

Growth of Consolidation

The residents of Buffalo Township were not alone in seeing the advantages of transportation and consolidation. In 1897 a farm mother told the Taylor County Farmers' Institute that much was heard of rural free delivery of mail, but, as a mother, she was "more interested in the delivery of our children at the door of a good graded school, where they may receive such an education as will fit them to read the mail when it is delivered." Two years later, in September, 1899, State Superintendent Richard C. Barrett called the attention of county superintendents "to an increasing interest in the consolidation of school districts and the transportation of children to a central graded school established by the township." The county officers had already indicated their support of the movement the previous spring.

By 1901, scarcely four years after transportation started, Superintendent Barrett was devoting seventy pages of his report to consolidated schools. His figures as to the extent of consolidation, however, were misleading. If any district shut down its school and made some arrangement to send its pupils to an adjoining district, Barrett called the action "consolidation." In 1901, only Buffalo

Center fit the subsequent definition of a consolidated school district as one containing at least sixteen sections of land, maintaining a central graded school, and furnishing free transportation.

A good claim to having established Iowa's second recognizable consolidated school may be made for Lloyd Township in Dickinson County, about fifty miles west of Buffalo Center. In March, 1901, Lloyd Township approved the construction at Terril of a two-story, \$4,000 wooden building. When it was completed in October, the township's seven rural schools were closed, and, as an experiment, the students were transported to Terril. The plan worked so well that in 1903 the school board sold all the old schoolhouses, some of which were so dilapidated they were usable only as outhouses.

The elementary grades at Terril were divided between the two rooms on the first floor, while intermediate classes and the two years of high school that were offered met in a second-story room. A fourth room was finished in 1905 when the confusion of simultaneous recitations in the intermediate and high school classes proved too distracting for the pupils and the two teachers. State Superintendent John Riggs, visiting the district in 1905, found that 23 of the 27 family heads whom he interviewed were unqualifiedly in favor of the new system.

Lloyd Township was not yet, however, a con-

solidated school district. It retained its subdistrict organization until December, 1913, when a consolidated district was approved and a board of directors elected from the township at large. Two years later the little wooden school was replaced by a \$50,000 brick building, and a four-year high school program was inaugurated.

None of the early consolidated schools was more important than that established in 1903 at Marathon in Buena Vista County. The previous year the board of the Marathon Independent School District had begun considering the desirability of consolidating with adjoining Poland Township. Director Charles Herrick had visited Terril, thirty miles to the north, and Buffalo Center, and had been impressed with those towns' consolidated schools.

In the spring of 1903, Superintendent Alexander C. Roberts, who later became president of San Francisco State College, was excused from his work by the Marathon school board, given a team and a driver and sent throughout the rural areas to campaign for consolidation. Roberts later recalled that "for three weeks I drove the country roads explaining the proposed consolidation to anyone and his wife who would listen to me. The favorite conference room was the kitchen with the farmer on one side and his wife on the other and the map and drawings spread out on the kitchen table."

The efforts of Roberts and the board were rewarded when, on May 18, 1903, five of the eight districts of Poland Township voted 99 to 31 to consolidate with Marathon. Because of poor road conditions the consolidation forces had not been eager to secure the support of the more outlying districts. In 1915 the area consolidated was enlarged to 33½ sections by the addition of several areas in adjoining townships.

The two-room Marathon schoolhouse, built in 1901, was replaced by a \$20,000 brick structure to which, in the fall of 1903, six hacks began transporting the township pupils. By 1905, the *Marathon Republic* reported, opposition to consolidation had been succeeded by solid support for the new system. One farmer answered critics who complained that consolidation had increased taxes by arguing that the savings in the children's shoe leather alone offset the added cost.

For at least ten years, wrote James Woodruff, one of Marathon's early superintendents, Marathon had the best consolidated schoolhouse in the state. "The spirit and enterprise of the citizens was in keeping with the building." The state, Woodruff declared, owed "a debt of gratitude" to the district and its board for setting the pace with its modern school and high ideals.

Another pacesetter was the Lake Township Consolidated School in Clay County, organized, like its neighbor to the south, Marathon, in 1903.

This school is important as the first of the open-country consolidations. There was no community in Lake Township where its school could be located, as had been the case with earlier consolidations. Nevertheless, the farmers, led by Moss Mason, a member of the township school board, went ahead and built "a commodious and modern frame building," costing \$3,200, at the exact geographic center of the township. There was not another building within three-quarters of a mile.

The old rural schools were abandoned, and the central school opened in the fall of 1903 with eight hacks used for transportation. When State Superintendent Riggs paid a surprise visit in January, 1905, the temperature was ten below zero, but 98 of the school's 119 pupils were present. Three of the horse-drawn busses had stoves, while the rest were provided with blankets and robes. All were covered to furnish further protection for the children against winter's bitter cold.

The roads were a serious problem. "If some evil genius had been selecting a township in the fair state of Iowa for the trial of consolidated schools," the county superintendent observed, "he could not have selected one in which the plan would have been better calculated to fail." Bad drainage had caused some roads to be abandoned. The rest were in such shape that for years the school had to be closed at certain seasons because transportation was impossible.

But Riggs reported that the people were not giving up. Difficulties with the roads only increased the desire of the farmers to improve them because their school was more than a school to them. It was the only public building in the township. Here the families met for Sunday School and church services, some of them coming in the same hacks used on weekdays to carry the school children. Thus the Lake Township school functioned as a community center, as the advocates of consolidation had hoped it would.

* * * * *

For many years progress in consolidation was slow, and defeats were about as numerous as victories. In March, 1902, for example, Okoboji Township in Dickinson County rejected consolidation by a vote of 23 to 20. In other townships the vote was sometimes as much as three to one against consolidation. In many cases where one or two schools were closed and the students transported elsewhere the experiment lasted only a short time. Thus, in 1906, thirty schools were listed as receiving students in this fashion from one or more rural schools, but by 1910 ten of these schools had abandoned the practice. In the latter year, according to incomplete reports, a total of 108 schools with an enrollment of 1,182 had been discontinued as a result of consolidation or transportation. Since there were still 12,503 rural schools with a total enrollment of 249,680,

it was plain that consolidation was not solving the rural school problem.

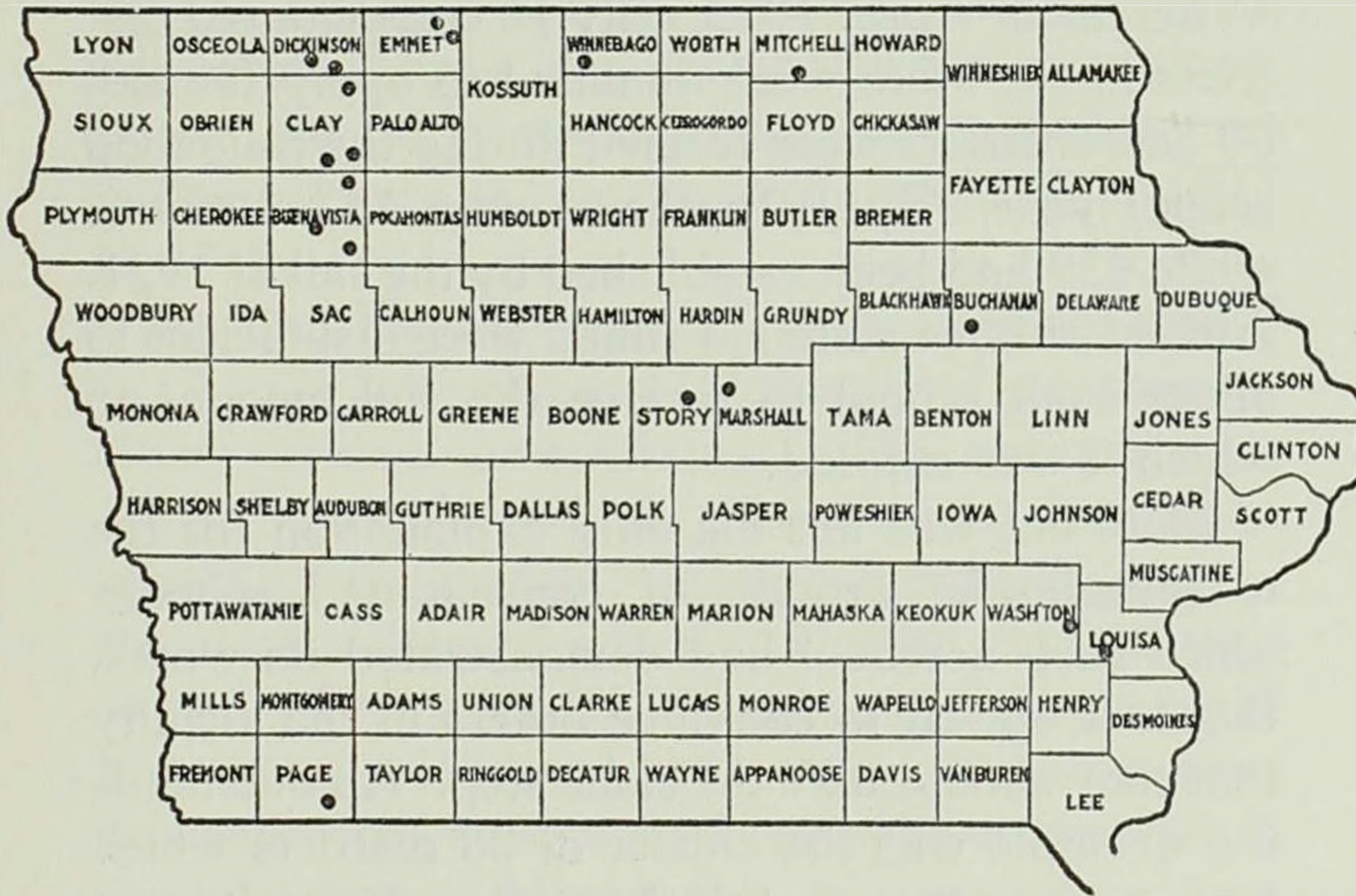
In 1898 Governor Francis M. Drake had expressed the opinion that with the provision for student transportation the school laws could "remain unchanged for years to come without detriment." Before long, however, it became apparent that more encouragement by the state was required if consolidation was to be widely adopted. Already in 1900 Governor Shaw was calling for new legislation to bring graded schools "within easy access of every farm in Iowa." He observed that in such matters "economy is not the synonym for statesmanship."

Two years later the House passed a bill which would have given voters greater opportunity to initiate the consolidation of two or more districts, but the Senate took no action. In 1906, however, the legislature provided that when a third of the voters within the boundaries of "contiguous territory containing not less than sixteen (16) government sections" indicated support for consolidation and the move was approved by the county superintendent, it was the duty of the board of the school corporation in which the largest number of voters lived to call an election within ten days. If the proposed district included portions of more than one county the approval of all county superintendents was required, or of the state superintendent if the county officials could not agree.

When a town was included in the proposed consolidation, provision was made for a separate ballot of those living outside the town. Failure to secure a majority of both the town and rural votes meant the defeat of the proposal. Additional legislation in 1911 declared it the "duty" of the board of a consolidated district to provide a central school and "suitable transportation." If residents were not satisfied, the district could be dissolved and a return made to the old system.

Except for clarifying certain procedures and establishing the minimum size of a district, these acts provided for nothing that was not already in the law. They had little effect on the number of consolidations which averaged about one a year until 1910 when two districts were organized. Two more followed in 1911 and three in 1912. These laws were permissive in character, in no way forcing any district to consolidate. Later, in 1920, President Homer H. Seerley of Iowa State Teachers College advocated a compulsory law which would "complete the opening of the right opportunities to all Iowa country boys and girls by having no other than consolidated schools permissible."

Although no such drastic step as this was ever taken, legislation passed in 1913 opened the flood-gates to a torrent of consolidations. In that year, at the urging of the Better Iowa Schools Commission, the General Assembly provided that consoli-



Consolidated school districts, June 30, 1912: 18

dated schools offering courses in vocational and industrial courses and fulfilling certain other requirements could receive up to \$500 in state aid toward needed equipment, and up to \$750 annually thereafter, the amount being governed by the number of rooms in the school. A maximum of \$30,000 was appropriated for this purpose in 1913-1914, and \$50,000 for succeeding years.

This fund subsequently was raised to \$125,000, but even this figure was small when compared with the \$4 million Minnesota was furnishing its 300 consolidated schools by 1920. But the offer of state aid, however slight, was enough to stimulate a tremendous upsurge of interest in consolidation.

Whereas in April, 1913, only 18 consolidated districts in the state were qualified to apply for aid, 60 new districts were formed during the following school year. By 1916 there were 187 districts, while 439 had been established by the fall of 1921. Almost at once state aid funds were insufficient to allow each school to receive the full amount to which it was entitled.

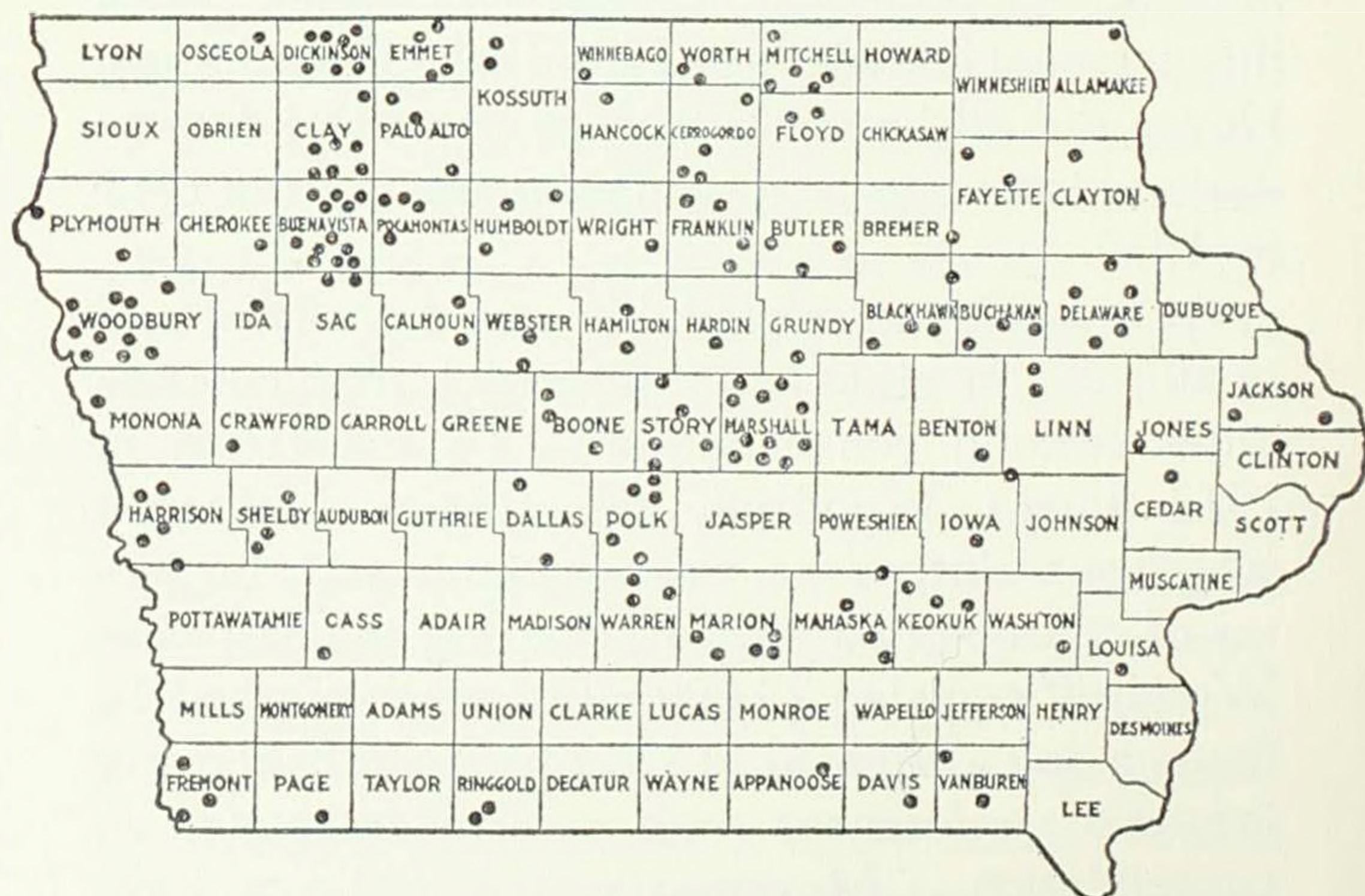
State aid was not the only explanation for the mushroom-like growth of consolidated schools. Once such a school had demonstrated its worth, this fact served to convince others in the vicinity that they should take the same step. An outstanding example was the cluster of 28 districts which had sprung up around the Marathon Consolidated School by 1918. This block of districts comprised 700 square miles of territory and extended into six counties of northwestern Iowa.

