, girls as well as boys. The only saving grace was that all valentines were anonymous, making it impossible for the girls to prove authorship of the valentines they received. The only exception was the teacher's valentine. This was the biggest and best that one could make, and was signed boldly in hopes of acknowledgment or maybe even a perk of some sort.

Games of several sorts were played at recess time and I suppose those involving teams were a basis for part of the grading in physical education. Ante-over was one we played a lot. Team captains chose up sides, one team positioned on the north side of the schoolhouse, the other on the south side. A ball (usually a softball) was thrown over the roof for the opposing team to catch. Team members took turns throwing, but little kids could name their stand-in. Points were tallied for catching the ball. The trick was to throw the ball so that it barely cleared the peak of the roof and rolled down the other side. The roof pitch was such that the opponents could not see the ball until it cleared the eaves and, since it might be appearing anywhere from end to end, catching it became a real challenge. Missed throws (failure to get the ball over the top) were penalties and called for point reductions. The game was often played with only one or two on a side, as a variation on playing catch.

In the spring and early fall we also played a lot of marbles, but this was just for boys and was not an organized sport. Those who had perfected the "end of finger" technique were held in awe as that shot could shatter a glassy. Those who couldn't shoot it kept trying. We usually played "keepers" so it paid to become as proficient as possible.

Winter in Iowa always produced snow and this brings back two sorts of recollections, the good and the not-so-good. The good were the pleasures of sledding. The not-so-good were the struggles that came from blizzarding and drifting. Both were common phenomena.

I don't recall going to school with a blizzard in progress, but two occasions come to mind when the morning trek to school followed a night of blazzarding and Pop had to help me get to school. We would travel across the fields, as drifting in the roads was often too deep to break through and open fields usually had just the actual snowfall without many drifts. The first time we took one of the horses. Pop led the horse and broke trail as I sat astride the horse (I was in third or fourth grade at the time and somewhat shorter than the snow pack). This system worked okay so far as I could see.

The second time Pop decided he wasn't going to break trail for a damn horse, so he just broke trail for me and I slogged along behind him. This system worked okay too, but I liked the other way better. Actually, with drifts often five or six feet deep, there was no way a small kid could have made it alone.

One year the shallow rise just west of Sam Kane's place drifted full from fence top to fence top. The V-plow used by the county to plow out roads was stuck in it, leaving 50 to 75 yards of road packed solid with snow six to eight feet deep. Drifts like this always crusted over with a blizzard in progress, but two were common phenomena.

Both were common phenomena.
drift out by hand, thus allowing the U.S. Mail (and some groceries and supplies) to pass through—but really messing up the snow cave project.

Now to the really good part of winter—sledding. The first three-quarters of my daily trip to school was poor sledding, a few shallow downslopes but mostly uphill. The last quarter mile was worth the wait. The Sam Kane Hill was long and steep, then a short swale and rise leading into the Schoolhouse Hill, which was shorter but even steeper. In poor snow conditions this stretch was pretty good. In good snow conditions it was great. Sometimes one could almost clear the rise without stopping.

One winter an ice storm covered the hillsides with ice. We had been using our strap-on ice skates to skate in the pasture, but the morning trip to school with the sled was even better. A running start produced a good ride even on the flats and shallow slopes. Then came that last quarter mile. As soon as I started down the Sam Kane Hill, I knew this was something different. As the speed increased, the wind brought tears to my eyes and I knew there was no choice but to hang on. The world was a blur as I crossed the swale and over the rise, sled runners screaming on the ice, and the slackening of speed scarcely noticeable.

And then—the Schoolhouse Hill. The roadside became a solid blur. Knuckles tightened on the steering bar, and all emotions froze. Too scared to go, and too scared to let go. As I hit the flat at the base of the hill, the schoolhouse whizzed by and I shot eastward at blinding speed. Somewhere about halfway to East Long Creek, I drifted to a stop. I lay on the sled a long moment, slowly realizing the significance of the experience that had just been granted to me. A brief walk back to the schoolhouse and it was all over. On a scale of one to ten, I would have to rate this ride as somewhere between glorious and ecstatic.

Another exciting but more serious event involved sledding on the school grounds. After a good snow we could trample out a good sled run from the higher west side down to the flat by the schoolhouse and ending at the road on the east side. Those of us with sleds would use this during recesses and the noon period. There were usually more kids than sleds so we often went double. Most of the time one of the younger (and smaller) kids rode the top spot and, if a good running mount was made, that often increased the length of the run.

On one occasion one of the older kids, without asking, leaped aboard as I was starting a run. He weighed as much or more than me and the extra weight added momentum. Our speed increased and I could tell it would be a very long run. And so it was. We reached the road and continued eastward at a pretty good clip. I saw there was a fence on the far side of the road and it had a barbed wire strand about 18 inches from the ground. I crouched down low so as to pass under it. The passage was made cleanly and the ride went on for a ways.

As the sled came to a stop, I realized I no longer had a passenger. Rushing back to the fence I saw the other kid getting up, staggering some, but not looking a whole lot different that usual. It seems that the barbed wire struck him in the forehead at the precise center of gravity. The wire didn’t break so he stopped quite abruptly. I suppose the snow cushion, heavy clothing, and luck must have combined to prevent serious injury. But I’ll bet the memory of the incident stayed with him for a long time.

Come to think of it, it has stayed with me for a long time, too. Neither of us mentioned the accident to the teacher and, so far as I know, neither did anyone else.

Lowell E. Horton is retired and lives in Pleasant View, Utah, after 38 years in the U.S. Forest Service in the West.

Rural Schools—Who decided what?
The typical one-room rural school of Iowa was a creature of a local board of education, for an area that averaged four square miles each. Curriculum supervision was in the hands of a county superintendent. It was one of the only political and elective offices open to women, and women served as county superintendents of schools in many counties. In 1915, for example, 55 of Iowa’s 99 counties had women superintendents.

Matters of curriculum were addressed by the Department of Public Instruction. As early as 1922 it promoted the value of “practical subjects that pertain to rural life, and that are valuable to the health and citizenship in the community.” By 1932 it recommended extending rural choirs to each school; broadening reading and study programs to include language, grammar, and social studies; and increasing funds for libraries. By 1942 health education was emphasized. Vocational rehabilitation of what were termed “severely handicapped persons” was emphasized during the war years. Special education for handicapped children became statute in 1948.

—by Loren N. Horton
"Creativity was not encouraged"

Attending a One-Room School in the 1940s

by Loren N. Horton

I started to school at Brushwood #5 in the fall of 1938, and at that time a "primary" grade preceded first grade. Although I began in primary, I was promoted to first grade after the first two months. Perhaps this was because my parents had taught me to read and count before I started to school.

Generally attendance ranged from 10 to 15 students during the school year, in all grades combined. Actually not all grades were represented in the school every year. Sometimes there was one other student in my grade, and sometimes there were as many as four. Although attendance was usually pretty good, the student body fluctuated as farmers who rented land moved in or out of the district. Since this event always happened on the first day of March, it meant students moved in and out of the district at that time too.

Our schoolhouse was a rectangular wooden building, painted white, but not painted very frequently. The windows on the north and south sides were without screens but did have large mesh wire nailed over the outside, perhaps to deter breakage. During my third grade the school acquired what were called "ventilators," sliding metal devices in wooden frames, which could be placed under the sash of an open window, allowing some fresh air to come in, but not flies and bees. The door, on the east end, did not fit tightly, and rain and snow sometimes crept in.

Inside, opposite the door, a blackboard and Palmer Method letter sheets covered the west wall, with the teacher's desk and chair and a recitation bench in front. One of the big blackboard sections was cracked and was held together with bolts. I remember that the crack used to look like a river running across the board. We used white chalk and had to take the erasers out to the cement slab in front of the front door and pound the dust out of them periodically. Sometimes that was a reward and sometimes that was a punishment.

If we had maps I don't remember ever seeing them. Neither did we have a picture of George Washington or Abraham Lincoln hanging on the walls. We did have a flag, which was mounted on a pole on the northeast exterior corner. But we did not have a flag at all for at least the first three years I attended.

The younger students sat on the north side of the school room, at smaller desks. There were both double and single desks, and they were individually screwed to the floor, not to movable planks. A compartment or bin under the fixed tops of the desks held books and tablets. Each desk had a grooved slot for pencils and a round hole for an ink well. We never used ink all the six years I attended Brushwood.

I started to school with a #2 lead pencil, a box of Crayolas, and a Big Chief tablet, which had a red cover with a drawing of a Plains Indian, complete with feather headdress. The lines were widely spaced and the paper was cheap pulp. Each student also had a foot ruler, a rubber eraser, and a jar of paste. I don't recall any other school supplies.

The school day allowed for a morning recess, an afternoon recess (each about 15 minutes long, and this included time for a trip to the boys' or girls' outhouse), and an hour noon break. In good weather we ate the noon meal outside, and in bad weather we ate it at our desks. We carried this meal from home in what we called "dinner buckets." Mine was filled with such things as sandwiches, fresh fruit (apples, pears, or grapes when they were in season), and, quite often, a boiled egg. Sometimes there were cookies or a piece of cake—of course, "homemade." The sandwiches were always on "boughten bread," and the filling might be "boughten" bologna, or "boughten" peanut butter, or "boughten" cheese, or maybe a fried egg or jelly. Each
Eula Overholtzer and Betty Peterson (right) taught at Brushwood #5.

item was carefully wrapped in wax paper by my mother.

A water bucket sat on a bench in the back of the schoolroom. Everyone drank from the same dipper, and I don't remember anyone having a separate glass or cup to use. Actually, I don't really remember ever taking a drink of water. There was a washpan for washing hands but I don't remember ever using that either, and I have no recollection of soap or towel.

Neither do I remember ever having to carry water from a neighboring house, although it must have been done, because the school well, located in the vicinity of the frog pond, had holes in the cover through which rabbits and other small animals and birds fell into the water. It was not only unfit to drink or wash with, it smelled really bad.

During the summer, the grass and weeds in the school yard had plenty of time to grow tall, and just prior to school starting it was the job of one of the directors to mow the tall, thick-stemmed weeds. After that, of course, the weeds were like spikes sticking up from the ground. Since we usually went barefooted for the first few weeks of school, these sharp weed stalks added an element of risk and danger.

Clumps of buckbrush and stands of oak and shagbark hickory trees covered about three-quarters of the school grounds, so shinnying up tree trunks and jumping down was a common recess activity. One time I miscalculated and landed on one of the weed stalks. Some days later a large chunk of stalk emerged from the bottom of my foot. It seemed about a foot long at the time but was actually about half an inch. Anyway, it was long enough to hurt a lot. There was no school nurse, nor did the situation require a doctor. After I arrived home that afternoon (having walked home barefooted on the dirt road), my parents soaked my foot in kerosene and then put iodine on it. I had to wear shoes to school from then on. For several years following, that piece of stalk was kept in a glass bottle.

That experience paled beside the time one year when I went to school barefooted on September 26 and it snowed during the day. No one brought me any shoes so I walked home barefooted in the snow that afternoon.

That mile between home and Brushwood seemed much longer when the weather was really cold, or the roads were really muddy. But I often detoured through neighbor's pastures to avoid the mud. I had to be careful about that, because animals would be in the pasture, and sometimes the ram, the boar, or the bull could be mean.

The plum thickets, grape vines, sumac brush, and osage orange hedge rows between our house and the school invited dawdling on the way home, although not on the way to school. On rare occasions a student would bring to school a "hedge ball" or "hedge apple" from the osage orange trees, and we would spend recess throwing it at each other. If it hit someone, its sticky white juice made a real mess on clothes and in hair.

