

THE GUTHRIE COUNTY HIGH SCHOOL

O. E. KLINGAMAN

It is with genuine pleasure that the editor presents the history of the Guthrie County High School by L. A. Logan, who is now superintendent of schools at Bedford, Iowa.

It seems advisable, however, to supplement this thesis, which was written to fulfill certain academic requirements, by materials which, in writing the history of the high school, will present other phases.

The topography of Guthrie County must be taken into consideration in dealing with this high school. The Wisconsin ice sheet lay across the northeastern corner of Guthrie, and when it disappeared, left behind it a level plain of great fertility. This level land attracted a large number of settlers so that this northeastern part held the bulk of the population in the county in the early '70's.

West of the Middle Raccoon River lies the old glacial Kansan drift, left by the ice sheet of more than 700,000 years ago. It has been subject to erosion during that period, with the result that it is extremely hilly, and, in the era of dirt roads, travel east and west across the county was difficult. One illustration will suffice: Between the postoffices of Guthrie Center and Panora, a distance of eight miles, there are fifty-two hills that for those days were both long and steep.

With the establishment of the Guthrie County High School in the town of Panora in this level country, it was quite natural that the greatest number of students therein should come from Cass Township and the town of Panora. The western two-thirds of Guthrie County settled very slowly. It was given over to large farms and cattle raising, with the result that few of the townships in the western half were able to send their quota of students to the county high school, even if the tuition was free.

It is to be remembered also that times were hard when the school was founded, and continued to be so for the farmers for

a long period of time. The author was a resident of Guthrie County from 1888 to 1898, and knows what the prices were that the farmer received for the things that he raised. He saw a great deal of the western half of Guthrie County come under the breaking plow, and knew how hard it was for the settlers there to finance even a high school education.

The county high school itself did a remarkable piece of work. It was far in advance of its time. Its teachers were always well qualified, and it did for the boys and girls who were able to come from the farms a splendid bit of educational work.

It is to be remembered also that, in its earlier days, it gave an opportunity to these boys and girls from the farm, especially to the boys, to enter the high school after farm work was done. The age limit at that time was not as low as it is now for high school entrance, and many of the graduates were twenty-one and twenty-two years of age at the time of graduation.

Unfortunately, the topography of the county and the unbalanced distribution of its population, both in themselves important social factors in the history of the county high school, by relating the matter to taxation, introduced the high school into politics—not because of any shortcoming inherent in the school itself, but because of what seemed to a number of citizens of Guthrie County outside of Cass Township the glaring injustice of a situation which apparently permitted the children of the town of Panora and of Cass Township to secure a high school education at the expense of the entire county, due to the advantage proximity to the school gave the parents of these children, when they themselves could not easily send their children because of the long journey over dirt roads, nor, with money so scarce could they well afford the expense of board and room for their children.

By 1897 the county high school had definitely become a political issue. In the fall of that year the board of trustees of this school voted a tax levy of \$15,000 to build a new high school building in Panora. At this time feeling was running rather high that something should be done to settle once for all time the inequalities of educational opportunities, so that Cass Township and the independent school district of Panora should have no

greater advantage over the rest of the county, because of proximity to the school, than any other township. The matter went into politics in the following manner:

It will be recalled that there was an issue in politics at that time known as the free silver question. In that fall two men came before the voters of Guthrie County as candidates for state representative in the legislature. One of these men was G. J. Maris who was chairman of the board of high school trustees at the time the tax was levied to build the new \$15,000 building. He had been nominated by the regular Republicans.

His opponent was a lawyer, Mr. F. O. Hinkson of Stuart, which is located in the extreme southeastern part of the county. Hinkson was first nominated by the free silver Republicans in Guthrie County in a convention that wrote such a plank in their platform; his candidacy was afterwards ratified by the Democrats of Guthrie County in their convention, thus he became the fusion candidate against Mr. Maris. The odds normally were in Maris' favor, as Guthrie County under ordinary circumstances returned to power the candidates for county office on the Republican ticket by an average majority of 600.

Mr. Hinkson, a candidate of a nominally minority party, had to have an issue other than the silver issue. He selected for his issue what he considered, and many others considered, an injustice on the part of the board of trustees in levying this tax to build a new building for the county high school, a tax which he and his followers insisted benefited only Cass Township and the independent school district of Panora.