Similar groupings elsewhere in the state suggest that the consolidated school was its own best advance agent, but it received powerful help from the State Department of Public Instruction. From Henry Sabin onward most of the superintendents gave their support to consolidation, but none more so than Albert M. Deyoe, who has been called "the outstanding figure in the battle for consolidated schools." A graduate of Mason City High School and the State University of Iowa, Deyoe received his early education in rural schools and returned to them, first as a rural school teacher and

later as superintendent of Hancock County. With this personal knowledge of rural school conditions, Deyoe did all he could to spur on consolidations during his term as State Superintendent from 1911 to 1919.

At first, Deyoe related, "he could easily attend to all calls for visits and information from communities seeking consolidation." To assist him in 1913 James Woodruff, the former Marathon school superintendent, was appointed state inspector of consolidated schools. During the first year Woodruff traveled 23,000 miles, often worked 18 hours a day, delivered 118 lectures, and held many informal conferences with persons interested in consolidation. "Movements to consolidate have sprung up simultaneously at points far removed from each other," he reported in 1914, "and frequently it was necessary to deliver an address in one community and to make a hurried trip to some distant part of the state where the people were about to vote on the proposition of consolidation and were anxious to have the workings of the system explained."

In 1916 the average consolidated district, representing a closing of five rural schools, comprised 24 sections. The average size of the school grounds was five acres, the minimum amount recommended by the state to assure room for playgrounds, parking, and agricultural instruction. The school itself had a staff of seven teachers and



Consolidated school districts, June 30, 1916: 181

an enrollment of 180 pupils, of whom 57 per cent were from rural homes.

"In contrast with the one-room school, where often the county superintendent could carry off the whole equipment in his hat," Inspector Woodruff wrote, the consolidated school was fully equipped "for the business of making American citizens." The courses were designed to prepare the students particularly for agricultural work, but college entrance requirements also could be met by those desiring advanced training. High schools were required to offer at least one year of agricultural training and another of manual training or domestic science. In addition, one day each week

HOLIDAYS



Courtesy Supt. R. L. Kinkead

Youngsters at the Terril school at their desks in their classroom which was gaily decorated for Christmas in the early 1900's.



Courtesy Buena vista Co. Supt. Harrison

The third and fourth grade boys and girls of Brooke Township Consolidated School in Buena Vista County celebrate Halloween in the 1950's.