During recess or the noon hour, other unorganized games included fistfighting and wrestling and chasing one another. I don't recall any grievous injuries from these activities. On rainy or snowy days when we had to play inside, a favorite game was Hide the Thimble. For quieter times, we made Cat's Cradle out of string or formed Church and Steeple with our hands.

Among our organized games were Drop the Handkerchief, Fox and Geese, Blackman, Hide and Seek, and Johnny May I Cross Your River. The latter game involved everyone lining up and one person being "it." Someone in the line would ask: "Johnny, may I cross your river?" The person who was "it" would say: "Yes, you may cross my river if you are wearing something ______" and then name a color. Then everyone in the line would run to another line, and the person who was "it" would try to touch someone, hoping that the person was not wearing anything of the color announced. If the person who was "it" succeeded, then the touched person became "it." Often I deliberately carried to school
a handkerchief with a border of red, blue, green, brown, and yellow. I was trying to be prepared.

Another favorite game was Andy Over, which involved one side throwing a basketball over the roof of the coal shed to students on the other side. I remember the game only vaguely, but part of the point of it was to catch the ball on the other side, and then run around the building and throw the basketball as hard as one could at the students who had thrown it.

During my second-grade year a basketball hoop and bang board were erected southeast of the school house, and also two poles with a cross bar that was to test jumping ability. (I was entered in the county jumping contest that year in Osceola but failed to clear anything higher than the third rung.) We even had a basketball that year, but I don't remember using it to play basketball as often as it was used to play Andy Over.

Except for Mansel Burchett, all of the teachers were from out of the neighborhood. That meant that they had to take room and board with some family in the neighborhood during the week. Usually they stayed with one family the whole term of school, although I understand that it was the custom in some other districts for the parents to take turns giving housing and meals to the teacher.

The county superintendent of schools, Ada Tillotson, used to come on periodic visits. I suppose this must have been stressful for the teachers, but I looked forward to Miss Tillotson’s visits. She was a friend of my family, and besides that, she brought books from the county library that we could keep until her next visit. Then we exchanged them for different ones. (During the summer my parents would take me to her office in the courthouse in Osceola, and Miss Tillotson would again let me borrow books from the county library to take home to read. That was a real treat. I don’t know if other students got to do that or not, but I really appreciated it.)

Our textbooks were usually either borrowed from older students or purchased from the Woolworth’s 5 & 10 cent store in Osceola. There were two books in the school library about astronomy, and I remember reading them during times when I had my assigned lessons completed. A white enamel metal cabinet along the south wall contained the “library,” although there weren’t many books in it. We did have a big dictionary. We also had a globe, although it was cracked and fell off of its stand when it was whirled.

One curious incident occurred during geography class one day. We were studying France, and the name of the city of Bordeaux was mentioned in the text. No one knew how to pronounce it except me, and the others, including the teacher, seemed to doubt that I was pronouncing it correctly. The reason I knew it was pronounced “bor-dough” was that my uncle Harvey had been stationed there during World War I. The other students and the teacher all pronounced it as “bor-dee-ax.”

I was very bad in arithmetic and would sometimes...
secretly take home problems because I couldn't get them done at school. I thought that was not permitted, but actually I doubt if anyone knew or cared. Homework was not a concept with which we were familiar.

Science was not emphasized, and I don't remember a single science lesson during the entire six years. One fall we were sent out into the nearby timber to collect samples of leaves and seeds. Perhaps that was for science. We did decorate the schoolroom with bittersweet berries and colorful leaves during the fall.

The school possessed a Victrola and three records (one of them was cracked), and that was our music instruction. The only songs I recall having to sing were "Do You Know the Muffin Man" and "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" (sung in unison, not as a round).

Art was occasionally taught and usually involved cutting out construction paper patterns. These often represented holidays, both in color and in subject matter. We would cut out orange pumpkins and black witches at Halloween, brown turkeys and black pilgrims at Thanksgiving, green evergreen trees, white snowmen, and red bells at Christmas, red hearts and red flowers at St. Valentine's Day, and brown rabbits and multicolored eggs at Easter (that is when the box of Crayolas came in handy). Often the results of this art were pasted to the window glass so that people driving by could admire them. Other art projects were drawing trees, which were geometrically measured so that the trunks were parallel lines and the foliage had to be a certain proportion wider than the trunk. Creativity was not encouraged in art—nor in much else.

Some teachers would read to the entire school body the first thing in the morning. I remember such books as Susan Bawere!, Leather Pants, and That Printer of Udell's being read. Interest in the latter waned, and the teacher never finished the book.

When a grade ahead of me was reciting, I would listen, so that when I actually got into that grade the next year I had a head start and already knew much of the material. We were often asked to memorize declamations and poems, and I still remember the opening lines of some. Among those I memorized were "The Landing of the Pilgrims," "The Boy Stood on the Burning Deck," the first stanzas of "Hiawatha" and "Evangeline," "The Charge of the Light Brigade," "Concord Hymn," "The Blue and the Gray," "The Children's Hour," "The Village Blacksmith," and probably some others. I never had any difficulty in doing the actual memorization, but I sometimes faltered when the time came to recite in front of the class. I was not yet confident enough to speak well in public.

We received report cards at the end of each six weeks' period. Flags decorated the front of the folded report card (left), and on the back was a space for a student's deportment grade. (I distinctly remember that on the brown folder in which my report card was enclosed was an advertisement for Lamoree's funeral home in Osceola.)

Since my mother and father had each been school teachers earlier in their lives, they contributed to my learning process. Among other things, they assigned me to learn the names of all the state capitals and all the counties of Iowa. I learned the counties from a map, by going from left to right, beginning with the row on the northern border. I also learned the numbers of the counties in alphabetical order, something that used to be on the automobile license plates. To this day I think of Clarke County as Number 20.

My father tried, rather in vain, to teach me to do rapid calculation in my head, a skill he learned while attending Iowa Business College in Des Moines. I never quite mastered it. My mother expanded my historical and literary horizons by reading to me and then by having me read from her textbooks of Greek mythology and stories of the Punic Wars. I knew more about Icarus and Pericles and Hannibal and people like that than I did about people alive in the 20th century. These things
were more interesting and real than some things that might have proved to be practical or useful.

Because our home did not yet have electricity or radio on December 7, 1941, we did not hear about the bombing of Pearl Harbor until the next day, when we were in a store in Creston. We did subscribe to a newspaper, but since it came by Rural Free Delivery, it was always delivered a day later than the date on the paper itself.

We got electricity on December 23, 1941, through REA—the Rural Electrification Administration, part of the so-called “alphabet agencies” of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal. Thereafter I often listened to the radio before and after school. I remember listening to Uncle Stan and Cowboy Ken on radio station WHO from 7:45 to 8:00 a.m., so I must have started to school after 8:00. That program was sponsored by Cocoa Wheats cereal, so of course I ate my Cocoa Wheats while I listened. The program also included an “electric eye” through which the hosts claimed they could watch boys and girls during the “dressing race.” Curiously enough, one week the boys would win three of the five days, and the next week the girls would win three of the five days. The show also advertised items that could be obtained by sending in so many box tops from the Cocoa Wheats package. Among the prizes I got that way were a telephone (consisting of two cardboard microphones connected by a piece of string), and a decoder ring that glowed in the dark.

My favorite afternoon programs included Jack Armstrong, Captain Midnight, and Terry and the Pirates. Of course I had to make sure that my chores were completed on time or I wouldn’t get to listen to any of them. It was when I turned on the radio one April afternoon to listen to Jack Armstrong that I first heard the news of the death of President Roosevelt. All regular programming was interrupted. I ran out to my parents, who were working in the garden, to tell them. They came in to listen too, and chores were not done on time that night.

We seldom had visitors at school other than the county superintendent of schools. Sometimes somebody’s mother would come for a half hour or so and sit in the back of the room, making everyone nervous. I don’t ever remember anyone’s father coming to visit. But the whole neighborhood did come to the Christmas programs, the pie and box suppers, and the cake walks. Students had to clean up the schoolhouse before those events and make sure that books and tablets were securely in the bins beneath the desks.

Cleaning the schoolhouse included sweeping it, of course. The floor was made of rough boards, and in order to keep down the dust and dirt the teacher would use sweeping compound, an oily, reddish stuff that looked a bit like sawdust. It was not pleasant when some of it got down the back of a student’s neck while the student was wearing long underwear, which we all did from November to March. The only way the sweeping compound could get down a student’s neck was if another student put it down there. It happened on occasion.

On the night of a community event, kerosene lanterns lit the schoolhouse (it was not wired for electricity). Pie suppers, box suppers, oyster soup suppers, and cake walks—all of which had nothing to do with school—were held in the schoolhouse. For the cake walk, people walked around in a circle, stopped by a particular cake, and then sat down to eat it with the
woman or girl who had baked it. Two or three times during each school year, volunteers made oyster soup or stew for a community supper and served it with oyster crackers. Sometimes a neighbor would entertain the crowd by playing the harmonica, the Jew's harp, or the ocarina, which we called a "sweet potato." I remember one wonderful trio of three neighbor women (Loura Kane, Addie Burchett, and Minnie West) singing "Shortnin' Bread." On rare occasions somebody would bring a fiddle and play a few square dance tunes. There really wasn't enough room in the schoolhouse to form squares, but sometimes a couple or two would do-si-do in the confined space.

Christmas programs were also fun—learning "pieces" to speak, acting in little plays, singing carols, and getting sacks of candy from the teacher. We did not have a Christmas tree or a Santa Claus, but red paper bells and chains of construction-paper loops hung from the ceiling, and green paper evergreens and white snowflakes were pasted on the window glass.

I shared a birthday date with another student, and usually my mother and his mother would come to school that day and bring cake and jello and the school would have a little party. The cake was always angel food and the jello was always red, with fruit cocktail in it and sliced bananas on it. No presents were involved and no other students ever did this on their birthdays.

Whacking the birthday person was sometimes done, most often not. However, the following two days were referred to as "kicking day" and "pinching day," and the person who had celebrated a birthday was energetically kicked and pinched on those days.

The most fun I remember at Brushwood was the last day of school. Parents came as well as interested neighbors. I was always glad school was over for the year, and besides, the variety of food at the picnic or potluck was exciting. Sometimes we would go to a nearby timber and roast wieneros and marshmallows over an open fire. One wonderful time the teacher drove us all the way to the Grand River and we had our picnic there and waded in the river afterwards. Sometimes the potlucks were held on the school grounds and parents brought the fare: lemonade, Kool-Aid, iced tea presweetened with saccharin, sandwiches, fried chicken, potato salad, jello, cake, and pie. Now and then we had something called Bavarian cream, which consisted of jello and whipped cream mixed together. It was at that time my favorite food.

World War II began while I was attending Brushwood. As children, we played war games, held maneuvers with three-inch lead soldiers, practiced black-out and air-raid drills, and generally felt we were contributing to the war effort. Rationing of sugar, rubber, and gasoline also had a real impact in a rural neighborhood. As students, we bought war savings stamps, studied current events, gathered milkweed floss (we were told it could be used to stuff life jackets in place of kapok, the supply of which was controlled by the Japanese), collected copper, aluminum, and tinfoil, saved bacon grease, and worried about the young men from the neighborhood who were in the armed forces. Four of these young men from the neighborhood were killed during the war—my brother George, who also had attended Brushwood School, as...
well as Gene Jones, Roland McNeal, and Johnnie Coon—and this had a profound impact on everyone. It brought the war very close to home, indeed.