The campaign was intensive and bitter. Mr. Hinkson in 1929 wrote an autobiography of his life, from which the following is quoted:

"The issue of the demonitization of silver and the dis-establishment of the County High School, or rather changing the law so it could be done, were the principal issues involved in the campaign. I spoke in every voting precinct in the county, I think, and we had a real campaign; the odds, normally were greater in Maris' favor, as I would have to overcome a normal republican majority in the county of about six hundred, and the question was, whether with the

dis-affection from the regular republican ranks, on account of the demonitization of silver issue, I could win over votes enuf on the High School issue, to over-come such majority. I had splendid crowds wherever I spoke, and in some of the precincts, lively demonstrations besides. In Menlo, they had a torch light procession, led by a long line of horseback riders, mounted on white horses. . . . I spoke over two hours that night, with scarcely a voter leaving the hall. The action of the Board of Trustees in levying the tax, Maris being the president of the Board, had aroused a sentiment against the High School that extended into every corner of the county outside of Panora, and gave me a big advantage over Mr. Maris, and you may be sure that I took advantage of it, challenging him again and again to meet me in joint discussion, justifying the levy, and his part in the matter, before the voters of the county, his refusal to do so being urged by me, as an admission on his part, that it was unjustifiable. When the votes were counted; it was found that I had been elected by about one hundred and fifty majority. In my canvas, I had openly pledged myself to do all in my power to: first, try and get the state to accept a gift of the High School property for the establishment of a State Normal school; and, second, to secure the passage of a law authorizing the dis-establishment of the school, by vote of the county; and third, to secure the passage of a law establishing a quota that might be sent tuition free from each township, and requiring that any township sending more than its quota, should pay a tuition fee for all pupils sent by it over and above such quota."

The writer has occasion to remember the heat of this contest, because he had personal charge of Mr. Maris' campaign. Mr. Maris was the only man defeated on the Republican ticket, and his defeat is directly chargeable to the issue that was made by Mr. Hinkson.

Hinkson came to the legislature to find that as a fusion candidate the Republican members of the House were against him in the beginning because he represented a fusion party. Hinkson, referring to his fight in the legislature on the County High School issue, continues in his autobiography:

"The one big issue was the passage of a law providing a means whereby a County High School could be dis-established, if the residents of the county so desired, and to the defeat of the passage of such a law, both Panora and the friends of the High School pledged their united effort. . . . I had been lobbied off the Committee on Schools and Text Books, one of the most important Committees, along the line of my proposed legislation. My first move was to introduce a bill providing for the establishment of four, I think it was, State Normal Schools, distributed over the state, making them convenient to different localities, and providing that they furnish Normal courses for the training of school teachers etc. I did not dare to provide in it outright, that one of these schools should be located at Panora, but provided how the location of these schools should be determined, and authorized the acceptance by the state of any suitable location and buildings offered for such schools etc. I left it open so that the representatives in the parts of the state that would be eligible for the location of one of these schools would be for the bill thinking perhaps their city or town might get the plum. The bill went before the committee on schools and text-books first, but as it called for the expenditure of money, it had to be passed upon favorably by the Committee on Appropriations, and there it met its Waterloo. . . . The purpose of the bill—the establishment of more Normal Schools—received very favorable comment all along the line, and I believe would have stood a good chance of becoming a law, but for the financial pessimism that prevailed. That was my first proposition, and of course, was highly favored by Panora and the friends of the school. It out of the way, I introduced my Bill providing a basis for the quota of pupils which each Township might send to the school, tuition free, and for the payment of the tuition of pupils sent from a township in excess of its quota, by such township, also limiting the power of the school trustees to levy taxes for the maintenance of the school, or for new buildings, and providing a way whereby such School might be dis-established by a vote of the tax-payers of the county. Then the fight was on. Delegations were there from

