

Iowa's Rural Schools in the 20th Century



Working for the WPA, Lee E. Hill photographed this rural school, Mercer #4 in Adams County, on March 26, 1934. The school yard has only the basics: outhouses and coal shed, swings and flag pole.

SHS: DES MOINES: WPA: CIVIC COLLECTION



They once were commonplace. Spaced every few miles across 640-acre sections of farmland, Iowa's one-room country schools stood through prosperity and depression. Like knots on a comforter, they anchored a landscape and held a neighborhood together. Like other iconic rural structures—mills, log cabins, depots, barns, churches—they were basic to everyday commerce, culture, and community.

Since the mid 20th century, thousands of Iowa's one-room schools have vanished. Yet state and community efforts are now under way to document and research rural schools and to find new uses for them. Funds are available (see page 141) to supplement local energy and ideas.

The rural schoolhouse was usually a simple structure, but its history is not. One-room schools have always evoked arguments and passions in Iowans. Should they be closed or improved, they debated? Were they as good as some people have contended, or sorely inadequate, we ask today? Do we honor and celebrate them because they reside in childhood memories, where nostalgia can run deep, or because they modeled useful ideas for current teachers?

The historian in us asks: What can the phenomenon of one-room schoolhouses tell us about Iowa and Iowans of the last century? And to apply that to today, how does our education shape us, as a people and a society? Or, how does it reflect who we already are?

These questions might occur to you as you delve into this issue of *Iowa Heritage Illustrated*. We offer you the voices of former students and teachers who speak with wit and candor of their 20th-century rural school experiences, and the perspectives of others who have stepped back to look at larger issues, like teacher autonomy, standardization, and consolidation. Enjoy comparing your own schools and classrooms, teachers and recesses, with those described in this issue. And why not invite a youngster to join you, as a modern-day schoolroom expert?

Perhaps what is most exciting about this issue is that it looks at a population often ignored or under-documented in history—children—and glimpses the communities they built day by day within the small universe of a one-room schoolhouse.

—The Editor

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