Because our farm was half in one school district and half in another, I spent my last two years, grades 7 and 8, in Fairview School, Doyle #6, a mile west of our house. My attendance at that one-room school was essential in order to have enough students to actually open it (it had been closed for several years because of the dearth of school-aged children in the district).

I learned many things during my six years at Brushwood School. Many of them are never to be forgotten. Some of them were academic, some of them were social, and some are hard to categorize. Certainly there were fun times and miserable times, just as there have been in almost any situation that I have since found myself in.

Loren N. Horton lives in Iowa City, after a 17-year teaching career and a 24-year career, ending as senior historian, at the State Historical Society of Iowa. A version of this article appeared in Rural Schools [of] Clarke County, Iowa, Doyle Township, compiled by the Clarke Area Retired School Personnel Association and Clarke County Historical Society (1997-1999).

Sundry other situations were made apparent in the 1944 report. Although Iowa had some new one-room school houses, the majority of them were judged to be from 40 to 50 years old. It was noted that about 3,000 of the 7,690 total rural schools had electric lighting and appliances, about 3,500 had approved heating, nearly 7,000 had Victrolas for use of recorded lessons, more than 3,000 had pianos, and almost 5,500 had indoor toilet facilities. These statistics are framed positively, but subtracting from the total reveals the significant number of rural schools that lacked these features.

After the war, Iowa’s rural population continued to decline, and centralizing the control of education in the state again gained momentum. So did pressuring the rural school districts to consolidate or to align themselves with a district that operated a four-year high school. The process was finally completed by the late 1960s, with the exception made by statute for the schools operated by the Amish in their own communities for their own children.

—by Loren N. Horton
Serving all the children in a rural neighborhood, a one-room school comprised kindergarten or 1st grade through 8th grade. One teacher juggled the needs of multi-age students, shifting attention between small groups of similarly aged children while maintaining order over the entire school. Left: Students of various heights and ages pose at Dover #2, Fayette County, early 1950s. Top: A small group at Dover #1 (same county). Below: Smaller pupils sit at newer desks than the older pupils, in this Ringgold County school. (WPA photo, Jan. 1942)
A Breathless Day in the Life of a Rural Schoolteacher

The challenges of teaching children of different ages and levels

by Melvin Owen

School day started about 9:00 to 9:15. We had what we called opening exercises, and I generally read a story to them from a book. One of the books that the boys really enjoyed was *Toby Tyler* by James Otis. It was a story about a boy that ran away to the circus and his pet monkey. They enjoyed that tremendously, and of course we always had the Pledge of Allegiance. At that time, we generally listened to this old phonograph with a record on it. And then from 9:15 to 9:30 I always had the little ones work on phonics and read several little stories. I always made flashcards for the new words introduced. And then from about 9:30 to 9:45, the third grade, I only had one student in there, he had a reading book, Elson Gray reading book. And he’s up there about fifteen minutes. Then the sixth graders, they came up, and they stayed about fifteen minutes. They all sat on a recitation bench by the teacher, and they had their reading. And then the seventh graders, which is only one lone boy, came up. It’s very hard to teach a young boy that age, just himself, because he had no challenge, you know. He was a real good boy, but he just was so laid back you really had to work on him to get much response from him. Then we had a recess for about fifteen minutes. In good weather they went outside. Of course, then, when it wasn’t so good, they had to stay inside. And we played on the blackboard, “hang the man” and games like that. Then we had arithmetic from about 11:00 to 11:15. The first grade, of course I introduced numbers to them, simple little combinations, made a lot of flashcards for them. Then the third grade, they had their arithmetic from 11:00 to 11:15; 11:15 to 11:30 was sixth grade; 11:30 to 11:45 was seventh. Then we had lunch, and we generally had it for about an hour. Sometimes that got kind of long if you had to keep them inside, but they wanted it that way. Outside, of course, then they thought it was too short because they’d get to playing. Then in the afternoon, the primary, they worked on some kind of handwork or some handouts I’d given to them, and then I had some coloring books for them to work on. Then there was a sandbox in the back of the room, and they had some sand in it, and there was some little trucks and different figures in there. The little ones played in that. I only told them they could play there if they were quiet. Then the other ones, they had geography and history from about 1:00 to 1:30. Then there was recess from 2:30 to 2:45. Then there was the primary, they worked on their lessons they were assigned, and I found them, a lot of times, they were just sitting there listening to the others, you know. Because they learned a lot from the others really. And some of them would do that. Some weren’t interested in that, they just went about their own work or what they were doing. And the last thing was history and geography. I combined the sixth and the seventh grade for that. One day we’d have history and the next day we’d have geography. Always about 15 minutes before they left to go home, they had to straighten up everything and keep everything in order. They were dismissed about 3:30.

Melvin Owen taught at Linn Grove School in Cedar County in 1938-1939. His description above is excerpted from Jeffrey A. Kaufmann’s dissertation, “Teaching Practices of Iowa Rural Teachers in the 1930’s” (University of Iowa, 2000).
Rural teachers recall teaching in 1930s Iowa

by Jeffrey A. Kaufmann

A FEW YEARS AGO, I listened to 15 former teachers recount their experiences in one-room schools in Cedar County, Iowa, during the 1930s. My 15 teachers had taught in 36 different Cedar County schools and had more than 100 years of one-room school teaching experience in Cedar County alone. These oral history interviews formed the core of my dissertation.

Although the 15 interviews, from which the following excerpts were taken, are too small a sample for broad generalizations, they do provide detailed examples of what it was like to teach in a rural school at that time. Common to all the teachers’ experiences were meager resources and the school’s role as a community social center.

The teachers I interviewed had a tremendous amount of freedom in choosing and implementing their teaching practices. I was impressed by the degree to which they took advantage of this freedom to be innovative and creative. Much of the rural teacher’s curriculum was prescribed by a state course of study and the county superintendent, but the emphasis placed on subjects and the quality and the quantity of the instruction were the teacher’s responsibility. The weekly schedules of teachers contained the same basic elements, but even those were adapted to the philosophy of individual teachers. Music and art education varied greatly. So, too, did opening exercises and even recitation (or daily discussion) by small groups with the teacher.

I have donated the oral history interviews in their entirety to the State Historical Society of Iowa so that they are accessible to the public, but I still retain the voices of those 15 rural teachers from the 1930s speaking softly, deep inside me. I invite you to listen to those voices, through the following selected quotations from the interviews.

“Well, it [the school where I taught] looked exactly like it did when my mother went to school there, probably twenty years before. A typical one-room schoolhouse, no vestibule, no entrance room. It had a pot-belly stove in the middle of the room. We did have coal, thank goodness, and of course the coal shed was off to the side. Of course we had no telephone, no light, no water inside. We did have a well outside, and we had a piano, but I couldn’t play the piano. And we had one of those wall maps you pull down for the geography. And we had a set of encyclopedias, and that was our library.” —Louise Kline

“One time I was reading to them, and I realized I’d lost my audience,
The WPA Collections in the State Historical Society of Iowa are the sources of many of the photos in this article. There are some 5,000 photos in the WPA Collection in SHSI's Iowa City center, and at least 2,000 in the Des Moines center. Organized by county or topic, they portray Work Projects/Works Progress Administration projects and workers in adult education, airports, art projects, bandshells, bridges, cemeteries, courthouses, dams and channel changes, fairgrounds, historical archives, levees and retaining walls, libraries, music projects, parks, public buildings, quarries, schools (including gymnasiums and athletic fields), sewers, standpipes and watertowers, the state fair, improvements to highways, streets, and farm-to-market roads, swimming pools, theater projects, and water mains. These collections are particularly rich in images of women in public roles; for a sampling, see Louise Rosenfield Noun's Iowa Women in the WPA (Iowa State University Press, 1999). For specific information on WPA images, contact SHSI Special Collections in Iowa City (319-335-3916) and Des Moines (515-281-3007).
Rural teachers recall teaching

"This was a community affair..."
and a mouse was coming out from under the desk where I had a dinner pail that tied at the top, and he was sitting up there eating a cookie. After that I kept my dinner pail on my desk... If they were too bad, I would offer a penny to anybody who would set the trap and take care of a mouse. One day I caught thirteen.” — Mildred Carstensen

“You can’t teach any domestic science or anything when all I had was a round-belly stove and no water in the schoolhouse and no drain... The country school that I went to for first through sixth grade, it was practically a brand new building. We had a furnace and we had cloak rooms and we had everything. But I went back to the Dark Ages when I went to this other school.” — Louise Kline

“I carried it [water] in a five-gallon pail when I drove the car. When I rode horseback, when the roads were bad, I couldn’t take water. All the students brought their own in a pint jar.” — Esther Rupe

“You didn’t ask for too much [in supplies] back then because wages weren’t very good. Back in the ‘30s things were pretty slow and depressed, and you pretty much made do with what they gave you.” — Evelyn Straub

“I was only getting $55 a month [teaching school].... [A school board director] told me because my husband was earning $18 a week [as a mechanic], he could not issue me a contract.” — Kathryn Shilling

“I quit on a Friday and got married on a Saturday... [or] I’d been fired right away. Well, they thought that the married women were to be supported by their husbands and leave these jobs for the unmarried.” — Ruby Streets

“The lowest blow I ever had in my life was when he [a school board director] told me the superintendent would not recommend me. I know my mouth dropped open. I had done all these four years of school methods, school management, child psychology, all these things just to be a teacher. I had no typing, no bookkeeping. I couldn’t do anything else because I wanted to be a teacher. So I said, ‘Why?’ ‘Well,’ he said, ‘I’ll tell you one thing, you go to dances.’ She [the county superintendent] didn’t believe in that, and you wore dresses then. You didn’t wear slacks. I had my legs out bare down there to the ankle. That was bad for a spinster county superintendent; that wasn’t lady-like, I guess. ‘But,’ he said, ‘tell you what we’ve decided. We’ve decided to give you a contract for three months, and if you prove satisfactory, we’ll give you a contract for the rest of the year,’ so I took that. I said, ‘I’ll sign that.’ And I did, and I signed that, and I taught there six years.” — Marie Christian

“I was an independent, I guess you might say. They [school directors] never bothered anything I did, never dictated what I was to do or I wasn’t to do. The superintendent never showed up.” — Louise Kline

“You were the teacher of the school, and you did as you thought best. The county superintendent would come along, and she’d stop in. They always loved to sneak in on you, and things like that... You didn’t have to get permission because if you weren’t doing it right, you heard from the directors or something.” — George McCoy

“Sometimes [to start the day] I read a chapter out of books, like Winnie the Pooh, or Old Mother Westwind, or Black Beauty or something. It had to appeal to first graders and eighth graders all the way up and down, but they liked that. And then we had discussion of current events, and then we had special experiences. They all walked to school and you never knew what was going to happen or what they saw on the way. Then, any changes of nature we would discuss, or birds or flowers or trees or pastures. Anything that I didn’t have time to work in, we would touch on in that opening exercise.” — Louise Kline

“I think I figured it out once; you
Early 20th-century educators urged rural teachers to instruct students in citizenship and physical education.

Above: Page County rural students salute the flag and recite the Pledge of Allegiance, which first appeared in Youth’s Companion magazine in 1892.

