

# Reading the Past

*Editor's note: In this new department, "Reading the Past," Marvin Bergman, editor of The Annals of Iowa, will introduce selected books of pertinence and interest to general readers keen on Iowa and the past.*

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 a 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

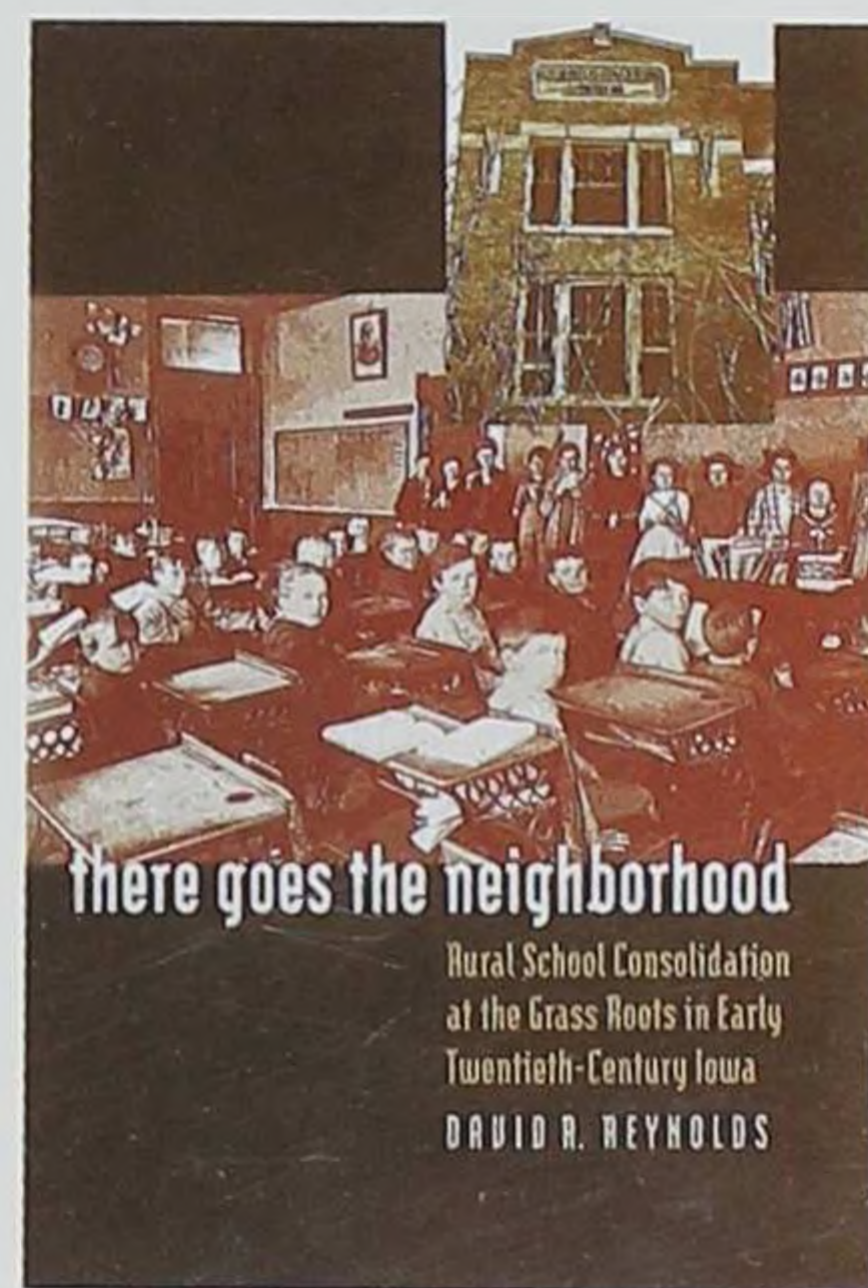
Buck Creek neighborhood in rural Delaware County.

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



*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, 1999. xii, 306 pp. Photographs, maps, tables, figures, notes, appendix, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth.