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. ❖

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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 set 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 *Midland Schools* (April 1922) for May Francis's campaign for the Republican nomination.

Other essential sources include: William Dreier, "A Brief History of Iowa's One-Room Schools," in William L. Sherman, ed., *Iowa's Country Schools: Landmarks of Learning* (Parkersburg, Iowa: Iowa State Education Association and Mid-Prairie Books, 1998); Wayne E. Fuller, *The Old Country School* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), and *One-Room Schools of the Middle West: An Illustrated History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994); Richard J. Jensen and Mark Friedburger, "Education and Social Structure: An Historical Study of Iowa, 1870–1930," National Institute of Education Project (Chicago: Newberry Library, 1976); David R. Reynolds, *There Goes the Neighborhood: Rural School Consolidation at the Grass Roots in Early Twentieth-Century Iowa* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999); Richard N. Smith, *Development of the Iowa Department of Public Instruction, 1900-1965* (Des Moines: Department of Public Instruction, 1969); H. C. Wilson, "A Comparative Study of Consolidated, One-Room Rural, and Urban Schools In Iowa," M.S. thesis, Iowa State College, 1925; and a phone interview with Sam Wiley (Des Moines, July 20, 2001).

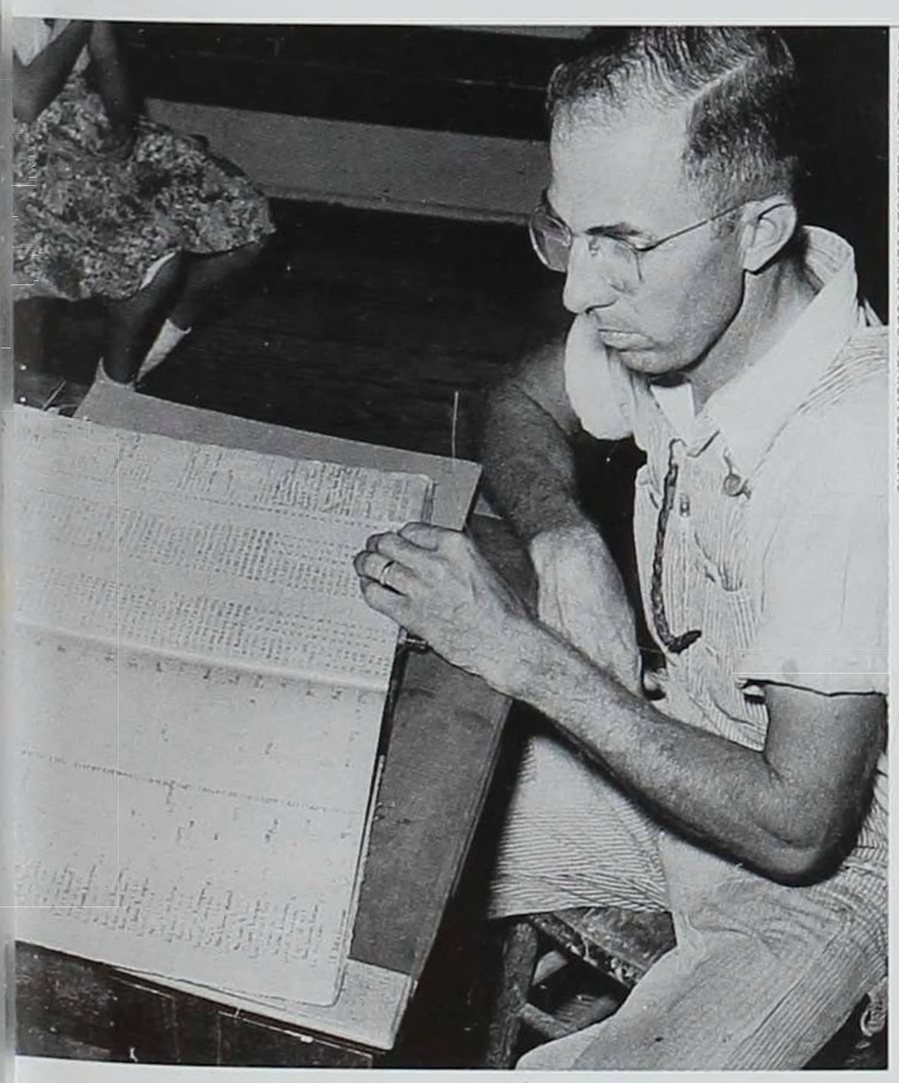
For Illinois, see: "The One Room and Consolidated Country Schools of Illinois," Circular No. 76 Fourth Edition, Francis Blair, Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1914 and Circular No. 65, 1912; the *Twenty-Ninth Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction* (State of Illinois, 1912); and George Herbert Betts and Otis E. Hall, *Better Rural Schools* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1914).

Annotations are in the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files (SHSI-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 Flinn, conference coordinator, 1-800-551-9029.

• October 4-5, 2002: State and regional conference on country school preservation, at Clarinda, Iowa. Sponsored by Iowa Historic Preservation Alliance. Contact William L. Sherman, 1-800-434-2039.



SHSI (DES MOINES) *DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE*

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 stove." 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 velvety' 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 deportment 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. ❖

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