Left: Teacher Grace B. Herzberg leads "organized play" at Summit School in Page County, 1921.
Right: Pupils at a school west of Centerville enjoy a hot lunch, in December 1941. Two decades earlier, a University of Iowa extension bulletin had reported that 30 percent of Iowa’s rural students were “seriously underweight.” Calling for rural schools to provide a “supplementary hot dish,” cooked and served by the teacher or parents, the bulletin recommended scalloped dishes and creamed soups for their milk content, since milk or milk dishes were difficult for children to carry from home and to keep cold at school. Expected benefits of the hot dishes were children “more nearly physically fit,” decreased education costs, and “fewer failures and fewer children repeating grades.”

Above and left: Most country school students carried the noon meal from home in tin lunch buckets (which were often empty syrup or lard cans). Nutritionists worried, however, that many rural students “have had early breakfasts and have walked or ridden long distances.” “Until the world awakens to a realization that the school should provide a way by which every child may receive a hot lunch,” a 1921 extension bulletin warned, “these children must continue to bring their noon-day meal... cold, often unattractive and not infrequently poorly selected.”
had fifteen minutes per child per subject or something. Of course they got your full attention for that length of time, but you couldn't double up a lot of times. I mean, even then the work was different

"A mother came and helped because I had one of her students that was starting to school the third year and had never gotten through the first grade because he had an impediment in speech, and when he would raise his hand, he would come up if he needed to go outside to the bathroom or if he needed a drink of water or he needed help, and he stuttered, and he would go, 'May I—I—I—1/ and he'd hit the highest key there was, and then the kids would all laugh. They did that once. I stopped. I said, 'I'm sorry. He is your brother, and he is your friend. I don't want to ever hear this again.' And they never laughed at him again, and his mother came to school the next day and was just thrilled that I was going to help him, and she was interested in helping him, and he was ready for third grade after one year."

—Kathryn Shilling

"I found out as the years went along that instead of calling up fourth-grade arithmetic, fifth-grade, sixth-grade arithmetic, I had a half hour that everybody did their math. That way I could go around from desk to desk, each one, and help each one individually, rather than have this class up and then have another class up. They all participated in that one subject. Of course you couldn't do it very well in history and languages and things like that as well as you could with math."

—George McCoy

"If you tried to get everything in in a day, you just would have, maybe, some five-minute classes and you can't get anything done. So I set up a longer time and called it reading, ... We didn't always read out of the reading book. If the child was having trouble with their geography or history or something like that, we sometimes used that book as the reading book."

—Marion Gehris

"You can't teach reading by itself. You have to have both sight reading, ... [and] context. Because that's the way adults read. An example: I wrote on the board one time, 'I put milk in a blank.' I had the children try to guess what I put it in. They guessed, I don't know how many different ones, and then I put a 'j' up there. And of course they had a choice between 'jar' and 'jug,' so they got that in a minute. And I did that to try to show them that if you knew the first letter, you would have a pretty good chance at getting the word right even if you didn't know it before."

—Mildred Carstensen

"Well, we started out with the alphabet, and at first, maybe I'd give them a letter each day. And they would bring pictures that begin with "A" or "B." We learned that "A" had a sound of "a." ... They could look through magazines and find them. But a lot of times they looked for them at home. And then we made a booklet of them or put them on a poster. So they had a record of them."

—Frances Langley

"Well, they all wrote their poems [on "what they were thankful for that day"] and some of them were a little crude as far as poetry went, and so we would talk it over and say, 'Well, now how can we make this so it would rhyme?' and so forth, and we talked about rhyming things. The idea, the thought is the child's, whatever they wanted to say they were thankful for, that was fine, and we made them, in some cases, rhyme a little better and put them into booklets."

—Marion Gehris

"I'm afraid I centered on grammar and punctuation more than we should've. That kind of cramp their style. If they could've told it in their own way without worrying about the correct word and way to spell it and all, I think maybe we'd have got a better response."

—Ruby Streets

"Grammar was real important in those days—punctuation and capitalization and complete sentences, and the climax of a story was important. It couldn't be haphazard, just a few sentences and given a grade. It had to have something solid in it."

—Clella Walton

"So they would put down their thoughts, and one thing I did, I told them they could not use a dictionary while they were writing, and if you think you've misspelled a word, when you're through, you may look it up. For instance, at the third-grade level, if they were trying to find 'dynamite,' it might take them the whole time they had to write. They'd lose their train of thought and you wouldn't get anything."

—Marjorie Carstensen

"If it were history what I cared about was whether it had something to do about history, and you didn't count off for spelling. If that had been a language test, then you would have watched the grammar. ... Often they had wonderful ideas. ... The child wouldn't be inhibited by thinking about, 'Well, should I use a comma or a period?' And they gradually learned. Sometimes you would take what they wrote and carefully correct every error and explain why it was wrong and have them rewrite it, but you didn't do..."
that every time. If you did, you wouldn't get anything."
—Mildred Carstensen

“Well, we had history from fourth grade on, I think. And we were kind of like a family; we just discussed whatever happened to be pertinent at that particular time. I think we mixed Iowa history and county history and family history.”
—Louise Kline

“Well, we had a little science. . . . Birds and flowers and animals, different things. We generally had them plant seeds, had little paper cups for flower pots and plant marigold seeds. . . . I didn’t do nature walks, but I taught them how to press leaves, and we used them for decorations.”
—Kathryn Shilling

“We never took any field trips because I rode horseback and we didn’t have any way to go, but the kids had a field trip every day they came to school, and if anything on the school ground was interesting, we’d look at it then. A lot of difference between country kids in those days and town kids.” —Louise Kline

“Well, we really didn’t do agriculture except we did plant some flower seeds. I think we planted a few kernels of corn and watched them come up. But beyond that, no. You ran out of time for all these things. They were country kids who saw their fathers doing all these things; they grew up with it.”
—Marion Gehrls

“On Friday afternoons [art lessons were] probably one of the last things we did. Oh, some of it was pretty simple. We made a lot of things to put on the windows and decorate, you know, mostly that type of thing. Wasn’t anything that we got too carried away. We didn’t actually teach them how to draw too much. It was mostly copying, I guess, and coloring and construction work. . . . I never liked to teach it because we always had such messes when we got through with the cutting and all this and that.”
—Evelyn Straub

“Well, one of the things we did was we taught children to sew on buttons, and we taught the girls a little bit of embroidery so they could do cross-stitch, and I think some of the boys had what they call little coping saws. They sawed out little figures out of wood, and I know one of the years we made gifts for our mother, and I had the lumber man saw out little breadboards out of a board, and he sawed the corners off. And then they sanded them down for their mothers, and that was a big hit.”
—Ciella Walton

“Something that was earth-shaking really caught their attention. Of course, there wasn’t television . . . there would have been a radio and newspapers, and I think particularly with the older children, you know, they sometimes come bouncing in, ‘Do you know what happened?’ and ‘Did you read?’ or ‘Did you hear?’ You know, this sort of thing, and we’d have a little discussion on it. I figured they were learning, whether it was tied to the textbook or not.”
—Adria Ralston

“One time we got up, chose up sides, and they debated on which was more helpful to the housewife: the broom or the dishrag? Well, you can take the broom and do this, you know, and I would sit and think, ‘Well, that was a good point. I’ll give them a point on this side.’ Well, then I can remember this very distinctly about the dishrag. ‘Yeah, but you put the dishrag on top of the broom to get up in the corner for the cobwebs.’ All right, there was a point for the dishrag. Things like that.
. . . It was just an extra activity. Trying to keep the kids interested. Instead of the same reading and writing and arithmetic; arithmetic, writing, and reading. One day, the same thing over and over. . . . It sure provided a lot of good arguments.”
—George McCoy

“You’re so busy working and everything, it’s just nice to have time to relax and be with them.”
—Frances Langley

“Especially [at recess] at that age, we were one of the children, but we still were there in case there was some problem, somebody got hurt, or they couldn’t decide whether he was out or not. I never interfered. I just did something if they asked me to. Sometimes they played Hide-and-Seek, but there weren’t many places to hide. They invented lots of different things. Once in a while we’d have a teeter totter and a swing, but they soon get tired of that. They played the games we did when we were kids.” —Marjorie Carstensen

“If it rained and we ate inside, we could talk, and they could laugh. It was real close communication. I mean, it isn’t like in the town schools where the kids go out-of-doors, and you don’t see them and you have them in your classrooms, and [then] they go to some other classroom. They were always yours, and I was always theirs.” —Marie Christian

“Well, the girls would talk about the dolls that they had at home, and that was a point of interest, so it was so much fun for them to bring their dolls at noon and recess. . . . I think it taught them to share, let the others play with their dolls, and then also to be careful, give them a little
Sisters Hilda, Aletha, Leanna, and Iris Kirkpatrick sled at noontime outside their rural Guthrie County school in December 1942. The accompanying news story stated that “two thirds of the 106 rural schools now are opening from a half-hour to an hour later than ever before” because of war savings time. For farm children, this meant more time to help with morning chores, and “they don’t have to begin their long walks to school in the dark.”

Students from a Higley school (west of Allerton) ride horseback rather than a school bus on a chilly spring day in 1950. According to the Des Moines Tribune caption, the students “prefer the one-room rural school to consolidated school in town.” The push for consolidation revived after World War II, as rural populations declined and as country roads improved. More reliable country roads weakened one argument against consolidation—transporting children beyond the neighborhood to a distant school.
training. And then the kites, that was a lot of fun for the boys to bring the kites, and we would all get out and see if we couldn’t get one up in the air at least, and maybe we’d get more.” — Wilma Fisher

“Alvie Proctor . . . came to school one time with a pair of stilts. His was only about that far [two feet] off the ground. [I thought,] Hmm, I believe I could do that. That night I went home and I took 2x4’s, and if you recall how the step is off the schoolhouse up there at Lime City, I had to get up on there to get on mine, and I was about this high off [four feet], and we’d go around there. It’s a terrible thing for a teacher to have done, but we’d kind of have a little tug-of-war. We’d go along, try to knock his stilt out. He’d come along, try to knock my stilt out.” — George McCoy

“Well, all the kids walked to school, and they all walked home and they all had chores, and we had two recesses and noon. How much more exercise do you want?” — Louise Kline

“Well, we had choir songs. Miss McCormick [the county superintendent] would send out, maybe there were ten songs from our songbook that were choir songs, and each one would have to learn that song and sing it with the Victrola. That was their music assignment. They had all year to do it, but each one would have to individually sing it, just so they had learned the song.” — Frances Langley

“In both schools we had these old, antiquated phonographs [with] which we were supposed to teach music. And we had certain songs that we were supposed to learn. This was put out by Charles Fullerton from Cedar Falls, and most of the records were just really bad. I mean they scratch and screech and scratch and screech, and you hardly knew what they were trying to sing. Many of the times we sang without it. I had some music ability. I’m not a soloist or anything, but at least I could carry a tune.” — Melvin Owen

“I answered an ad in the paper . . . [for a pump organ]. I could read music, and my right hand would work, but my left hand wouldn’t, and so I had my dad, with his truck, pick up that organ. I bought it for $15, and I bought them music, and it wasn’t required, because I thought music was very important . . . We didn’t have music books, but I would have a copy of the music book, and I would practice that on the piano when I went home on the weekends so I knew what I wanted to do, and lots of times we’d sing one of those songs in the morning, and they would learn the tune from listening to me with my right hand.” — Kathryn Shilling

“The eighth graders . . . had to take the county test, which meant that you spent the major part of eighth grade getting that youngster ready for the test . . . I can see maybe some point to it, it was a way to see whether all of the youngsters had an equal amount of background, but you spent so much time reviewing for that stuff, you really couldn’t take them very far forward in eighth-grade work because you had to go back over all this . . . Well, you had to work it in somewhere because the poor kid had to pass that stuff [to enter high school].” — Adria Ralston

“Well, there were booklets put out by [a publisher in] Minden, Nebraska . . . . They were on every subject, and we would take extra time and go through those and ask the questions, and they would give the answers and so forth. We did push
WPA rural school projects ranged from digging basements to painting interiors to building additions or new buildings. Above: WPA workers at this school near Collins, Story County, tuck-pointed brick, painted, grubbed out old trees, and planted new ones.