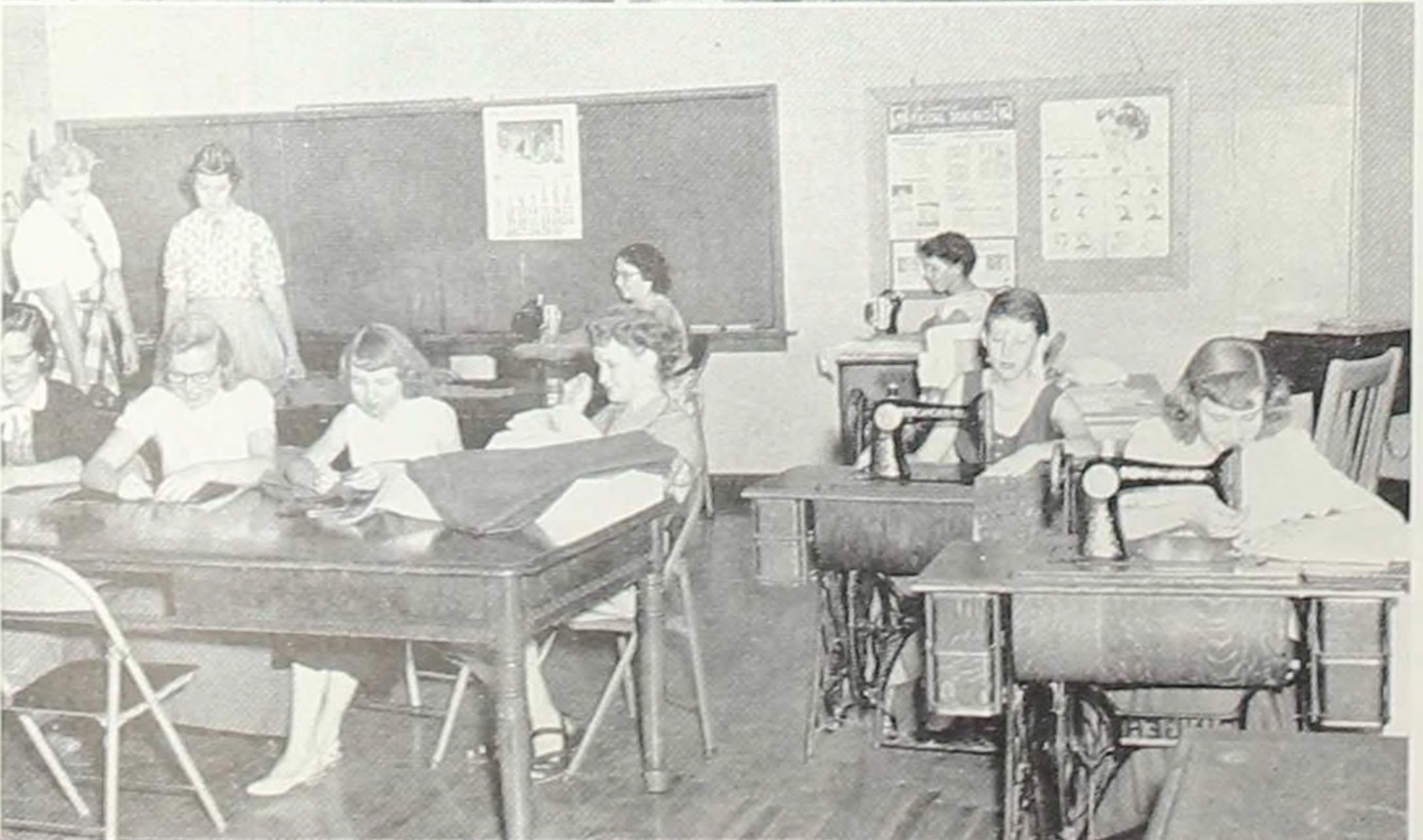


GIRLS'
CLASSES

Domestic Science
Alta Consolidated
School



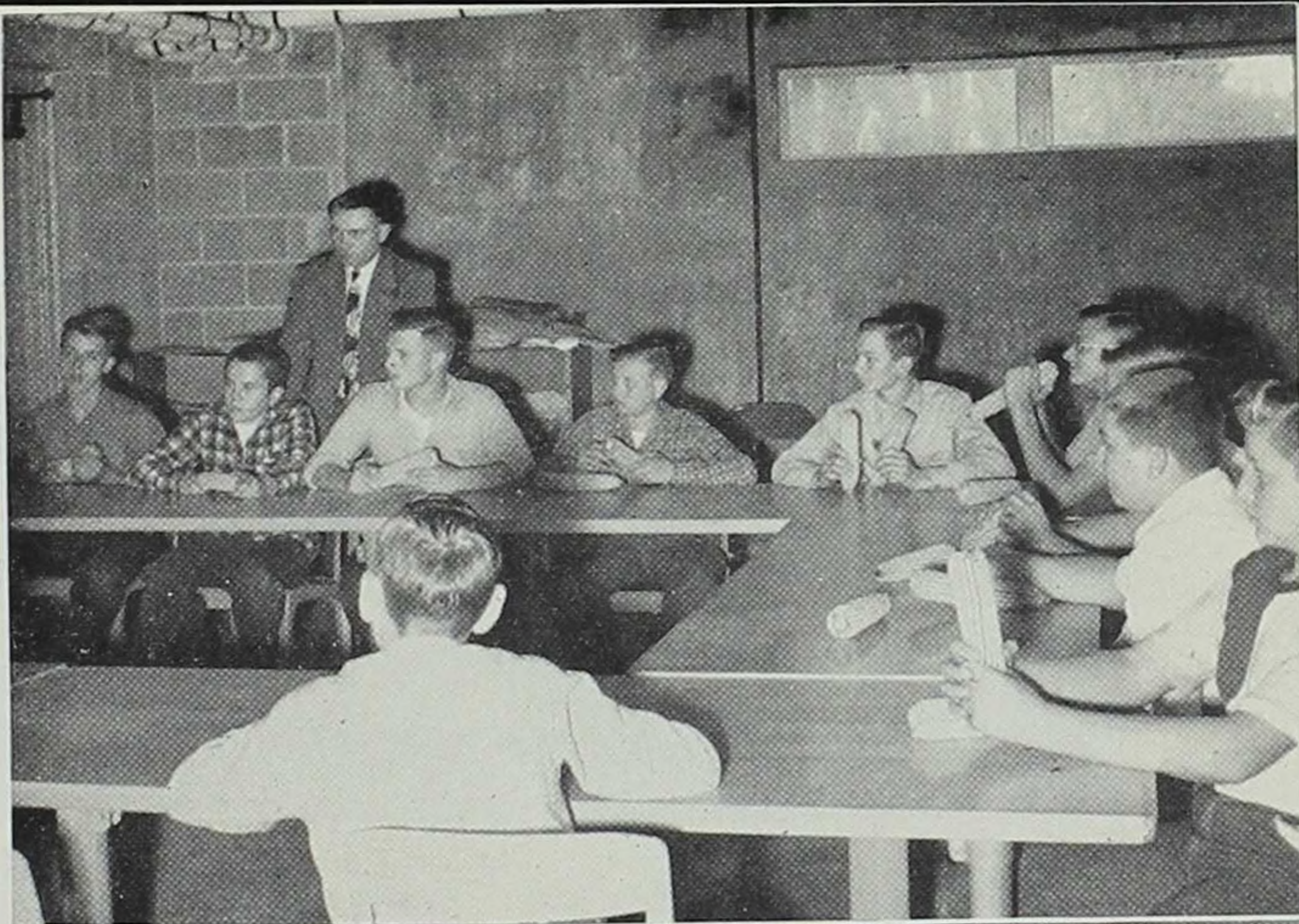
Business training
Alta Consolidated
School



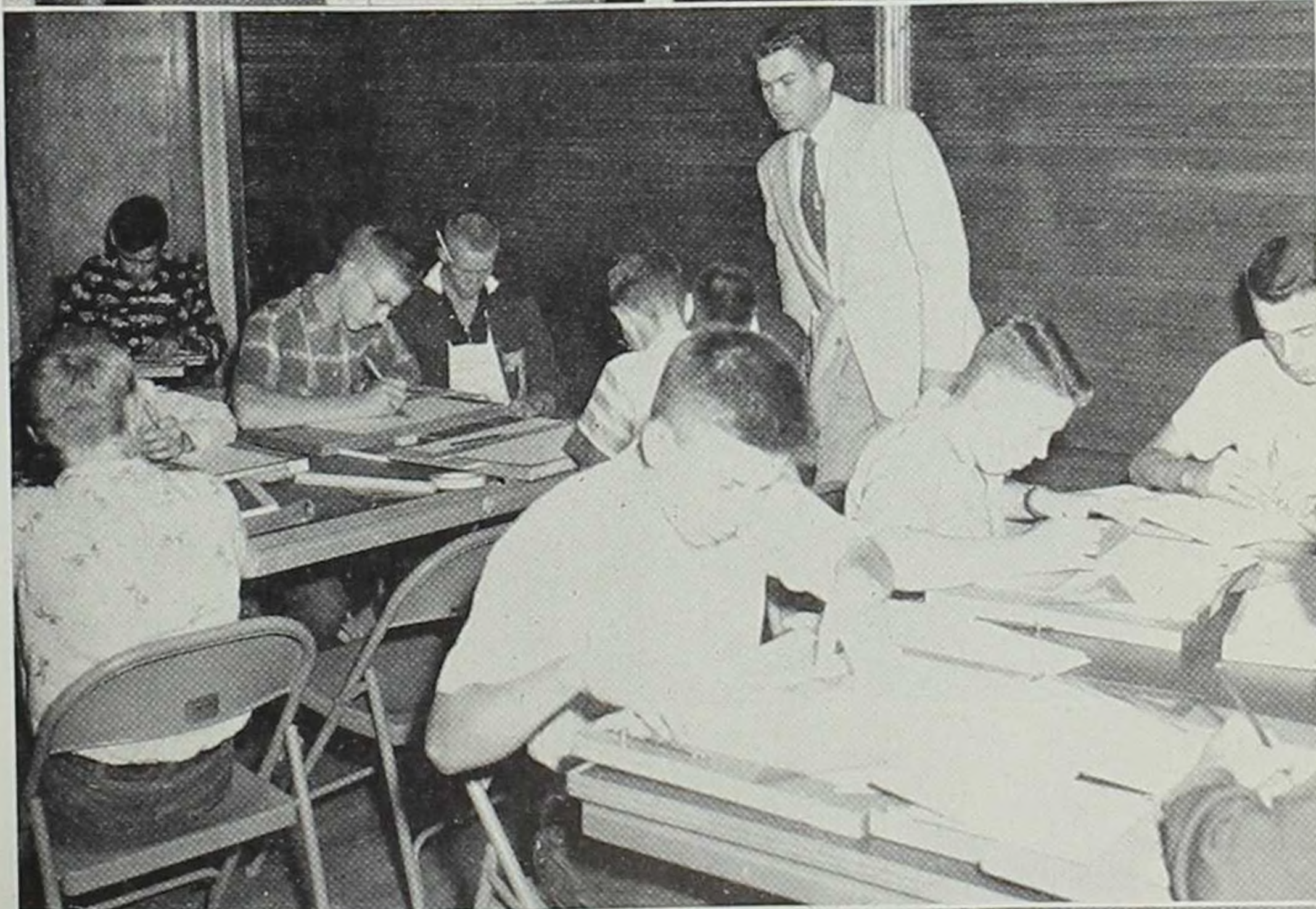
Sewing class
Tabor Consoli-
dated School

