

THE PALIMPSEST

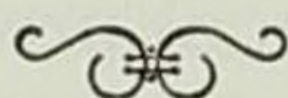
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The Rural School Problem

"The school-house stood a mile away on the prairie, with not even a fence to shield it from the blast. . . . a square, box-like structure, with three windows on a side and two in front. . . . painted a glaring white on the outside and a drab within. . . . this bare building on the naked prairie seemed a poor place indeed." — HAMLIN GARLAND, *Boy Life on the Prairie*, 1899.

Amid the romance and sentiment that characterizes American concepts of the old country school, the harsh criticisms of those who knew it well are often overlooked. The rapid growth of urban centers in America during the post-Civil War years compelled educators to devote most of their thought to meeting the needs of expanding city school systems. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, they were becoming increasingly aware of the deficiencies of the rural school. In contrast with the city school, the tiny one-room country school now seemed, in Hamlin Garland's words, "a poor place indeed."

In 1895 the National Education Association ap-

pointed a committee of twelve educators to study the rural school problem. Two years later the committee, headed by Iowa's Superintendent of Public Instruction, Henry Sabin, presented a report which for several years was the standard work on the rural school problem. Subsequently, President Theodore Roosevelt's Country Life Commission studied the question. The Iowa farm editor, Henry Wallace, a commission member, declared that he and his colleagues found that complaints about rural education were nationwide.

Meanwhile, Iowa educators for many years had been expressing concern at the failure of rural schools to keep up with the advance made in the cities. In 1890 Superintendent Sabin had directed the General Assembly's particular attention to this subject, calling it "by far the most urgent" educational matter demanding legislative action. Sabin's successors expressed similar views.

The volume of criticism grew as the years passed. In 1898, for example, Dean Amos N. Currier of the State University of Iowa told the State Teachers Association that with all their good points the rural schools were "the weakest, the most poorly equipped, and the most insufficient corps in our army of education." Fourteen years later the important Better Iowa Schools Commission, composed of many of the best known public figures of the state, devoted most of its legislative recommendations to this situation.

The rural school was not without its supporters. One Iowa paper called Simpson College's president "a fraud, imposter and unworthy of any consideration whatever" because he had criticized the country school. Iowa's low percentage of illiteracy caused many citizens to feel satisfied with existing schools. "Ability to read and write . . . was a high personal distinction 1,000 years ago," Dean Currier admitted, "but greater things are needed to justify boasting at the close of the nineteenth century."

Many Iowa farmers were confused by criticism of rural schools because, as a sympathetic educator, Chauncey Colegrove of the State Teachers College pointed out, it came from the friends, not the opponents of public schools. Insofar as this criticism implied that the farmers were responsible, Colegrove said, it was unjust, since the rural school problem was caused by forces beyond the control of the rural population. Certainly the farmer was not responsible for the growth of the great urban industrial centers requiring a constant supply of labor, or for the technological revolution in farming methods that created a surplus of farm labor. Yet these complementary developments produced a migration to the city that caused Iowa's rural population to decrease 115,000 from 1900 to 1910. More important to the educator was the fact that enrollment in country schools dropped by 60,000 during the same decade.

Macy Campbell, head of rural education at Iowa State Teachers College from 1913 to 1927, was not far wrong when he remarked, "Steel farming machinery and modern farm practice killed the rural school."

But the population decline was only one of several changes upsetting the pattern of rural life. The one-room school had developed to meet the needs of an isolated, frontier population. The primitive means of transportation in 1850 made a school at every crossroad a necessity. By the early 1900's, however, rural isolation was being reduced by a vast railroad network, better roads, the telephone, and rural mail delivery. Within fifty years automobiles, movies, radio, airplanes, television, and participation in global warfare completed the process. Distances had shrunk, and institutions once prized now seemed inadequate.

Certain elements inherent in the rural school system help explain its inability to adjust to the changes going on around it. Foremost of these was the decentralized administrative system. Horace Mann had recommended in 1856 that the township be made the school unit in Iowa. Two years later his advice was heeded. Townships were divided into subdistricts, usually nine in number, with a school in each. The subdistrict elected a director who had immediate supervision over its school, and who, together with the other directors, made up the township school board.

Although the subdistrict system had its defects, it was far superior to the one that arose after 1872. Against the advice of the state's ablest educators, the 14th General Assembly permitted subdistricts, by a majority vote of the township, to become independent school districts, a unit previously reserved for cities and towns of some size. Instead of one director, a subdistrict that took this step would have a three-man board, a secretary, who might not be a board member, and a treasurer.

In a few years restrictions were imposed limiting the opportunities for forming such districts, but not before much damage was done. Between 1872 and 1874 the number of independent districts rose from 400 to 2,026, and by 1900 to 3,686. The step was defended on the grounds that it provided greater local self-control of school affairs, but lacking the means to implement its increased power the tiny rural independent district hardly benefited by the change.

The waste and inefficiency resulting from the rise of these small districts was appalling. A single township might contain from 36 to 45 school officers. "Think of this," Henry Sabin commented, "one man out of every three you meet a school officer, acting as such in some capacity, and the other two only waiting until the next election." In Marion and Keokuk counties in 1889 a total of 464 officers had to file their reports before the county superintendents could make their annual

reports. Some 13,950 school officers in the state handled school funds before they could be paid to those to whom money was due.