Left: Called "practically a rebuilt job," Ankeny School in Adams County was photographed March 20, 1934, during WPA work on the building. U.S. Highway #34 is on the right.

Below: Pupils perch on a fence outside a Polk County school with a new WPA addition, by Oralabor, in December 1939.
for those. I have always felt that I would like to see the town kids take those [eighth grade] tests. They thought that the country children were not as well educated, and consequently [that] they had to take those tests to 'get into high school.' I went to school in town all my life, and they figured that if the teacher taught you, why that was good enough.” —Marion Gehrls

“We didn’t address it [morality] as a formal study, you know. They were to be honest, truthful, and compassionate, help the underdog, and be responsible.” —Ruby Streets

“I always read a Bible thought to them that I had saved on paper. Then we would say the Lord’s Prayer, which you can’t do now. But the kids enjoyed that. . . . Later one of the girls told me that she wanted me to know how much she appreciated that because she never had a chance to get to Sunday school or church and that helped build her up.” —Esther Rupe

“One of the fathers came down, I don’t know if he was an atheist or what. He did not want his kids talking the Lord’s Prayer, the first thing in the morning or any other time. So I dropped it.” —Louise Kline

“How you learned to divide, how you learned to respect and all of that. As far as the country school, I think it was the foundation of all our learning because you were taught there more togetherness, how to share and live with one another as a school, so that later on in life, you learned to live with your neighbor and all of the good things, that we can’t live by ourselves alone, we need everybody else.” —George McCoy

When you lived with them from nine to four in the afternoon and
played all the games with them, why, whenever a subject came up of any morality or anything, we hashed it over. But not just as a subject in class.

—Louise Kline

“The directors and the people in the community decided to put a basement underneath [the schoolhouse]. So one summer the whole community got together, digging the basement out practically by hand. There were people underneath throwing the dirt out; people outside with pickups or different things, hauling it away. This was a community affair that everyone chipped in and did their bit. I knew I was going to teach there next year so I wanted to participate as much as anything. Then that was our recreation area in inclement weather, the basement, and it was a nice place.”

—George McCoy

“We called it the Sugar Creek Gang, and everybody got together, and well, maybe the first month there would be two or three people, and they put on the program. It could be anything that they wanted to do—little skits, musical, anything that would make up a good program, and that went over pretty good. At Christmas, I furnished a duck, I forget anymore what it was, and it was a raffle. . . . And money at the end went to something for the school. Maybe we needed a new map, or we might have needed something else, and it was all to be given to the school. To give you an idea, they would plow snow, they would plow mud and everything to get there. And it was up there on a hill, and if you got stuck, everybody pushed.”

—George McCoy

“I had a program, which was expected, and I hated them. A community thing of some kind where you had, well, I didn’t have many chil-

Proud parents squeeze into desks, and a piano stool doubles as a pint-sized table on October 27, 1941, dedication night for two rural schools rebuilt by the WPA in Sherman Township, Monona County. The host schoolhouse for the community event, four miles southwest of Blencoe, is decorated with black cats and streamers. Social events and holiday programs often filled one-room schools with parents and neighbors eager to socialize.
dren so I didn’t get a lot of parents either, and then there were some people dropped in. We had a program around Halloween. I guess it was a potluck dinner, and the whole group played bingo. It wasn’t anything I liked to do, and I know that a lot of places, a rural school was more of a center of social things, and if I had stayed, I might have gotten into the swing of it, but I didn’t. Then at Christmas we had a program, and everybody had to sing two or three songs or speak two or three pieces, and at Christmas, teacher bought the tree, teacher bought the treats, teacher bought the gifts. Nothing was furnished.”

—Adria Ralston

“We had a PTA [at Linn Grove], and I think it met about four times a year. It was a community affair. I mean all the officers were people around there, and they always had a potluck. Knowing farm folk, they brought plenty of food. I welcomed them because at the place where I stayed, the food wasn’t the greatest. Some of the programs consisted of old pieces spoken by the students there, and also maybe little playlettes given by either the people of the community, or some of the times I took part in. And I can remember distinctly the Christmas program. I think it was about 90 scrunched in that little bit of a building, and you know the ventilation was poor. I thought, Oh, I’ll simply roast. It just reeked with perspiration. But we got through it, and the people enjoyed it a lot.”

—Melvin Owen

“Everybody showed up. They brought the baby and everybody else, and even though they had no children in school, everybody was there, and they were there early, and they brought food you wouldn’t believe, and it was marvelous.”

—Marion Gehrls

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ASK IOWANS what they are most proud of about their state, and one of the most common answers will be public education. Oddly, however, despite widespread popular interest in the history of country schools, professional historians have given little attention to the history of public education in Iowa. When they have, they have generally followed the model established by Clarence Aurner. Between 1914 and 1920 he wrote a thorough, five-volume history of educational policy, oversight, and teacher training that included histories of individual statewide educational institutions in Iowa. In the 1980s Keach Johnson and Carroll Engelhardt mined instructive details and insights from the official reports of the Iowa Department of Public Instruction, the proceedings of the Iowa State Teachers Association, and the writings of the state’s educational administrators for a series of articles that each wrote for the State Historical Society’s scholarly journal, The Annals of Iowa.

But, aside from some biographical work on women schoolteachers, historians have paid little attention to how official policies and reformers’ prescriptions actually played out in the field. University of Iowa geographer David Reynolds has now begun to correct that oversight in his book There Goes the Neighborhood: Rural School Consolidation at the Grass Roots in Early Twentieth-Century Iowa. The book won the State Historical Society of Iowa’s Benjamin F. Shambaugh Award, recognizing it as the most significant book on Iowa history published in 1999.

In the first half of There Goes the Neighborhood, Reynolds describes the context within which school consolidation took place in the early 20th century. Here he describes the forces that were the impetus for school reform—and many other reform movements—in Iowa during the Progressive Era. Prominent among those forces was the branch of the Progressive movement most concerned about rural America, the Country Life Movement. Much of this discussion is quite abstract and theoretical and may discourage some general readers of the book. But they should persevere (or skim), because the payoff comes in the second half of the book, where Reynolds zooms in on the movement to consolidate schools in one county, Delaware County, and eventually one rural community, the Buck Creek neighborhood in rural Delaware County.

There the story of school consolidation becomes more complicated—and more dynamic—than the usual straightforward story of educational reform yielding steady progress. Buck Creek was a virtual battleground between the forces promoting school reform and consolidation and those who saw the benefits of preserving traditional values in that rural community—or group of communities. The main characters in this drama include a group of Roman Catholic farmers in this predominantly Protestant neighborhood, the Ku Klux Klan, and, perhaps most importantly, a dynamic Methodist minister imbued with the values of the Country Life Movement and the Social Gospel, the religious form of the Progressive movement.

There are no clear heroes and villains in Reynolds’s telling; this is not a story of enlightened reformers being resisted by ignorant rubes. Here his work joins that of people such as Wayne Fuller and Paul Theobald, who have argued that the country schools of the past were not the dismal failures educational reformers have portrayed them as, but instead were the carriers of values that we can continue to learn from as we debate how to reform the schools of today.

Reynolds is sensitive to the religious, ethnic, and class differences that contributed to the dynamic character of this rural neighborhood. Differences that could be accommodated in the decentralized schools of the community were heightened when reformers proposed consolidation in a central location with preference given to a particular set of values. Debates about school consolidation, Reynolds concludes, are about much more than simply the quality of rural schools; they go to the heart of our understanding of the nature of the communities we live in. As such, There Goes the Neighborhood is a rewarding book not only for those who are interested in the history of education, but for those who care about our schools and communities today and into the future.

—by Marvin Bergman
Let us take a look, in imagination, at the little (once white) schoolhouse. There it stands out in the corner of some field without a fence to bound its plot of ground, no trees to afford shelter from the winds of winter or to offer shade in summer. The weeds have taken possession of much of the school yard, the cattle have been permitted to trample the grass under their feet and to destroy the trees that may have been planted by the teacher and the boys and girls on Arbor Day. The out-buildings are sometimes without doors, the worst sort of places for vice, nastiness, and evil thoughts. The school building is shaped like a boxcar with a coal shed attached to the rear and opening directly into the school room by a loose fitting door, permitting free access of cold air laden with coal dust. Desks are sometimes placed within two or three feet of the stove which stands in the center of the room; the walls are blackened with accumulation of dirt and coal soot; a poor old map or two hang on the walls.

This is how Albert M. Deyoe, Superintendent for Iowa’s Department of Public Instruction (DPI), described a typical rural schoolhouse in 1912. Deyoe echoed the concerns of social critics and reformers across the nation who saw American agriculture and its rural populations as lagging behind in the nation’s shift to economic efficiency and industrialization. Nor had rural schools kept pace with modernization in town and city schools. By urban standards, critics charged, rural schools suffered from failing physical plants, limited supervision, undertrained teachers, low attendance, outdated curriculum, and poor sanitation. Sociologists and educators crusaded to change rural education into a more urban model, thereby improving the lives of farm families, securing their commitment to laboring on the land, and industrializing agriculture. Indeed, the Country Life Movement, as it was called, was initiated by urban Americans and defined by urban values.

One approach for improving midwestern rural schools was pioneered in Illinois by State Superintendent of Public Instruction Alfred Bayliss in the early 1900s. His plan was simple. He would devise criteria, visit Illinois rural schools, evaluate the buildings and academic programs, and then award “diplomas” to those that qualified. His successor, Francis G. Blair, formalized the plan, writing regulations and hiring inspectors. Little did Bayliss and Blair realize that this early form of review by an outside evaluator would put into motion improvements in thousands of midwestern country schools during the next four decades.

Bayliss’s and Blair’s school improvement effort—
more commonly called the standard school program—
gained national recognition when the U.S. Commissi-
oner of Education issued a bulletin about it in 1912. In
1914 George Herbert Betts and Otis Earle Hall included
the program in their book Better Rural Schools. This ex-
pansion, plus the informal communication network
among state superintendents, helped spread the idea
of consolidation. Although only 37 districts had consoli-
dations had taken place in Iowa. But not everyone
believed in school consolidation. Falling farm commod-
ity prices after World War I and the cost of new build-
ing construction and operational expenses, combined
with the desire by rural Iowans to maintain local con-
control over their children’s teachers and education, stalled consolidation in Iowa.

Meanwhile in Iowa, educators had been using an-
other approach for improving rural schools—school
consolidation. Although only 37 districts had consoli-
dated between 1897 and 1913, by 1921 some 439 con-
solidations had taken place in Iowa. But not everyone
saw consolidation as “much different from rearrang-
ing urban schools.” Fuller writes, “To close a country
school was to destroy an institution that held the little
rural community together. It was to wipe out the one
building the people of the district had in common and,
in fact, to destroy the community, which, in those years,
so many were trying to save and strengthen. Even more
important, as far as the farmers were concerned, the
destruction of their school meant that their power to
set the length of the school terms, to employ their
teacher, and to determine how much they would spend
for education would be taken from them and given to
some board far removed from their community and
their control.”