BOYS' CLASSES

Agricultural
training
Tipton Consoli-
dated School



Mechanical
drawing
Tabor Consoli-
dated School

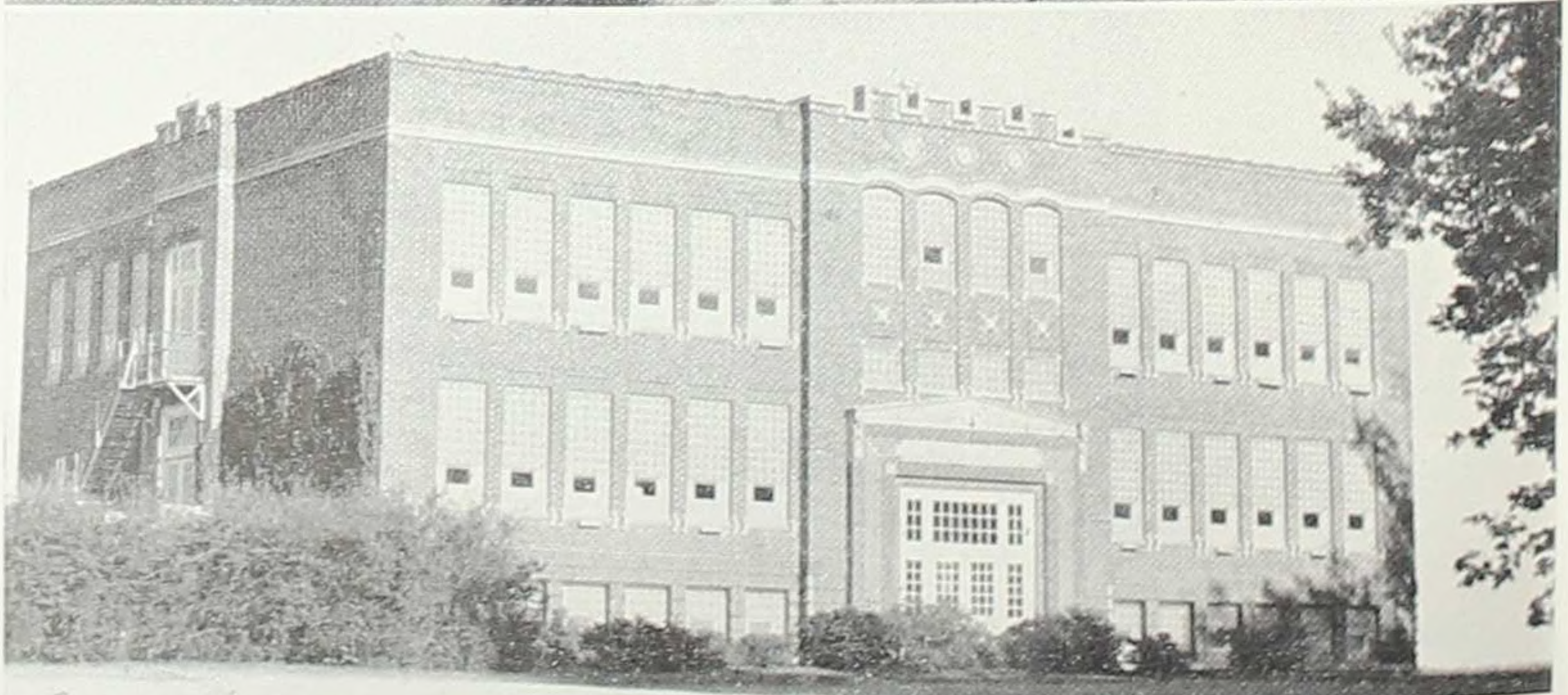
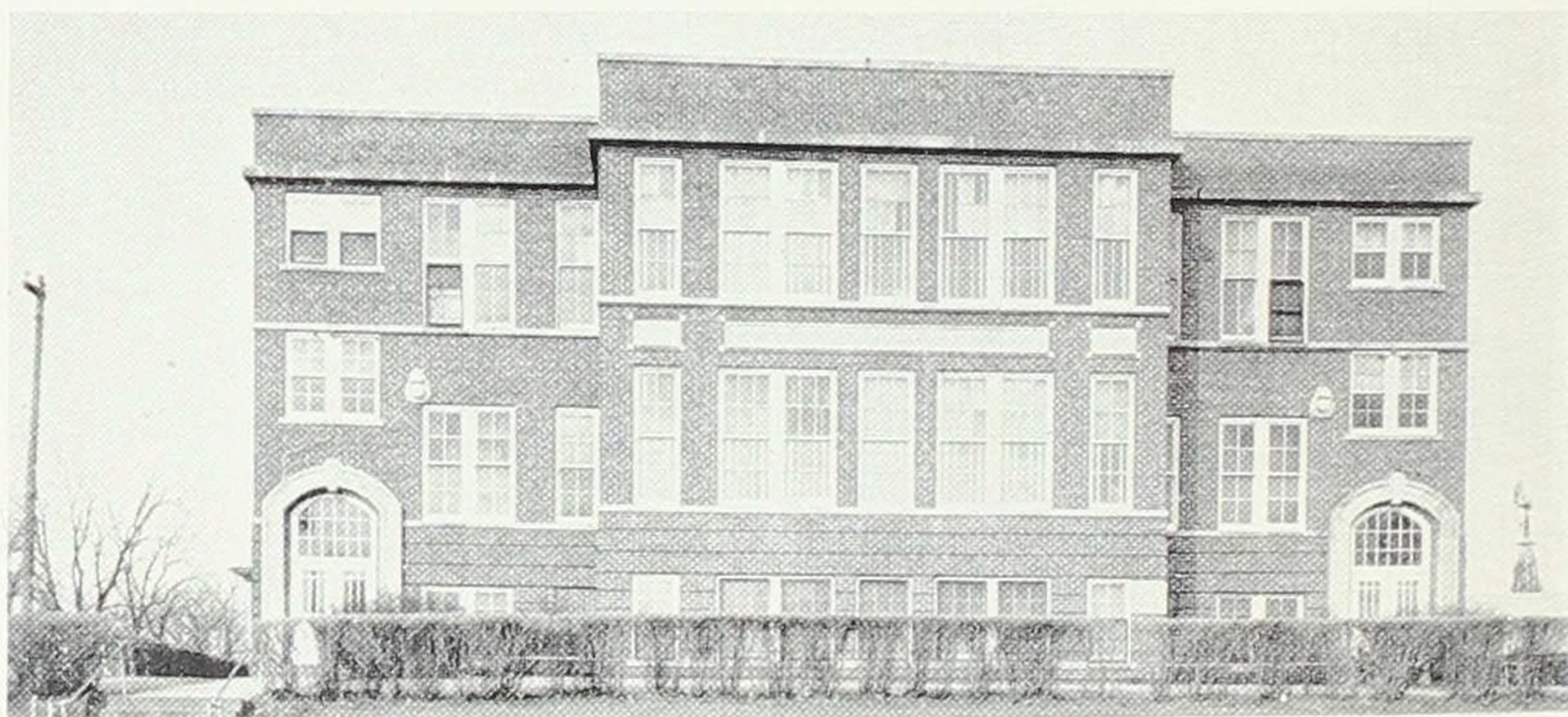


Mechanical
training
Alta Consolidated
School



(Courtesy Supt. Melvin
Samuelson, Alta;
Supt. R. W. Gambach,
Tipton; Miss Fern
Williams, Tabor.)

