

Overcoming Opposition

"If . . . I want to make trouble for myself," Henry Wallace once confessed, "all that I have to do is to write a strong article urging centralization of rural schools. On no other point will I get such instant and urgent protest." Uncle Henry favored consolidation, as did an impressive list of Iowa's leading citizens. The Des Moines *Register and Leader* could not see "where there was any chance for argument over a reasonable consolidation of adjacent country schools." But argument there was and frequently bitter opposition, which only hard-fought campaigns could overcome.

The chief source of opposition came from the farmers. In districts that were to include town and country elements it was the rural vote that was most likely to defeat the proposition. Farm groups, such as the 1910 state agricultural convention and the Farm Bureau Federation, gave their backing to consolidation, but a strong core of opposition remained at the local level.

Some of this sprang from the farmer's natural conservatism, for, as Henry Wallace explained in 1910, the very character of his business forced the farmer to be "almost as careful to follow prece-

dent as a judge on the bench. . . . He buys livestock because he must do so to keep up with the procession and make ends meet." The need for similar improvements in rural education the farmer had not yet seen, Wallace believed in 1910. Another cause of the rural attitude was probably what a farm leader of a later generation, Mrs. Raymond Sayre, has termed the farmer's "can't-have-it complex." When, as a young bride, she found conditions not what she had hoped for, Mrs. Sayre recalls, her aunt had said to her, "Oh, Ruth, you can't have it any other way on the farm." Similarly, when a teacher left the country for a better job the farmer said, "you couldn't expect her to stay out in the country."

Resentment was back of much opposition — resentment of those who sought to change the traditional forms of rural education. Specifically, this resentment was directed at the city. There had long been a feeling that educators were more concerned with city than with rural problems. Homer H. Seerley declared that arithmetic books were "full of problems that constantly suggest city life and being a merchant. They give views of occupations that are one-sided and erroneous. They are not particularly suited to the boy on the farm, they do not make him at home in the computations he needs to use, as much as they do the boy who is to become a grocer, a banker or a clerk."

Although one group of pedagogues argued that

education was the same no matter where it was taught, Seerley was a leader of those who maintained that the interests of the country school were, and should continue to be, different from the city's. Now it was proposed to bring the graded school, which had been largely a development of the city school systems, to the country. State Superintendent Deyoe admitted in 1912 that the lack of success of the early consolidated schools was in part due to the failure to adapt them to the rural environment. The offer of state aid only to those consolidated schools that had courses in agriculture and homemaking was an effort to correct this situation. But in 1920 Chauncey Colegrove complained that at best the consolidated high school "is a poor copy of the city high school and at its worst it is a chaos of old-time subjects supplemented with some book agriculture, aimless manual training and domestic science that deals with frills and ruffles."

The traditional suspicions of the city were brought into play in another way, since most consolidated schools were located in towns. "Is not one of the great objects for living in the country that our children may not mingle in great masses where there is sure to be much impurity and depravity?" a farm mother asked in 1902. If the one-room school was replaced by a large central school, located in town, rural children would be exposed to these evils.

When the farmers of Des Moines Township in Pocahontas County heard in 1916 that the town of Rolfe planned to consolidate with parts of the township they reacted quickly. Although many of them were not particularly interested in consolidation, they were determined at all events not to become part of a district with a school located in Rolfe. By working all night the farmers prepared their own consolidation petition, which they presented to the county superintendent early the following morning, several hours before the citizens of Rolfe arrived with their own petition.

Rural parents may have exaggerated the evil influence that associations in a town school would have on their children. As C. R. Scroggie, editor of *Midland Schools*, observed, there was "just as apt to be a foul minded boy or girl in the country as in the small town." Advocates of consolidation opposed the location of any school in a town of over 5,000. The fact that in 1917 out of 235 consolidated districts only four included towns with populations in excess of 1,000 indicated that this principle had been observed. Of the remaining districts 28 included no town, 30 included towns of between 500 and 1,000 persons, while towns of less than 500 persons were found in the other 173 districts. The urban influence in towns of such size could not have been great, especially since the schools were usually located at the edge of town.

Supporters of the small town pointed out that it needed the consolidated school as much as did the strictly rural areas. Unless they could consolidate with the adjoining farmlands, most small towns would be unable to support an adequate educational program. In such a district the townspeople helped pay for the school bus service, although only the farmers' children received transportation to school. But as early as 1905 one farmer in the Buffalo Center district remarked sarcastically that consolidation "has given us the great privilege of furnishing 45 per cent of the pupils and of paying 65 per cent of the cost." Unfortunately, his complaint has been more than borne out by the careful studies of W. H. Lancelot of Iowa State College, who found in 1941 that in those districts containing town and country elements farm owners paid the entire cost of their own children's education plus 61.6 per cent of the cost of educating the townspeople's children. This disparity, the result of basing school support almost entirely on property taxes, was the major problem left unsolved by the consolidated school movement.