Another critical factor in turning farmers against
consolidation was a significant increase in school taxes
in a consolidated school district. As David Reynolds
relates in his book There Goes the Neighborhood, “For an
average-size farm, [the additional tax levy] represented
a tax increase of $140 per year, shrinking average prof-
its of its owner-operator to only $105 per year.” Reynolds
concludes that “it was an increase many farm families
felt they could not afford.”

Although Iowa educators would soon resume the
push for consolidation of rural schools, interest now
turned to an approach similar to that tried in Illinois.
May E. Francis, who became a DPI supervisor of rural
schools in 1919, was the chief architect of the standard
school movement in Iowa. She drafted the legislation,
which was approved in 1919, and then wrote the regu-
lations to implement the new Iowa Standard School
Law, which went into effect for the 1919/20 school year.

As supervisor of rural schools, Francis visited more
than 1,800 one-room schools and worked closely with
county superintendents, who were responsible for car-
rying out the standard school evaluations. These mini-
um requirements dealt with teaching, general equip-
ment and seating, heating, lighting, ventilation, water
supply, library, care of grounds, and fire protection. A
school that scored 80 points on a 100-point checklist
qualified as a “standard school” and received $6 of state
aid per student (based on the number of students in
attendance for at least six months of the school year).
Thus, a school averaging 15 students would receive $90
of state aid for that year.

Half of that aid was to supplement the teacher’s sal-
ary. A $45 increase for the school year—essentially a
bonus—for a teacher of 15 students was significant,
given that this could be nearly a 5 percent increase for a
teacher with at least two years’ experience and training
beyond high school. As Francis pointed out in her 1924
DPI biennial report, the salary supplement allowed “the
country school to offer at least ONE other inducement
in its attempt to keep some of the best teachers in the
rural schools instead of allowing the towns to take them
all.”

The other half of the standard school’s state aid was
to be used to purchase equipment and supplies. Again,
for a qualifying school with average attendance of 15,
that yearly supplement of $45 could buy essential items
in 1920: 15 desks and a set of 8 pull-down wall maps,
for example; or an 18-inch globe in a stand, a 10-gallon
crockery water jar with bubbler attachment, a fire ex-
tinguisher, an American flag, and portraits of Washin-
ton, Lincoln, and General Pershing.

A final incentive was the oval brass plate that read
“IOWA STANDARD SCHOOL.” Many qualifying schools dis-
played them proudly over their front doors. Some can
still be found on rural schools today—including Antioch
School (in Jones County), Lancaster School (Keokuk
County), Hoosier Row School (Warren County), and
relocated schools in Lake Mills (Winnebago County) and
Massena (Cass County).

The standard school law remained in place for the
next 29 years. Aside from consolidation, it be-
came Iowa’s first statewide school improvement
program. It marked the first attempt in Iowa to develop
statewide voluntary standards. And it provided Iowa’s
first state funding earmarked for local schools based on
student enrollment. Up to that point, schools were fi-
nanced exclusively with local property taxes.

The law proved to be a pathway to progress for
Iowa's country schools. It helped improve educational opportunities for thousands of Iowa children. But there would be bumps in the road that limited the impact of this landmark legislation.

In 1920, when the standard school law went into effect, more than half of Iowa's public school students were attending one- and two-room country schools. School participation in the program increased rapidly. By 1924, roughly one out of ten of Iowa's country schools had qualified, and there were standard schools in all but a few Iowa counties. State Superintendent May E. Francis noted its success in "raising the standard of the rural schools... as it has improved the type of building. Instead of the unattractive, inefficient box model, the new buildings have modern plans employing in most cases finished basements, modern light, heating and ventilating systems, and often chemical toilets." She praised the legislature, calling the law a "turning point in Iowa's educational policy." "Of the hundreds of millions that the farmer has paid into the state treasury for the support of education in general in the state of Iowa," Francis remarked, "this is the first attempt to give his school some direct benefit from it."

The DPI's 1925 Regulations for Standardizing Common Schools articulated the kinds of improvements that county superintendents were instructed to look for during their evaluations. Fifty-three standards with various point values were grouped under six categories—grounds and outbuildings; the schoolhouse; equipment and care of the schoolroom; library and supplementary readers; teacher and academic requirements; and community activities. For example, if a teacher was judged to be excellent or superior, the school received six points. If the school had a vestibule and separate cloak closets for boys and girls, it earned three points. To be deemed "standard," a school needed 80 points out of 100. Scores of 85 the second year and 90 the third were required to continue the designation. (See right and page 136: This rating card, circa 1928, shows the revised scoring.)

The annual appropriation of $100,000 to fund the standard school program was more than adequate to start with, but already by the 1923/24 school year, the

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May Francis championed "the smallest school unit"

P. E. McClenahan was the state superintendent of public instruction when the standard school law was adopted. But it was May E. Francis who championed the cause for the country schools. Her advocacy for country schools in general helped get her elected state superintendent, but it also forced her from that office.

Francis began her career as a country school teacher and was then elected county superintendent in Bremer County. In 1919 she was hired by McClenahan to be the first inspector of rural schools at the Iowa Department of Public Instruction. Her responsibilities included preparing and administering the first regulations for standard schools.

Francis surprised the educational establishment by announcing her decision to run for state superintendent in 1922, opposing the man who had hired her. Another candidate, W. H. Bender, decided to run as well, thus creating a three-way race for the Republican nomination.

Francis campaigned on her support for country schools and on spending restraint. "I believe that the taxpayers, especially of the rural districts, should not be called upon to expend millions of dollars for palatial school buildings. Rather we should improve buildings and equipment, and with less of the taxpayers' money, lift the standard rural schools to a place of paramount importance in our educational system," she wrote in Midland Schools.

"I shall inaugurate a policy of ever advancing in school affairs...[yet] measure this advancement by the rule of conservation, sanity and safety. This in order that fads and fadism shall not run rampant like a hungry lion, devouring the hard-earned dollars of the taxpayer... Progress and advance for the smallest school unit—the rural school."

Francis won a close primary election and then trounced her Democratic opponent in the general election, becoming the first woman elected to statewide public office in Iowa. Historian David Reynolds noted: "She became the first state superintendent in more than a generation not to tout school consolidation as the only effective means of improving the quality of rural schools."

Her troubled tenure as state superintendent lasted one term. In 1924, at the urging of the Iowa State Teachers Association, a special legislative committee met to investigate alleged illegal and unfair acts by the DPI. Francis was charged with raising the grades of teachers to permit them to receive certificates, refusing to accredit some consolidated schools, and arbitrarily refusing certificates to some entitled to them.

On a narrow vote of the committee, she was exonerated of all charges. But the investigation weakened her leadership influence. Francis completed the remaining two years of her term. She devoted much of her time to campaigning for improving the quality of the country school and trying to help the large number of small consolidated schools cope with financial problems.

In 1926 she was challenged in the Republican primary by Agnes Samuelson (a former teacher, Page County school superintendent, and extension professor in rural education at Iowa State Teachers College). Samuelson, who favored consolidation as a way of improving rural education, won the primary and the election. Francis left Iowa and enrolled at the University of Texas, where she later became an instructor in the College of Education and earned a Ph.D. She also wrote two historical novels, two children's books, and a fourth-grade spelling book.

—by William L. Sherman
### Rating Card for Standard Rural Schools

**County**........................................ **Township**................................................ **District**...................................... **Date**..............

**Teacher**........................................... **Address**........................................... **Salary per Mo.**...........................................

**Total enrollment**.............................. **No. months of school**........................ **Date of Inspection**............................... **Average Daily Attendance**........................ **First date approved**..............................

**President of the Board**........................ **Address**...........................................

**Secretary of the Board**........................ **Address**...........................................

**Treasurer of the Board**........................ **Address**...........................................

This school has met the requirements specified for standardization by the State Superintendent of Public Instruction and should be designated as a standard school and receive state aid as provided by law. Should this school fail to maintain the required equipment and efficiency, I will remove its certificate of standardization and will notify the State Superintendent of Public Instruction.

---

### I. Grounds and Outbuildings—120 Points

1. Grounds well cared for, in good condition, accessible, and removed from dangerous conditions........................................... 10
2. Trees, shrubbery, and flowers, attractively placed ........................................... 10
*3. Flag and flag pole with flag display in good weather (Statutory—Section 4253, School Laws of Iowa)........................................... 10
4. Adequate grounds, fenced against traffic hazards ........................................... 10
*5. Toilets—Two inside, separate, sanitary toilets, or two separate, sanitary, outside toilets, provided with latticed screen for entrance........................................... 20
6. Supervised play, and suitable equipment ........................................... 20
7. Water supply—Good well or cistern supplying pure water ........................................... 20
8. Walks—cinder, gravel, or cement—from schoolhouse to road, well, and toilets........................................... 10
9. Fuel room in good condition, well supplied with fuel and kindling........................................... 10

### II. The Schoolhouse—190 Points

**Standard School—800 or more points**

**B Class School—700 to 800 points**

**C Class School—600 to 700 points**

**D Class School—500 to 600 points**

**E Class School—below 500 points**

Points marked * are required for standardization

No district will be satisfied to attain only the minimum score but will try to provide for its boys and girls better educational opportunities each year.

---

### II. The Schoolhouse—(continued)

4. Good doors with lock and key........................................... 5
5. Outside platform with steps in good condition and provided with handrail........................................... 5
6. Interior walls in good condition, tinted a light shade ........................................... 10
7. Windows on left, or left and rear of pupils........................................... 20
*8. Windows supplied with good translucent shades and sash curtains........................................... 10
*9. Heated and ventilated by approved system (Underline: Basement furnace, room furnace)........................................... 30
10. Separate cloakrooms, vestibule, and storage closet........................................... 20
11. Interior clean and tidy. Floors in good condition, smooth, tight, and properly treated for preservation........................................... 10
12. Twenty (20) square feet of floor space, and 220 cubic feet of air space for each pupil........................................... 20
13. Window space 1-6 to 1-4 of floor space........................................... 10
14. Twenty linear feet of slate blackboard the proper height, with chalk trays, good erasers and good grade of crayon........................................... 10
15. Provisions for community meetings:
   (a) Added space........................................... 10
   (b) Lighting system........................................... 10
   (c) Folding chairs........................................... 10
### III. EQUIPMENT—190 Points

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Single desks</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Adjustable</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movable</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Properly placed</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*No child seated so his feet cannot reach floor</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Good desk and chair for teacher</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Kindergarten table and chairs</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Approved equipment for primary work</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Interior of room tastefully decorated</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Display and bulletin board</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Three good pictures framed—not more than one portrait included</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Suitable dictionaries</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Charts—reading, hygiene</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Complete set of eight (8) up-to-date maps, including Iowa, evidences that they are used</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Globe—twelve inches in diameter; used daily</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Good talking machine and ten approved records</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Drinking and washing facilities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Sanitary drinking fountain or covered cooler</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Sink and drain—or wash basin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Individual or paper towels</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) Liquid or powdered soap or individual cakes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e) Individual drinking cups if cooler is used</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Other equipment:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Waste basket</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Latest world almanac</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Thermometer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) Atlas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e) Pencil sharpener</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(f) First aid kit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(g) Mats for cleaning writing system including shoes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teacher’s manual</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Organized health program</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Hot lunch</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Other improvements not listed:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) radio (b) window ventilators (c) textbooks on art (d) chart printing outfit (f) paper cutting machine (g) piano (h) screens for windows and doors (j) manual training equipment (k) additional records, 15, for teaching music</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(l) provisions for outdoor lunch</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not over 25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### IV. LIBRARY AND SUPPLEMENTARY READERS—90 Points