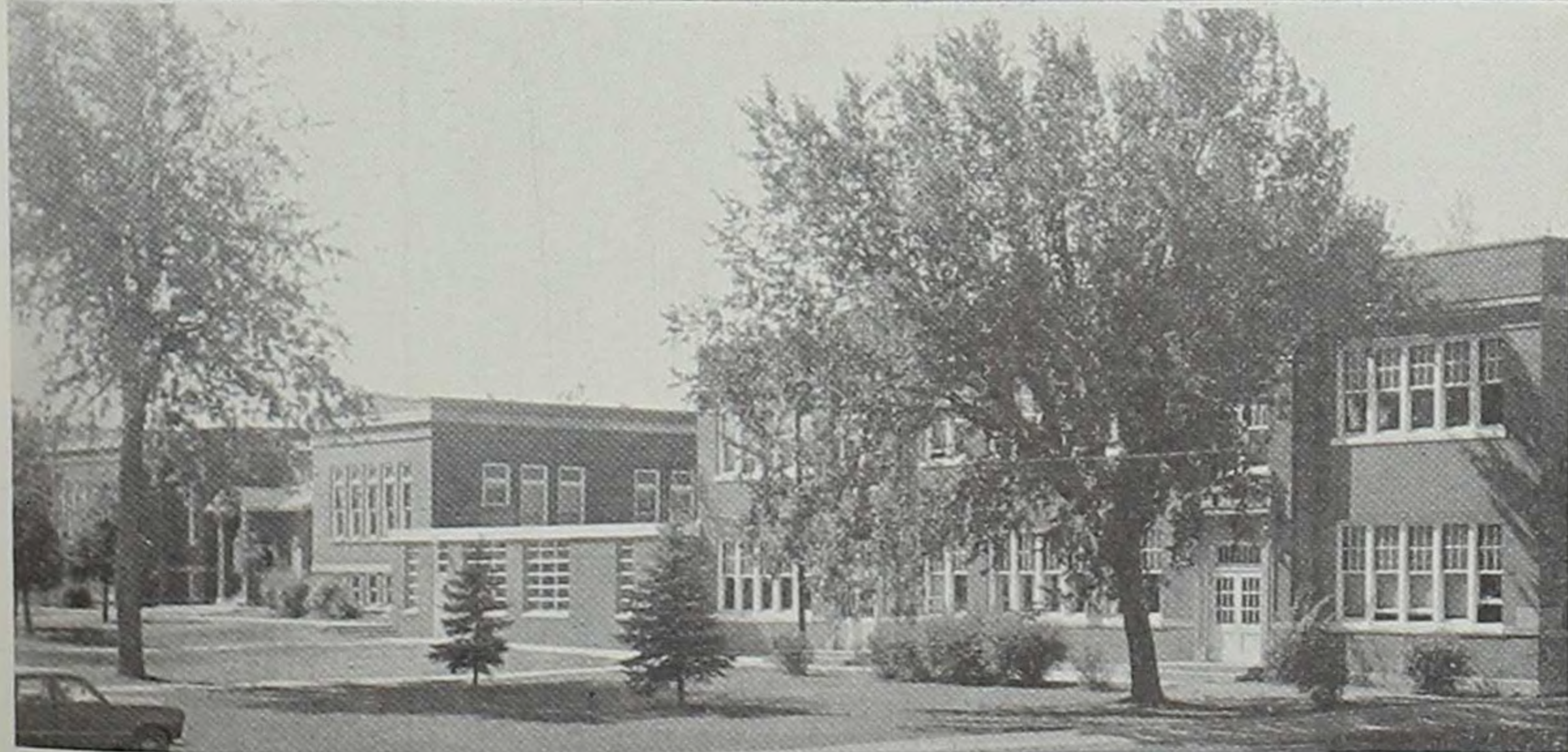
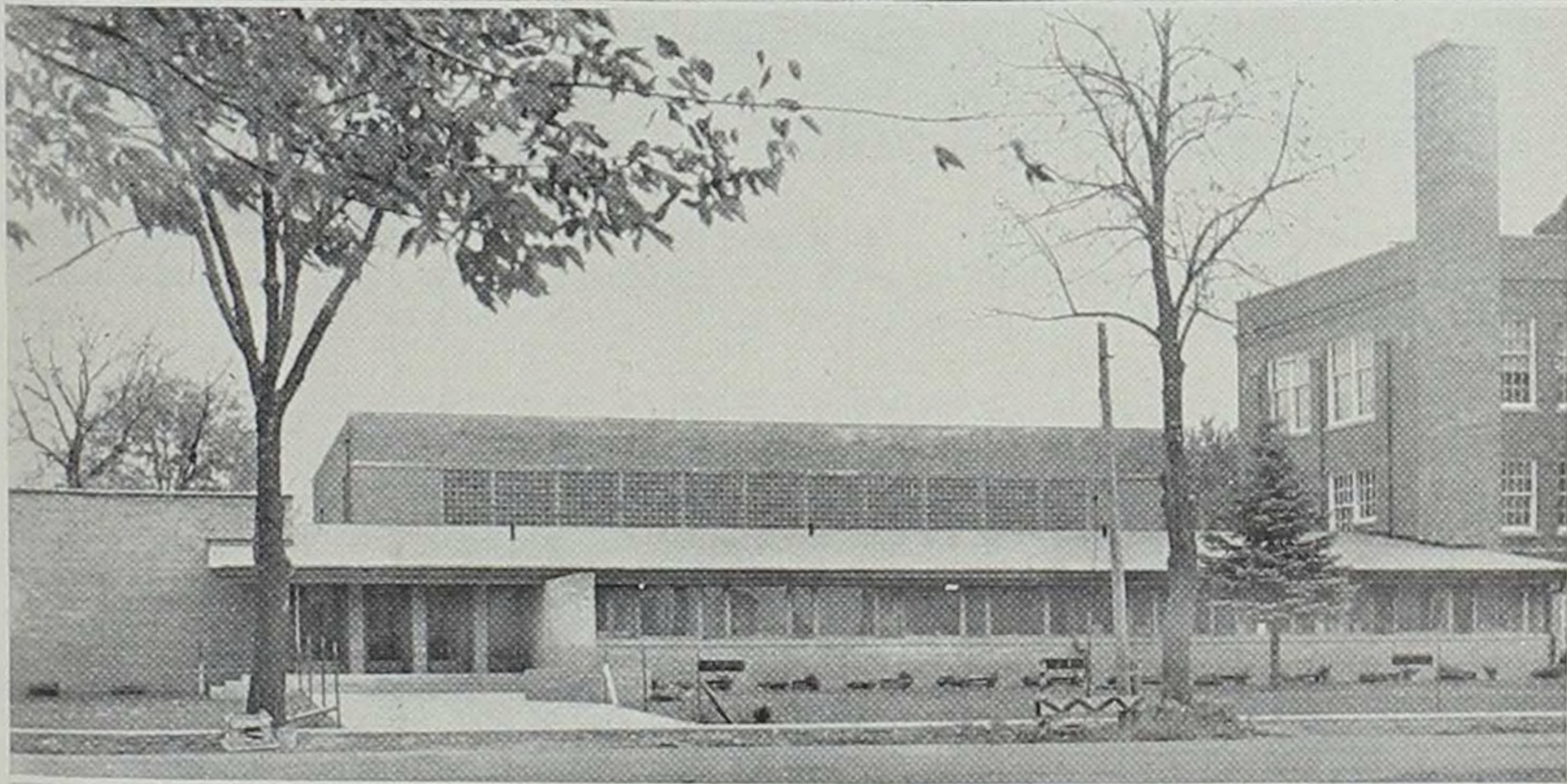
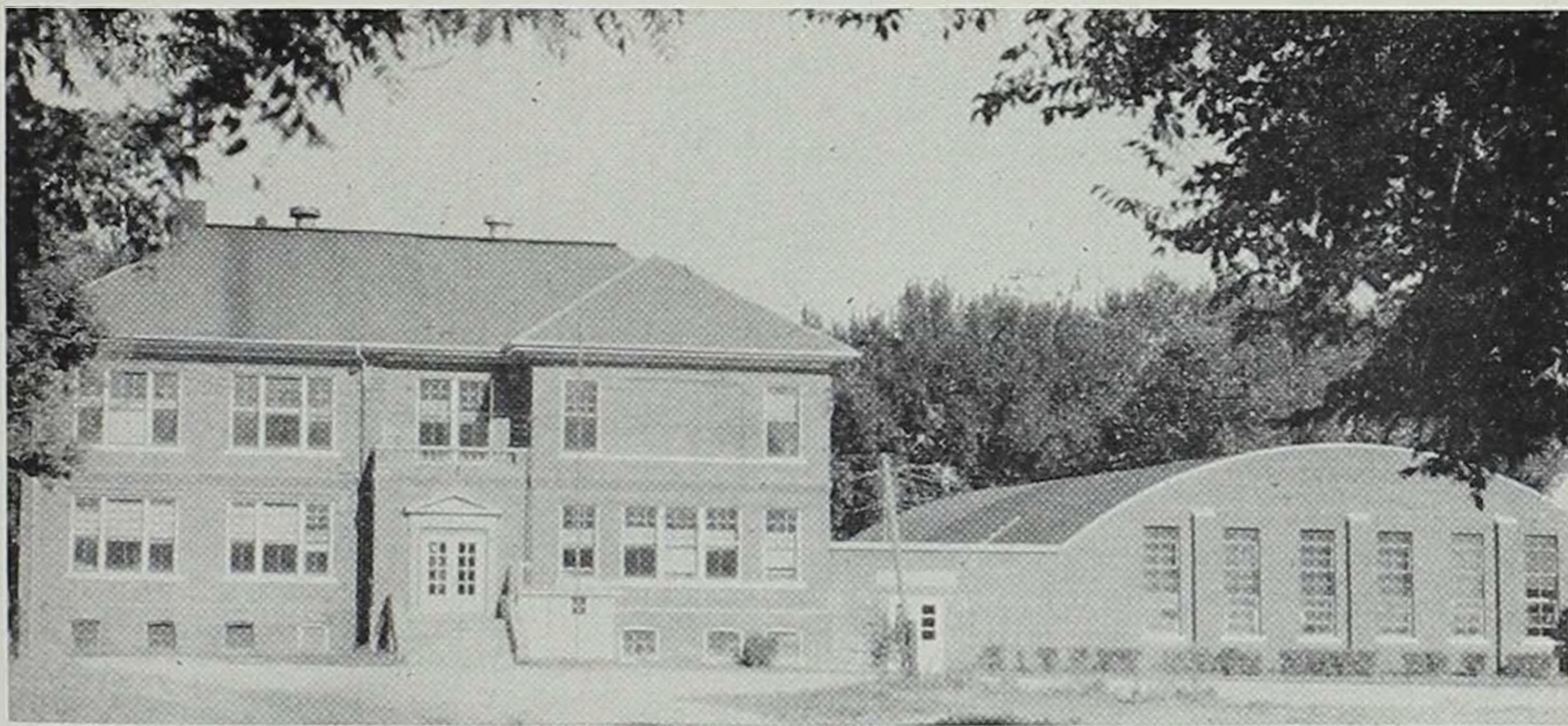
OPEN-COUNTRY CONSOLIDATED SCHOOLS



Courtesy Geneseo Con. Sch., and Malvern Leader

Among the 77 open-country consolidated schools in 1955 was the Geneseo Township school in Tama County (top), and the Strahan school in Mills County (bottom). Many provided living quarters for their teachers similar to the Geneseo school's dormitory (center).