Guthrie County for and against the bill, the principal fight against it, being from Panora on the dis-establishment of the school. They were afraid that if the county at large ever got a chance at it, the school would be voted out of existence. I had prepared the bill with a good deal of care, and was ready for the fray. By this time, I had made many very warm friends in the assembly, and had managed to get several—quite a number of them—under obligation to me, in a small way. The bill was reported out of the Committee on Schools and Text Books for passage and went on the Calendar. In the roll calls, they commence alphabetically of course, [and] I had noticed that when a bill got off with a good, healthy 'yea' vote from the head of the list, it was pretty sure to go through sailing. Working on that theory, I took occasion to have a friendly talk with some of the first on the roll call, suggesting to them that my county was deeply interested in a High School bill soon to come before the assembly, that we were the only county in the state to have a County High School, and told them of some of its injustices, and how the bill sought to correct them; that the town where it was located as a matter of course, was fighting the proposed changes in the law, and that, in fact, I was elected on the issue of changes in the law, which the bill proposed, and that , when it came before the House, I wished it might receive favorable consideration at their hands etc. When the bill came before the House for passage, the Panora delegation to oppose its passage was on the floor, working among the members, urging them to vote against it. I had sole charge of the bill, and think that I answered satisfactorily every question raised, at any rate, when the roll call had been completed, it was found to have passed, with, I think less than a half dozen negative votes, and without the change of a word, from its original draft. I was complimented on all sides, the way I had handled the bill, and it was at that time that Speaker Funk said in my presence, that, to his knowledge, the opposition to the bill had entered into the organization of the House."

In the Senate sat Mr. Hotchkiss from Adel, who took charge of the bill when it came from the House, because Guthrie County

was in his senatorial district. Quoting again from Mr. Hinkson's autobiography, "As to the fate of the bill, the dis-establishment part of the measure was cut out of it in the Senate, and a provision substituted by Hotchkiss that practically rendered that part of the law useless, but the provisions as to quotas of pupils from each Township, and requiring payment for the excess number, and abridging the authority of the trustees to levy taxes for the maintainance of the school and for new buildings, were left in the bill just as I had prepared them."

Those who may be interested in comparing the law passed in 1898 with the law under which the high school was eventually abolished may do so by comparing Section 5, Chapter 84, Session Laws of the Twenty-seventh General Assembly, with Section 4095 of the Code of 1931.

This is quoted from Mr. Hinkson's autobiography to show that as early as 1897, the feeling against the high school was largely in favor of dis-establishing it, or forcing townships that sent pupils there in excess of a quota to pay tuition for those in excess.

This political fight created a great deal of bitterness. In the meantime, of course, high schools in the other towns in Guthrie County were being organized and standards were being raised, so that some of these high schools as well as the county high school were recognized by the colleges and universities of the state, admitting their graduates without qualifications.

With the establishment of these high schools, of course, the attendance in the Guthrie County High School became more and more local in its character. The objection to the school by this time was based wholly on the proposition of taxation, the question being, should the great majority of the property of Guthrie County be subjected to a tax to support a high school which drew most of its enrollment from the people living in close proximity thereto.

The school itself, however, as has been stated, did a remarkable piece of educational work, and those who were connected therewith, either as members of the board of trustees, or as members of its faculty, or as members of its student body have never had any occasion for feeling other than pride in that school.

The author had an opportunity of knowing very well most of the principals and teachers, and can testify that they were men and women of the highest character and extraordinary teaching abilities. He was personally acquainted over a long period of time with most of the men who served on the board of trustees and can testify from first hand knowledge as to their integrity and their desire to give to Guthrie County a first class high school, which was for years the only high school in the county on the accredited list of the state university and the other colleges of the state. He desires to pay special tribute to Dr. E. L. Bower of Guthrie Center, who served on the board so long and so efficiently, and who gave so much of his time in creative effort for the entire county in the effort to build up this school. There were other men too who served on this board, who lived in the western half of the county and who gave valuable support to the school.

The issue that was a constant threat to the life of the school, as has been stated before, and upon which a great number of people in Guthrie County felt strongly, was that the people of Cass Township and the independent school district of Panora were not carrying their just part of the costs of the school in return for the education received by their children.

The school has now passed into history, and in order that no one shall detract from its glory, the editor takes pleasure in publishing the history of this school in order that it may be preserved in the ANNALS OF IOWA, as a great forward-looking educational movement that was the first attempt to give the same equal opportunity for a high school education to the boy and girl from the farm as that enjoyed by the boy and girl of the village.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.