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World War II and Iowa’s Rural Schools

The effects of World War II on rural schools were made explicit in the 1942 Biennial Report of the Department of Public Instruction: “Rural Iowa is under heavy war responsibilities. It is supplying half of Iowa’s fighting men. It is the recruiting ground for workers for war industries throughout the nation. It is producing in increasing quantities food for victory. . . . Here the public school is a most important factor. It has taught us to understand and to love the American way of life. It has fitted us for today’s tasks. . . .”

She noted that the public schools had contributed significantly to the war effort. “The war is furnishing an unparalleled opportunity to our public schools to vitalize citizenship training.” Among ten objectives listed was number 7: “Group activity shall be encouraged and working together to common ends recognized as the American way.”

In 1944, Jessie M. Parker, Superintendent of Public Instruction, used the biennial report to elaborate further: “The two-year period covered by this report has been two years of war. Some hundreds of our school workers have joined the armed forces. Additional hundreds have accepted other responsibilities. It is supplying half of Iowa’s fighting men. It is the recruiting ground for workers for war industries throughout the nation. It is producing in increasing quantities food for victory.”

The report went on to note that the public schools had contributed significantly to the war effort. “The war is furnishing an unparalleled opportunity to our public schools to vitalize citizenship training.” Among ten objectives listed was number 7: “Group activity shall be encouraged and working together to common ends recognized as the American way.”

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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.

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war responsibilities. The remaining workers are loyally discharging their no less heroic duty. These remaining workers, their effort supplemented by that of emergency teachers [issued emergency certification], are absorbing the added tasks of the war programs and the extra load caused by staff shortages. . . . We have thus attempted to save our schools from the marked deterioration which the war emergency threatened to bring."

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)