THE EXPANDING CONSOLIDATED SCHOOL



Courtesy *Malvern Leader*; Supt. W. J. Edgar, Grand Junction; Prin. R. E. Bright, Paton
Typical of the ways in which increased enrollments have forced consolidated schools to add on to their original school buildings are these additions at the Henderson (top), Grand Junction (center), and Paton schools (bottom).

HORSE TRANSPORTATION



Courtesy Supt. R. B. Trafton

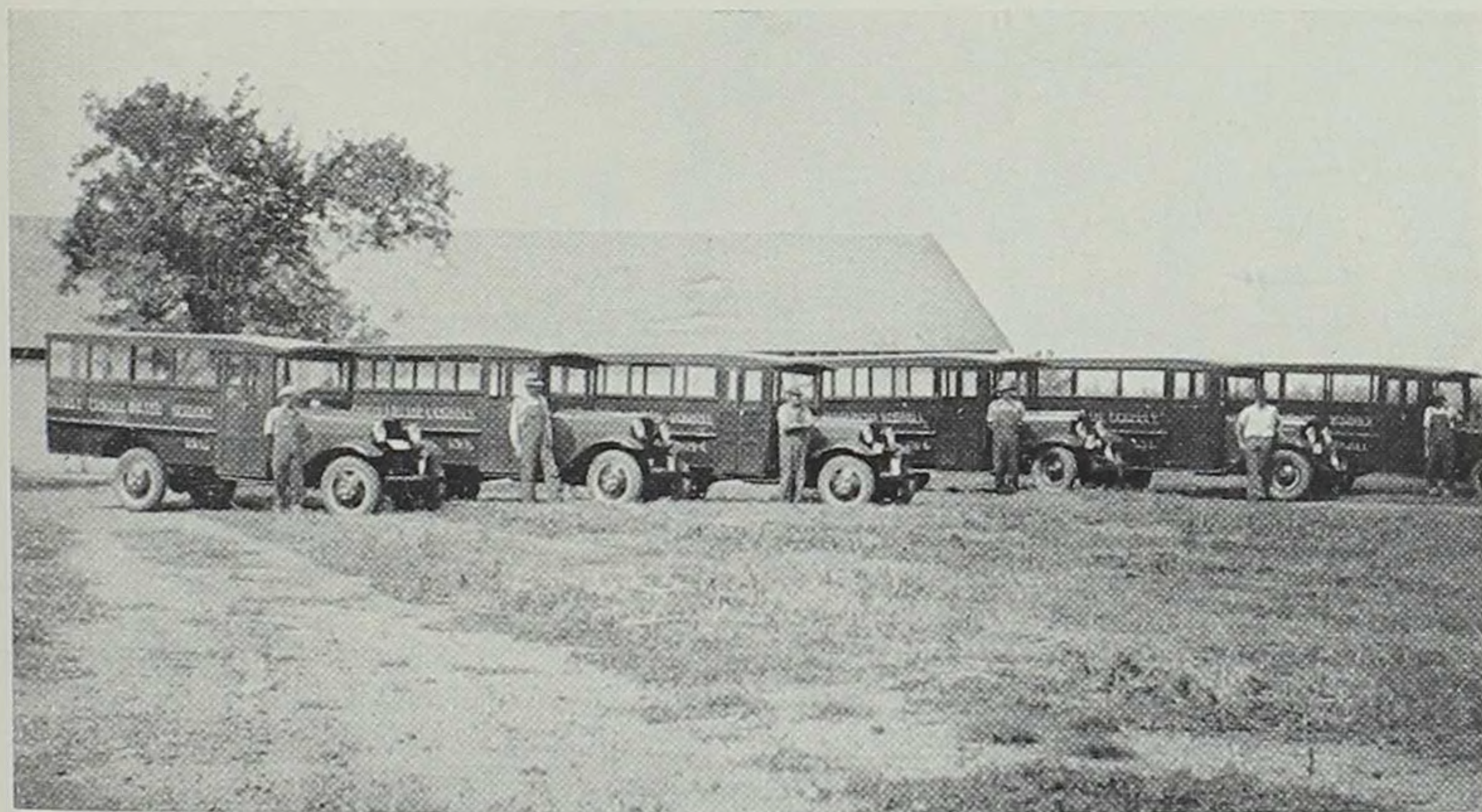
A. G. Johnson, Oscar Johnson, and Knute Sandeen of Marathon proudly stand beside the carriages they built in 1903 to transport students to the famous Marathon Consolidated School.



Courtesy Supt. R. L. Kinkead

"Ma's school bus" on the way to the Terril Consolidated School. Judging by the happy expressions on the faces of those standing beside the hack, the little fellow lying in the ditch was not hurt but was only camera-shy.

MOTOR TRANSPORTATION



Courtesy Dave Gibson

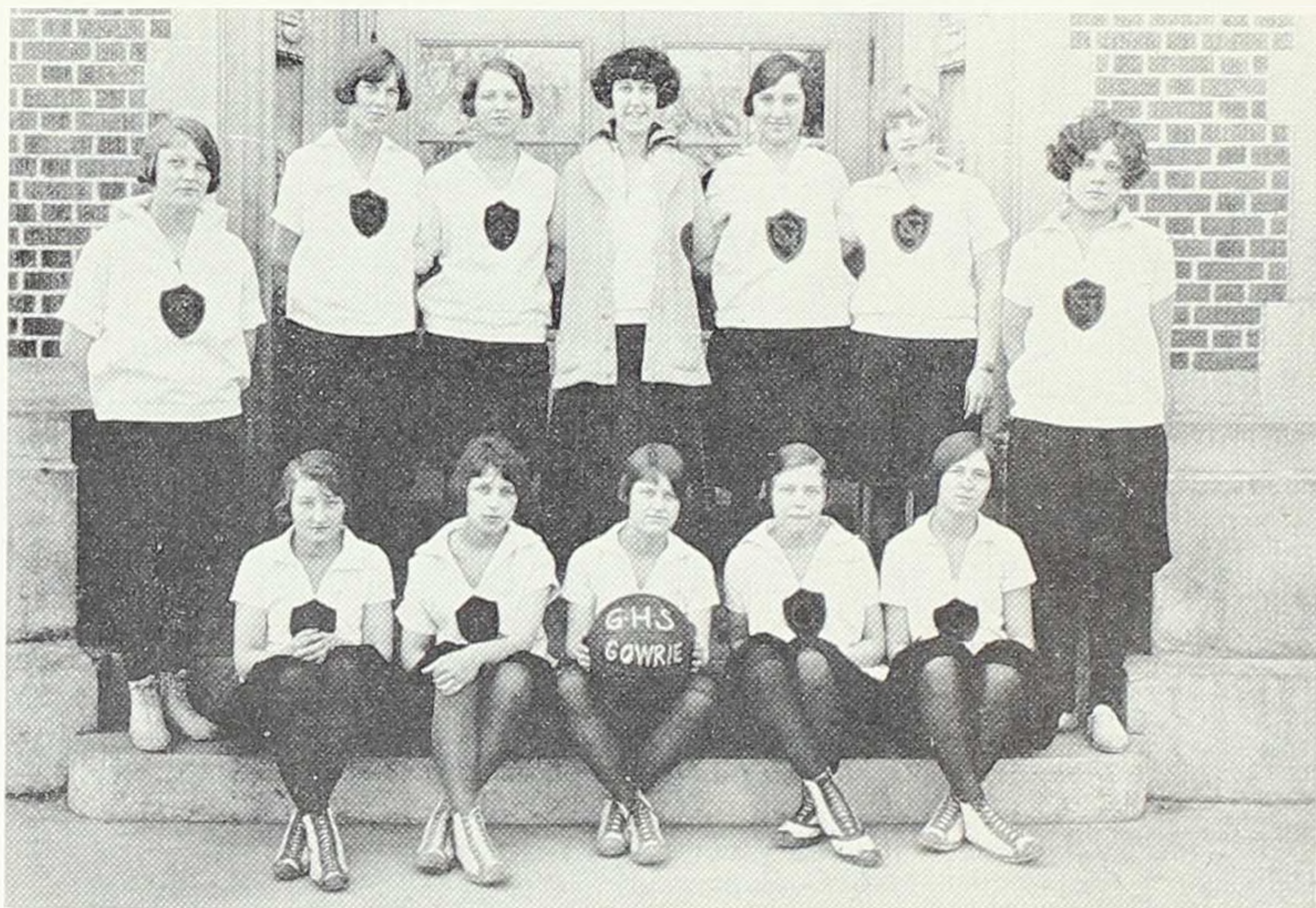
The Gilbert school's motor busses in about 1931. The drivers owned the trucks, the school the wooden bodies. Supt. V. L. Schwenk reported that in January, 1956, the Gilbert school was transporting approximately 300 students in six busses.