There were districts where there were not enough men eligible to serve, while others chose men obviously unqualified. Henry Sabin told the State Teachers Association in 1892 of "men whose official titles were presidents of boards of education who actually could not read their own name after it was written." Some districts did not bother to hold school elections.

Not only the school and its district but its enrollment was small. In January, 1910, ten country schools had an actual daily attendance of only one pupil, 35 others had only two students in attendance, while 3,018, about a fourth of Iowa's rural schools, had an attendance of ten or less.

Such small schools were wasteful. Teachers instructing ten students could, with much more benefit, handle two or three times that number. In a small school a child frequently missed the opportunity of working and learning with others of his own age and experience. Of course, as *Midland Schools* pointed out in 1906 upon hearing of a one-student school near Vincent, discipline was no problem in such a situation. "When the whole school gets down behind its lone geography, teacher knows there is something doing and she investigates."

The amount of schooling received by a farm

youth was another serious defect of rural education. Taking the school enumeration as a basis, the average annual country school attendance in 1896 was only one and three-fourths months per pupil, while the student in village and city schools had over four months of schooling each year. "Note the difference," Superintendent H. L. Coffeen of Calmar declared; "fully 60 per cent of the school population of our state turn from their books and their instructors to engage in life's pursuits, when less than three school years of nine months each cover the entire school privileges of which these pupils have availed themselves."

The size of the school and of the district affected the quality of teaching, which critics generally agreed was unsatisfactory. State Superintendent John Riggs contended in 1904 that "the rural school suffers more from inexperienced and poorly prepared teachers than any other cause."

Few men were teaching in the country school by the 1890's, in contrast with pre-Civil War days when the schoolmaster was a familiar figure in the one-room school. From the 1860's onward the proportion of female to male teachers grew steadily, until by 1900 there were 23,841 women teachers employed in the state's public schools and only 4,948 men. In rural schools the ratio seems to have been even more heavily weighted in favor of the women. Efforts were made in many districts to secure a man during the winter term, since this

was the slack season on the farm when the older boys attended school in larger numbers.

To handle a schoolroom of pupils ranging in age from five to twenty-one was difficult for an experienced teacher. But when, as Governor Leslie Shaw said in 1898, the mature schoolmaster of the earlier day was replaced by immature and inexperienced girls, the situation became desperate. The number of experienced, well-trained teachers in the state in 1900, as indicated by the first-grade and state certificates issued, was only 4,202. Most of the more than 20,000 remaining teachers had had no training beyond elementary school and a few weeks at county normal institutes.

The tiny rural districts could not hope to compete for teachers with the urban graded schools. The city schools absorbed the bulk of the specially trained teachers, and, in their constant demand for more instructors, hired the best of the rural teachers as soon as they gained experience. Chauncey Colegrove admitted that the country school was little more than a training ground for teachers who would move to the city if they proved capable. In 1903-1904 a new teacher was hired for each of the three terms in 1,808 rural schools, while in 4,836 others two different teachers came and went. Thus, pupils in over half the state's rural schools lacked the advantage of having the same teacher for one entire year.

Low salaries were the major cause of the high

rate of turnover among rural teachers. Nepotism was another cause for numerous replacements. Not uncommon in districts where three or four families supplied all the pupils was the dismissal of a teacher who had incurred the displeasure of one set of parents. State Superintendent Riggs found one subdistrict in 1907 whose two pupils were from the same family, the teacher was their sister, and their father the director. An adjoining district having several pupils but inadequate funds for a good teacher suggested that they combine their forces. The father, fearing that he might lose control of the school, rejected the idea.

In addition to all these institutional weaknesses was the deplorable physical condition of the schoolhouse. In the early years, Hamlin Garland observed, the farmhouses were no better than the school building. As time passed, the school "changed only for the worse. Barns were built first, houses improved next, and school-houses last of all." In 1896 some 5,210 school buildings in the state were listed as in no better than fair condition. Rural school outhouses were so shocking that one writer later argued that the provision of clean, supervised indoor toilets alone would justify the cost of new consolidated schools. Frequently no one in a district, not even the directors, assumed responsibility for the care of the schoolhouse. The building was generally located in an isolated spot and was easily entered by tramps and

other vagrants. Superintendent William Wilcox of Atlantic in 1897 told of a conscientious teacher who returned to his school after a three-months vacation and "found to his chagrin and sorrow that the maps he had secured had been used by tramps the summer long for bedding, the dictionary for a pillow, the stove for a spittoon, and that every conceivable liberty had been taken with his building in his absence."

Surveying all of these deficiencies of the rural schools, Dean Amos N. Currier declared in 1898 that "the lack of life and spirit and force resulting from these conditions may justly be diagnosed as intellectual anemia, affecting not only the teacher and the school, but the whole district with its blight." His remedy, and that of most educational leaders, was first to establish the township as the unit of school administration, and second to provide central graded schools for the rural children and public transportation for all who needed it. Out of the second proposal grew the consolidated school movement which, until recently, overshadowed the less colorful campaign for administrative reorganization.

GEORGE S. MAY