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Good bookcase used for books only</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. List of 100 books chosen from state bulletins</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Standard set of encyclopedias of recent date</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Supplementary readers for all grades from one to seven as listed</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. One current events paper—one farm paper</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. One table for primary grades, with many varieties of primers and lower grade reading material</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### V. TEACHER AND SCHOOL ORGANIZATION—290 Points

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Training: High School Normal Training</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College, including special training for rural schools</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. One year of previous experience (5)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than one year (5)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Teacher retained a second year</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Professional Spirit:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Membership in state or National Education Association</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Attendance at educational meetings called by county superintendent</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Reading of at least one professional magazine every year</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) Reading of at least one professional book every year</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Attendance at summer school within past three years</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Interest in community</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Management:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Well-kept records and prompt reports</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Daily program posted and followed</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Not over 28 classes per day</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) Good order—all children profitably employed</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. State Course of Study and bulletins followed</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. An average daily attendance of 85 per cent required. Not over 2% of tardiness. School hours closely observed</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Housekeeping: Careful attention to light, heating, ventilation and cleanliness, including cloakroom, toilet, playground, and basement</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Efficiency of teacher (Ranked by County Superintendent)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Professional attitude</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Teaching and discipline</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Playground management and care of property</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) Personal appearance and manner</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e) Community and social contacts</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Attitude of Pupils:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Orderly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Neat and clean</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Courteous</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) Industrious—trying to do required work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e) Loyal to school and careful of school property</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Homes of pupils visited by teacher</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. At least two demonstrations of school work prepared and given to public</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Organized health program</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Physical Education as prescribed by State Course of Study</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Hot lunch in season</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Community and social activities—120 Points</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Cooperation with County Superintendent:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Attend meetings called by county superintendent</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Consult county superintendent before purchasing supplies</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Consult county superintendent before hiring teachers</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Represented at state, district, or county fairs</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Compete in spelling, arithmetic, dramatic, music, or other contests</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Conduct a school literary society, Boys’ and Girls’ Clubs, Boy Scouts or Campfire Girls, Girl Reserves</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Be a community center for two or more meetings</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Community activities:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Board or patrons assist in scoring school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) At least one-half number of parents visit school once during the year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Donations of labor or equipment by community or individuals</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Community organizations:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Active Parent-Teachers’ Association affiliated with state and national organizations</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Other community clubs</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
funds were insufficient “to care for all the schools meeting the standards,” as Francis reported. She recommended increasing the appropriation to $150,000. Unfortunately, Francis and the DPI lacked sufficient political clout, and improving country schools was not a priority for the Iowa State Teachers Association (ISTA) and other school leaders.

Instead of increasing funding, the legislature in 1927 now stipulated that the money could be used for improvements and apparatus, “but no part thereof shall be paid to any teacher for compensation.”

Nevertheless, DPI officials and country-school advocates continued to promote participation in the standardization program. Between 1924 and 1928 the number of standardized schools nearly doubled. But the level of appropriation remained constant, and the prorated amount dipped to $2.70 per student.

In 1928 the DPI revised the criteria and point system, converting it to a 1,000-point scale. Criteria for the schoolhouse and grounds were largely the same, but more specific requirements were spelled out for teacher preparation, classroom management, and community and social activities held at the school.

State Superintendent Agnes Samuelson pointed to particular progress: “Many two and some four year college graduates are teaching standard rural schools. Some of the schools have running water, electric lights, radio, telephone, manual training and home economics equipment, kindergarten tables and chairs, and a well organized Parent Teacher Association, or other community groups.”

Jessie M. Parker, who headed the DPI’s rural schools division, remarked on the program’s momentum in 1930: “Buildings have been painted inside and out. The cream ceiling and buff side wall tinting . . . has given sunny, cheerful schoolrooms. Light shades, playground equipment, hot lunch equipment, and kindergarten tables and chairs, are found in practically all schools.”

Parker continued: “Many schools which have been on the standard list for several years wish to progress further in making the best possible rural school. To encourage this, the honorary rating of ‘Superior School’ has been established.” Qualifying schools had to be judged “standard” for three years and then score above 900. “The Superior School must have a teacher who is above average,” Parker commented, “a building and equipment of standard plus certain required features, a community enthusiastic in support of the school, and pupils doing excellent work.”

The “superior school” designation was honorary only and provided no additional funding. But schools now received a second bronze doorplate, this one rectangular with the words “SUPERIOR SCHOOL.” In 1930 the first three Iowa Superior Schools were Bradford #4 in Chickasaw County (taught by Lela Martin); Eden #3 in Clinton County (Agnes Schnack); and Newton #4 in Jasper County (Grace Lynch). The number of superior schools would peak at 63 in 1940.

Participation in the standard and superior school programs continued to increase into the early thirties. By 1932, the program’s peak year, more than 30 percent (2,715) of Iowa’s ungraded one- and two-room schools qualified as standard schools, but by 1940 the number had dropped to 2,465. The Great Depression, a declining rural population, and reduced funding all took a toll on the program. The aid to standard schools had fallen steadily over the years, from the original $6 per student, to $3 in 1927, $2.70 in 1928, and then hovered around $2 in 1932 and 1933.

Still, administrators valiantly noted gains. In 1934, Parker recorded that “a large proportion of the state aid for standard schools has been used for building up libraries by adding supplementary readers and single copies of easy reference material on history, geography, citizenship and other school subjects. As a result of this concentration, reading in all rural schools shows a marked improvement.”

Two years later, Superintendent Samuelson remarked that “use of the school as a community center is recognized as one of the characteristics of a good standard school and parent-teachers’ meetings and those held under other auspices are doing much to sponsor school improvement in the community and to develop a more wholesome and satisfying rural life.”

Some might argue—and some did—that Iowa’s standard school program provided more funding to schools that were doing well, and did little to help those schools most in need. John R. Slacks, from Iowa State Teachers College, observed in 1939 that “the present plan of distribution of funds requires a district to have a good, well-equipped school before it can qualify for aid. The wealthy districts can do this without a great effort, but there are poor districts that cannot meet the requirements. . . . Would it not be more logical,” he reasoned, “to give aid to those districts with low taxable values? Surely . . . districts that have been given state aid for years have acquired enough interest and pride in their schools to keep them up to that standard without outside help.”

Nevertheless, schools that participated in the evaluation probably benefited from the process even if they did not score high enough to obtain the designation.
Looking at the numbers of schools that qualified as standard or superior simply does not provide a complete picture of the program’s impact on education in Iowa. In reflecting back over the history of the standard school law in Iowa, a case could be made that this was the most significant piece of legislation for education between 1919 and 1949.

It marked Iowa’s first attempt at developing a set of statewide educational standards. Because it was a voluntary program administered with a variety of options for obtaining the standard school designation, the strife and conflict associated with school consolidation was avoided. The standardization program also set a precedent for future voluntary accreditation programs like those later developed by the North Central Association. Finally, the legislation marked the first time the funds were earmarked for teacher salary improvement (even though the salary supplement funds ended in 1928).

The Iowa Standard School Law could indeed be described as a “pathway to progress.” It led to improvements in many schools that resulted in better educational opportunities for rural students. It encouraged parents and teachers to work for better schools during severe economic conditions. And perhaps the school standardization program—and the bronze doorplates that symbolized it—instilled a sense of pride and optimism among farm families at a bleak time in Iowa, when there was little else about which to be cheerful. ♦

William L. Sherman is a retired public relations specialist for the Iowa State Education Association and executive board member of the Iowa Historic Preservation Alliance. He is the editor of Tributes to Iowa Teachers (1996) and Iowa’s Country Schools: Landmarks of Learning (1998).

Finding Your School’s Past

A RESEARCH PRIMER

by Lori Vermaas

TWO QUALITIES needed by a schoolteacher—perseverance and ingenuity—are also needed by anyone researching the history of a school.

So says Ronald E. Butchart in his Local Schools: Exploring Their History (part of the Nearby History Series published by the American Association for State and Local History, 1986). So if you’re delving into the history of a particular school, or schools in general, be aware that records may be scattered in unpredictable places. Some of the best places to start your search are historical societies (county and state), libraries, and county courthouses. County auditors have historic maps that show locations of country schools. Most country school records have been transferred to area education agencies.

Because schools are central to a community, local newspapers can be an excellent source. Newspapers from many Iowa communities are available on microfilm through interlibrary loan and in the Des Moines and Iowa City libraries of the State Historical Society of Iowa.

Reading books about the history of schools and education in general will help you understand how the specific information you find about one school fits into the larger picture. (See “Reading the Past” and other articles in this issue for suggestions.)

Perhaps the most promising and reliable historical sources of information for an individual school are teachers’ records. Careful documentation has always been a requirement for teachers, and the importance of such paperwork has often helped to secure those records’ preservation. Find out if your local historical society or library has collected student attendance records, grade books, or teachers’ annual or term reports (also called summary reports).

This last group of documents was intended for a teacher’s successor, so outgoing teachers usually extensively recorded all kinds of information and basic details (a teacher’s name and salary, a class’s size, the books used, lesson plans, and available supplies), along with possible notations regarding the schoolhouse and school yard (“walls are discolored,”
**NOTE ON SOURCES**

Published biennial reports from the Iowa Department of Public Instruction (now Department of Education) were a major source for this article. Tracking participation in the standard and superior school programs and other public school trends became more difficult in the 1940s when the biennial reports became largely statistical. Fortunately, a series of ledgers (1920–1945) listing standard schools county by county is in the State Historical Society of Iowa archives (Des Moines). With these ledgers and state school aid budget tables, the history of standard schools can be tracked. The DPI’s regulations for standard schools, published in 1921, 1925, and 1928, describe the criteria and points system. See Mid-Prairie Books, 1998; Wayne E. Fuller, The Old Country School (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); and Hayes, Rural Schools (Parkersburg, Iowa: Iowa State Education Association and Mid-Prairie Books, 1998). For Illinois, see: “The One Room and Consolidated Country Schools of Illinois,” Circular No. 76 Fourth Edition, 1912; the Twenty-Ninth Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (State of Illinois, 1912); and David R. Reynolds, “Historical Development of the Iowa Department of Public Instruction, 1900–1965.” For the Old Country School archives (Des Moines), write the Iowa Department of Education, 524 admin building, Des Moines 50319 for access. The history of standard schools can be tracked. The DPI’s regulations for standard schools, published in 1921, 1925, and 1928, describe the criteria and points system. See Mid-Prairie Books, 1998; Wayne E. Fuller, The Old Country School (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); and Hayes, Rural Schools (Parkersburg, Iowa: Iowa State Education Association and Mid-Prairie Books, 1998). For Illinois, see: “The One Room and Consolidated Country Schools of Illinois,” Circular No. 76 Fourth Edition, 1912; the Twenty-Ninth Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (State of Illinois, 1912); and George Herbert Betts and Otis E. Hall, Minor Rural Schools (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1914).

For the biennial reports can be useful. They can help to refine oral histories and reminiscences as well as open up a whole new set of questions for the budding schoolhouse researcher. **

Old school records can reveal the past, as Floyd Filson discovered in 1957 when he looked at the attendance book for a rural school near Birmingham, in Van Buren County. Finding school records takes perseverance and ingenuity, but what fun when you find them! See this article for tips.

for example, or the outbuildings “should be reshingled”).