Courtesy Supt. W. A. Ortmeier

The Armstrong Consolidated School's busses in the fall of 1955. Supt. W. A. Ortmeier reported that 253 of the school's enrollment of 438 were transported to school at this time.

EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES



Courtesy Supt. A. C. Blome

Participation in sports, such as girls' basketball represented here by the Gowrie team in the 1920's, was one of the important benefits to the students in a consolidated school, not to mention the entertainment such sports furnished the community.



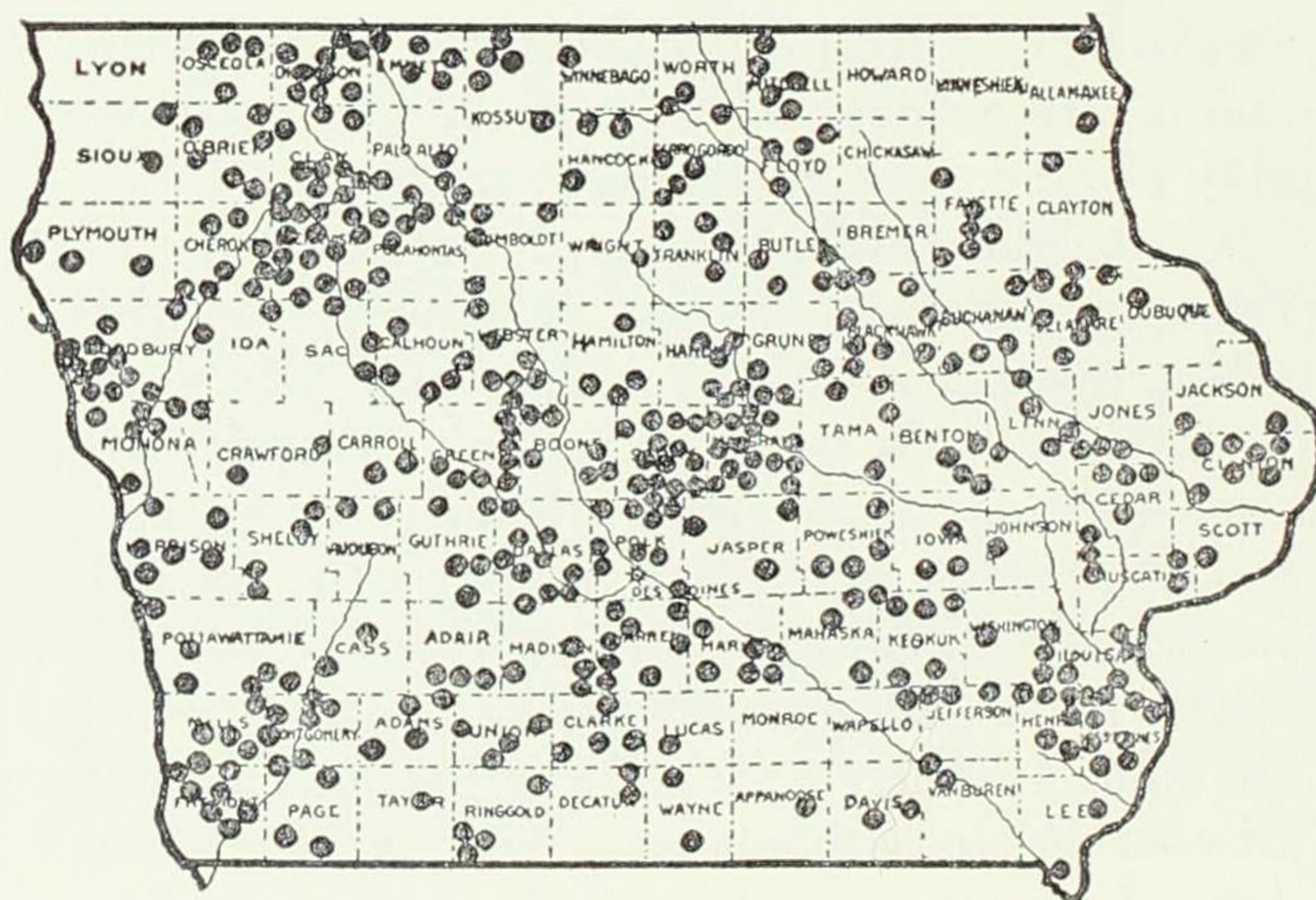
Courtesy Supt. A. C. Blome

The opportunity which they offered for the development of musical talent was among the consolidated schools' greatest contributions. Note that the auditorium in which the Gowrie band plays is also used for athletic contests and dramatic performances.

was to be devoted to similar courses in the seventh and eighth grades. Many schools went considerably beyond these minimum requirements.

Consolidated school districts were organized at the rate of fifty or more a year until 1917-1918 when, due partly to the war and partly to a new law, which made it easier for opponents to block consolidation, organization of new districts came to a virtual halt. In 1919, however, after the 1917 act was amended, and aided by the post-war economic boom, the greatest era of consolidation in the state's history began. The harried inspector of consolidated schools, even with frequent assistance from other members of the staff of the State Department of Public Instruction, was unable to keep up with the demands for his services. Between July 1, 1919, and June 30, 1920, an average of ten new consolidated districts were formed for every nine school days, while in one 29-day period in March, 1920, a total of 33 districts were established. By July, consolidation extended over a fifth of the state's area, and at least three counties had organized three-fourths of their territory. The stampede to consolidate continued unabated until late 1921.

Inevitably, many mistakes were made which might have been avoided had the advice of educators been heeded. State Superintendent Riggs in 1908 had recommended that the existing haphazard organization of districts be replaced by



Consolidated school districts, Sept. 1, 1921: 439

planned development, which would determine in advance the number and extent of consolidated districts best suited for an entire county. In 1920 President Fred D. Cram and other leaders of the Iowa State Teachers Association were urging the adoption of such a plan for the entire state.

But aside from the requirement that each district must contain a minimum of sixteen "contiguous" sections and the infrequent refusal of a county superintendent to approve a proposed district, local initiative was allowed free rein. Many districts were organized that subsequently proved too small and weak to provide an adequate education for their young people. Such matters as geographical considerations, reasonable estimates of

future enrollments, the amount of taxable wealth available, and the inclusion of a cohesive community unit should have governed the decision as to a district's size. Instead, local pride caused some areas to form districts and build costly consolidated schools simply because neighboring communities had done the same. Wild scrambles took place to gobble up the best lands before a rival district got them. Government section lines and township and county boundaries were too often the determining factors in establishing district limits. The results of such unplanned growth were a great many peculiarly shaped districts, which met the legal requirement as to size but did not comprise logical units from a geographical, economic or social standpoint.

In areas of heavy concentrations of consolidated schools those sections remaining unconsolidated often were farm lands regarded as too poor to furnish the additional taxes necessary to cover their inclusion in a district. Yet these pockets of unproductive farms were the very ones most in need of improved educational facilities and least able to supply them by themselves.

GEORGE S. MAY