The anticipation that consolidation would result in higher school taxes was the principal reason why so many wealthy landowners opposed moves in that direction. An Iowa tenant farmer told Macy Campbell in 1920, "My landlord says that he will raise the rent so high as to force me off the

place if I vote for the consolidated school." Pressures of this kind were reported from many sections of the state.

Perhaps the greatest error that early advocates of consolidated schools made was to seek to silence critics by declaring that such schools would not be expensive. Eliminating several small schools and replacing them with a large one would by itself involve a saving. But with this larger school went the added expense of transportation, more equipment, higher salaries, new courses, and all the other aspects of the "educational awakening" that accompanied the demand for consolidation. "Those who are familiar with this type of school," James Woodruff asserted, "know that while the consolidated school may be made a cheap school it will always be a disappointment if made so cheap that it is cheaper than the one room school."

Eventually support was won for the consolidated school by emphasizing that it was superior to the old rural school, that it would give the taxpayers "a dollars worth of education for their children for every dollar expended." A member of the Boxholm school board told a *Saturday Evening Post* writer in 1923 that it was foolish to speak of the consolidated school as an inexpensive school. "You bet they cost," he said. "But look what we get for it! Darned good investment, we all think now, and you can say for me that this

community would get it if it cost five times as much."

Certain groups opposed consolidation for special reasons. Where there were Catholic parochial schools, opposition sometimes arose from Catholics who feared that consolidation would undermine the church schools' support. At Early in Sac County and the Varina Consolidated District in Pocahontas and Buena Vista counties Catholics were won over by a promise, which was kept, to transport parochial students in public school busses.

Directors of the existing rural school systems were another source of trouble to advocates of consolidation. The desire to be a director of his subdistrict, Henry Wallace declared, was to the farmer what the prospect of a D.D. degree was to the minister. In a large district, however, the chance of being elected would be greatly diminished. Sometimes a little horse trading helped overcome this hurdle. When the Norway Consolidated District was being discussed in 1914, one rural school official who opposed consolidation suddenly swung into support of the proposition when he was assured that he would be elected to the new consolidated school board — and he was.

The stubbornness of the opposition was such that consolidation forces could not afford to relax for an instant. The votes on organization were fre-

quently very close. If the move to consolidate was defeated on the first try, a standard maneuver was to cut away areas of strongest opposition wherever possible and try a second or even a third time. But even if consolidation was approved at the polls it might be overthrown on a technicality, as happened in the Ellston district in Ringgold County in 1920, when, after the school bond issue had been approved, the bond company discovered that the county superintendent had improperly advertised the election on consolidation. This made a new election necessary, at which the voters rejected consolidation.

Another time, after two tries, a consolidated district was approved by a slim majority in Delaware Township in Sac County. But anti-consolidation forces surged back to win control of the new school board, which refused to take any action to build a central school until a writ of mandamus was filed in district court in 1911. A school bond election was then held, which resulted in the proposed bond issue being defeated. Shortly thereafter the district was dissolved. Ten years later the township again voted to consolidate, this time also approving a bond issue that was four and a half times more than the one rejected in 1911.

Despite all the opposition to consolidation, however, State Superintendent Barrett was correct when he predicted in 1901 that once its advantages had been fully explained most people would

support consolidation. Opponents sometimes admitted that they knew consolidation would come eventually. At Jesup and in Orange Township in Black Hawk County, as well as at many other places, it was found that the best way to win support for a proposed district was to send its strongest opponents on a visit to established consolidated schools.

Once a school had been built its success rested heavily on the shoulders of the man employed as superintendent. Such a man needed, above all else, a knowledge and understanding of farmers and rural life. "Too often," Chauncey Colegrove noted, "the school board will employ . . . a man whose only experience has been in town schools, never lived on a farm, and has little or no knowledge of scientific agriculture." The ideal superintendent, Macy Campbell declared, also had to be able to develop a first-class educational program, and be "capable of handling the difficult problems of transportation, the warm noon lunch and competitive athletics under consolidated school conditions."

The rate of turnover was high, which was understandable in view of the things a superintendent, especially in a small school, had to do. Superior Township in Dickinson County in 1918 paid its superintendent \$1,000. He agreed:

to do the janitor work for \$350. To throw up janitor work if he does not give satisfaction. Also, he [is] to furnish

heat for downstairs and toilet rooms in residence, each teacher to pay twelve and one-half per cent of coal expenses per month. Mr. Rogers further agrees to pay for seeds used on agricultural plot, and also work done on same, said crops to be used for experimental purposes. He further agrees to room and board janitor, if found necessary to hire one.

Little wonder that the scarcity of good superintendents was a serious bottleneck in the early 1920's.

In capable hands the consolidated school overcame most of the opposition that remained. No district that erected a consolidated school ever voted to return to the one-room schools.

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