

There Goes the Neighborhood: Rural School Consolidation at the Grass Roots in Early Twentieth-Century Iowa, by David R. Reynolds. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999. xii, 318 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, figures, notes, appendix, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth.

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In *There Goes the Neighborhood*, David R. Reynolds examines Iowa's experience with the educational reform inspired by the Country Life Movement. Between 1912 and 1921, Iowa's educational leadership attempted to develop a new model for rural schools, which they hoped would serve as a model for other midwestern states. In spite of high hopes, the plan largely failed, and rural school consolidation in Iowa would not become a widespread accomplishment until the 1950s.

In the years before World War I, rural school consolidation was one of the most contentious issues in Iowa's countryside. School reformers argued that bigger was better, and that consolidated schools could more efficiently serve the needs of the state's children. Rural residents, however, often argued that school consolidation was bad for neighborhoods, and that small rural schools could meet the needs of their children as well as, or better than, larger schools. These philosophical differences were complicated by economic realities that often made consolidated schools appear to be a far-too-expensive luxury. Changes in the law, as well as the post-World War I agricultural depression, halted the movement toward consolidation by 1921, and it would not resume until the post-World War II period.

The story that Reynolds has written, however, is far more complicated than the foregoing would suggest. With the example of the Buck Creek neighborhood, the author beautifully illustrates the complex nature of local fighting over school consolidation. Buck Creek, in Delaware County, was a purely rural neighborhood, and the site of one of the most hotly contested school consolidation fights in early twentieth-century Iowa. In that community, a reforming Methodist preacher took up the banner of school consolidation and converted his flock to his cause, much to the distress of the area's Irish Catholic farmers. In Buck Creek, the fight over consolidation was not one pitting farmers against the nonfarm population, but rather one of farmer against farmer, with the division forming along ethnic and religious lines.

The fighting in Buck Creek took on a particularly sinister tone when the Ku Klux Klan became involved in the struggle. Although the secret nature of the organization makes it difficult to know the exact dimensions of Klan membership in Buck Creek, Reynolds estimates that almost all of the members of the local Methodist Brotherhood

who supported the consolidated school also became members of the Klan and used Klan activities such as cross burnings to attempt to force their neighbors to vote in favor of consolidation. In the long run, this dispute and the eventual adoption of the consolidated school resulted in the loss of Buck Creek's Catholic community. Many left in the immediate aftermath of the consolidation fight, and many more left during the Great Depression.

In the end, Buck Creek established its consolidated school. The school existed from 1923 to 1959, and 345 students graduated from its eighth grade, although only a minority of those students went on to Buck Creek High School. And although the school was now "modern," Reynolds argues that the quality of the education there was really very similar to that provided in the area's one-room country schools. Over the years, the school took on great local importance. The Buck Creek neighborhood became increasingly identified by the school and its sports teams, rather than by its Methodist church, where the consolidation battle was born.

David Reynolds has written a very interesting book that addresses the issue of school consolidation in far more complex ways than most standard treatments of the subject. Through his careful research he has uncovered dimensions of Progressive Era school reform that others have failed to understand or appreciate. Instead of presenting the issue as merely a city versus country controversy, he has uncovered the disputes that consolidation could create within rural communities and between neighbors. Consolidation could take on ethnic and religious dimensions, in addition to those supplied by class, occupation, and geographic issues. He also correctly notes that this issue is far from resolved. Rural districts, especially in midwestern states such as Iowa, still face serious problems of resources that force them to contemplate consolidation, as well as comments from critics who still often argue that bigger is better. In the decades to come, Reynolds writes, this controversy might possibly be resolved, or potentially may be complicated, by changes in communication technology.

There Goes the Neighborhood is a thought-provoking book for anyone interested in the history of education, reform, and rural Iowa.

Editor's Note: In April 2000, the State Historical Society of Iowa's Board of Trustees awarded the Benjamin F. Shambaugh Award to David R. Reynolds, recognizing *There Goes the Neighborhood: Rural School Consolidation at the Grass Roots in Early Twentieth-Century Iowa* as the most significant book on Iowa history published in 1999.

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