Although these reports are mostly factual, they frequently include a teacher’s subjective reflections about students. Such brief anecdotal gems can range from being terse, perfunctory commentary, where a particular student is noted as being “bright” or “learns easily,” to the more colorful.

For instance, in 1916, Harry Lewis, a teacher at a Springdale Township school in Cedar County, noted that because “this school is made up of good material and nearly all are ‘live wires’ . . . you will find the greater majority . . . intelligent energetic farmer boys and girls.

With some the ‘gray matter’ is limited in amount but of course this is not their fault.”

Teachers also inserted all kinds of notes and suggestions in the reports, such as “their text book seem uninteresting to them,” or “beware! of the smoke.” Lewis left detailed instructions and a drawing indicating which stove drafts to close and open. If the wrong one was closed, he warned, “the gas collects . . . and blows the stove pipe off and in the morning you have the pleasure of cleaning off an inch of ‘nice velvet’ soot from everything in the room.”

The straightforward documents usually end with a teacher’s cordial welcome to his or her successor (“I wish you . . . pleasant work”). Evelyn Humphrey’s final comments capture the generous but realistic tone. In May 1918, she sympathetically concluded that while one of her students “started this spring and cried nearly all the time the departure of the school is very good. The whole district is nice and they know how to treat you. Good luck. I left the school house clean but cannot lock it so you may have a job of cleaning anyway.”

When you can locate them, primary sources like teachers’ reports can be useful. They can help to refine oral histories and reminiscences as well as open up a whole new set of questions for the budding schoolhouse researcher. **

Lori Vermas interned as an editorial assistant for this magazine and now works as a project historian with Tallgrass Historians, L.C., in Iowa City.

**Upcoming Conferences on Country Schools**

- June 27–29, 2002: National conference on one-room schooling, at the University of Iowa, Iowa City. Academic papers, tour of area country schools, and country school fair. Sponsored by the University of Iowa College of Education, Iowa Historic Preservation Alliance, Johnson County Historical Society, and Cedar County Historical Society. Contact Kelly Fin, conference coordinator, 1-800-551-9029.

Re-using Rural Schools

Over the last century and a half, Iowa’s one-room rural schools often functioned as more than a daytime center of learning for children. In the 19th century, singing societies and evening penmanship classes used the buildings. In the 20th century, schools continued to double as township and community centers, where rural residents gathered to cast ballots, discuss issues, eat potluck dinners, applaud school programs, and in other ways exercise a sense of community.

Although thousands of one-room schools have disappeared from the landscape (or now masquerade as farm storage buildings, housing, and the occasional commercial enterprise), significant numbers have been lovingly brought back to useful lives. In recent years Iowan William L. Sherman, with the help of hundreds of others in every county, compiled an extensive record of remaining one-room schools in Iowa. The product, Iowa’s Country Schools: Landmarks of Learning, sets rural schools in historical context, considers their educational virtues and various architectural styles, shows the remarkable adaptability of these modest structures, and recognizes the energy and labor that Iowans have poured into them. Sherman believes that Iowa may hold the record for the most one-room schools still standing—by his count, more than 2,900.

Meanwhile, the State Historical Society of Iowa is funding a major study of town and city schools, 1846–1966, with inventories, intensive surveys, National Register of Historic Places nominations, and three field guides. The guides will help the public understand, appreciate, and nominate town, city, and country schools to the National Register.

These four photos are just a sampling of the ideas and energy Iowans have applied to that beloved and beleaguered structure—the country school.

―Ginatie Swaim
Financial Incentives for Country Schools

The Country School Grant Program, through the State Historical Society of Iowa, can provide up to $5,000 in funding, per applicant, for the preservation and maintenance of country school buildings, for planned educational activities within a country school, and for projects that interpret the history of country schools. This is a relatively new component of the grant program known as the Resource Enhancement and Protection/Historical Resource Development Program (REAP/HRDP).

The Country School Grant Program was created for the purpose of providing up to $25,000 per year for the preservation of one-room and two-room buildings once used as country schools in Iowa. Almost everyone and every group is eligible to apply for Country School Grant funding. Eligible applicants include governmental entities, not-for-profit organizations, private corporations and businesses, individuals, recognized American Indian tribes in Iowa, and cooperating groups drawn from the list above.

Projects are evaluated on these criteria:
• Planned educational activities within a country school.
• Plans for use as a facility to interpret the history of country schools.
• Plans for the preservation and maintenance of a country school.
• Plans for incorporating curriculum development and teacher activities with area school systems.
• Degree to which the budget is reasonable, appropriate to the project, and meets a match requirement of dollar-for-dollar.

Grant applications are due on January 15 of each year. For more information, contact Cynthia Nieb, Grant Programs Manager, State Historical Society of Iowa, 600 East Locust Street, Des Moines, Iowa, 50319, 515-281-8754, or by e-mail at: Cynthia.Nieb@dca.state.ia.us.

—by Cynthia Nieb
For County Schools

Financial Incentives

Re-using Rural Schools

1. **Census Service** — including service for a new Extension program.
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3. **County Service** — including service for a new Extension program.
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Imagine the scene—
A young Norwegian-American woman, frustrated with classical music, discovers the traditional music that drives the dancers at an old time Scandinavian community dance in northeast Iowa. Fascinated by both the music and the sense of community that surround the dances, she seeks out the master fiddlers, working with several over the years to learn the tunes. After many lessons, formal and informal, one master fiddler asks the woman to accompany his band during a performance at the community dance. The young woman knows she has learned her lessons well when the master artist, Bill Sherburne, gives her his electronic pickup to amplify her violin, and asks her to continue playing for the community dances. Now, years later, the woman, Beth Hoven Rotto, is part of a band that plays traditional Scandinavian music for festivals, heritage celebrations, concerts, and, most importantly, community dances, just as her teacher did.

Or how about this: A man with limited knowledge but unlimited curiosity seeks out a master wood turner. The master is reluctant, but the student is persistent. Finally a project is agreed upon and the two men begin to work together weekly. Lessons include tools and how to use them, wood turning design, turning and spindle techniques, and “scraping versus shaving” (or how to turn with a shaving technique). The best lesson the student learns is when he puts a gouge through the bottom of his first turned bowl. The master says, “Oh, well, that happens
sometimes." Today, the student, Daniel Bray, still does some turning, and he considers the master wood turner, Rick Reeves, to be a great teacher, a good friend, and his sharpest critic.

Both of these scenarios illustrate the magic that takes place when a master artist passes on traditional knowledge and art to a motivated student. The Traditional Arts Apprentices Program, sponsored by the Iowa Arts Council, Department of Cultural Affairs, offers traditional master artists and apprentices the opportunity to work together, sharing not only a love of teaching and learning but also the stories and values important to the community where the traditions are cherished.

Folklorist Steven Ohrn created the Iowa Folk Arts Apprenticeship Program in 1984, offering traditional master artists and apprentices the opportunity to pass on such traditions as Czech egg decorating, Amana rug weaving and basket making, decoy carving, and numerous musical and dance traditions. Everyone involved in the apprenticeship program—master artists, apprentices, and their communities—gained a renewed understanding of the importance of passing on traditions.

For example, Joanna Schanz, who learned to weave German willow baskets from Philip Dickel, the last traditional basketmaker in the Amana Colonies, became a master artist in the Apprenticeship Program. Joanna believes students need to learn the entire process to fully understand the subtleties of basket form and construction. Her apprentice, David Schmidt, was a student committed to understanding every aspect of willow basketry. Under Schanz's direction, Schmidt harvested, prepared, and wove the willow into baskets. To complete the knowledge cycle, he also planted willow slips to replace those harvested for baskets. For him, the apprenticeship provided the opportunity to gain in-depth knowledge about German willow basket making. For Joanna Schanz, the apprenticeship helped to enforce the idea that willow baskets were, and continue to be, an important part of the community, that basketry should not be taken for granted, and, with new people learning to make baskets, that the tradition would not die.

Take another instance: Tesa Heldenbrand had taken violin lessons as a child. Years after starting her family, she longed to do something for herself and wanted to participate in the jam sessions and fiddle contests held in her community around Winterset. She sought out Eddie Benge, an old time fiddler, to serve as her teacher. For Heldenbrand, the crowning moment in her apprenticeship came when she won the...
junior division of the old time fiddle contest at the Iowa State Fair, and Eddie Benge won the senior division contest. To determine the grand champion, Heldenbrand would have to compete against her teacher. After a sleepless night, she played her best, but Benge proved to be the better fiddler and won the contest. Today Heldenbrand plays mostly with friends and at church, but fondly remembers the lessons learned from master fiddler Eddie Benge.

These stories of lessons learned by both master artist and apprentice illustrate the importance of passing traditional knowledge on to a new generation. In many cases, a single person carries the whole of a community's traditions and is waiting for the right time and the right person. Often master artists are hesitant, unsure that the knowledge they possess is worthy of passing on to others. In most cases, once the apprenticeship is well under way, a strong bond forms between the master artist and the apprentice, allowing for the magical flow of traditional knowledge from one person and one generation to another.

Karen Heege is Folklife Programmer for the Iowa Arts Council, a division of the Department of Cultural Affairs. Find more about the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program at: www.culturalaffairs.org/iac. Or contact Heege at 515-281-6911 or karen.heege@dca.state.ia.us.
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Midwestern teachers around the turn of the century often handed out souvenir cards to their students at the end of a school year. These keepsakes (examples from the collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa are shown here) express the special relationships that sometimes existed between teachers and students.

As Wayne E. Fuller points out in *One-Room Schools of the Middle West*, distribution of the cards could be an emotional moment for both teacher and pupil. A rural school’s small enrollment—a half-dozen to 20 or so, and many of them siblings—often fostered a familial one-on-one connection between teacher and student that rarely exists in today’s classrooms. Furthermore, the fact that most rural teachers boarded with a local family or families often allowed them to develop close ties and granted them an insider’s view of a neighborhood’s workings.

Teachers could order the cards from nationally distributed catalogs and have them personalized with their portraits and students’ names. Mass-produced in various forms, some honored attendance or good citizenship. (Churches used them also, to reward Sunday school participation).

The four cards shown here date from the end of the 19th century to the first decades of the 20th, a period when midwestern school districts began hiring teachers with more training and experience. Prior to this, female teachers were sometimes very young—perhaps 16 years of age—potentially increasing the complexity of the student-teacher interaction, given that some pupils could be as old as the teacher.

By the teens, manufacturers were also offering small booklets with poetry meant to inspire. Though sappy and mawkish by today’s standards, the poetry and artwork consecrated the schoolhouse as a stimulating environment that nurtured a child’s purpose, direction, and potential—beliefs best summarized in poems like “When the Seeds Come Up,” “Success,” and “My Aim.”

The illustrations further reinforced such heightened ideas. A winged globe suggested the schoolhouse as a place where a youth’s awareness and appreciation of the world would take flight. On another card, lighted candles and books symbolize torches of knowledge flanking the schoolhouse as an enlightened learning haven.

Treasured and tucked into scrapbooks by their young recipients, the cards fascinate us today as expressions of Americans’ idealized notions of education, and the relationships between teachers and students.

—by Lori Vermaas
In the 1951/52 school year, the Fayette County superintendent of schools visited rural schools and photographed these scenes. Above: Four young scholars ponder songbooks in a colorful reading corner in Dover #9. Below: Clocks, fruit bowls, and autumn leaves brighten Harlan #1. Stories and pictures of Iowa’s country schools fill this issue of Iowa Heritage Illustrated.

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