

Early Consolidations

Consolidated schools first became possible in 1869 when Massachusetts authorized the use of public funds for the transportation of students to school. This enabled school districts to close rural schools and transport the pupils to a central school. The first rural consolidated school was formed in 1875 when three rural schools near Montague, Massachusetts, were closed and the students brought to a centrally located building.

The first state in the Midwest to follow the example of Massachusetts was Indiana, where, in 1889, transportation of students at public expense was approved. By 1914 Indiana had 655 consolidated schools, attended by over a third of its rural school children. Its neighbor, Ohio, began transportation in 1894, and by 1916 had established 539 consolidated schools.

After 1910 the consolidated school movement spread rapidly through the country, twice as many consolidations occurring between 1910 and 1916 as in all preceding years. By 1920 an estimated 65,000 districts had closed their schools as a result of consolidation.

The consolidated school became popular because it offered a cure for so many ailments of the

rural educational system. It strengthened the foundations of rural schools by throwing the support of an area behind one large unit instead of scattering that strength among several small ones. The large enrollments brought about by consolidation made it possible to grade students according to age and level of learning into separate classes with a teacher for each. This in turn led to a wider range of subjects, including specialized courses like music and art. The high school, which was a part of almost all consolidated schools, greatly extended the educational horizons of the rural young people whose education formerly had ceased, except in rare cases, at the end of eight grades. Finally, the consolidated schools, because of improved salaries and better working conditions, could compete on more nearly equal terms with city schools than could the one-room school.

In addition to the educational benefits of consolidation advocates of the new system stressed the over-all community advantages such a step would foster. Rural leaders like Dean Charles F. Curtiss of Iowa State College pointed out that the school question was but one phase of the challenge presented to rural communities by the modern world. The consolidated school, it was felt, would be a means of making country life more attractive and thereby would stem the migration to the city, which was depriving the farming areas of some of their most intelligent citizens. Not only could

the consolidated school provide an education comparable to that offered in the city, but it could brighten the social life of the farmer by serving as a community center for meetings and entertainment of all kinds. It would be a unifying force in the community which was witnessing a rapid decline of the rural church and which no longer had such activities as the spelling bee and lyceum debate to draw the people together.

The consolidated school movement in Iowa began officially in 1897 when the new Code granted to school directors the authority,

when there will be a saving of expense, and the children will also thereby secure increased advantages, [to] arrange with any person outside the board for the transportation of any child to and from school in the same or another corporation, and such expenses shall be paid from the contingent fund.

This addition to the school laws, whose adoption had been urged by Superintendent Sabin in 1895, was the key which opened the door to consolidation. However, the movement in that direction had begun many years before with the introduction of the graded school during the 1850's. State Superintendent James D. Eads reported in 1854 that he had visited a "large number" of these schools and was "very highly gratified" with the results they were achieving. "Of course," he declared, significantly, "these schools can only be maintained in towns or villages where there are a

large number of scholars within a convenient distance of some central point."

As early as 1857 State Superintendent M. L. Fisher noted that some of the wealthier farmers were moving into the towns in order to give their children the advantages of a graded school education. Others began the practice of paying tuition at a graded school for the family's older children. Transportation being what it was, this frequently meant that these children had to leave home and live in the city while attending school.

Following the creation of the subdistrict school system in 1858 central township graded schools were established at several points in the state. In 1865 the voters of St. Charles Township in Floyd County approved the building of an \$8,000 graded school to be open to all school children of the township. One contemporary authority declared that to his knowledge this was the first township graded school in Iowa. The school, a three-story stone affair located in Charles City, opened in 1866 with four divisions: primary, intermediate, grammar, and high school. Similar schools were founded at North Liberty, Monticello, Brooklyn, and other communities.

Although the Charles City school apparently offered the children of the township a complete education from the elementary grades through high school, others, such as the one at Monticello, served only as township high schools. However,

they were under the control of the township, and all the subdistricts shared in the benefits of an advanced school that would have been infeasible for the individual subdivisions to maintain. In this way the farmers' children who desired it could obtain a tuition-free high school education, and, if they lived close enough, might, at the same time, remain under the parental roof.

Unfortunately, this important educational development was cut short in many communities before it achieved its full promise. Charles City became an independent school district in 1871, while Monticello took the same step in 1877. This was typical of what happened in township after township as towns and villages grew in size and desired to strike out for themselves in school affairs. For the rural children the town high school was now open only on a tuition basis. "The great idea of our school system," Representative John Russell of Jones County declared in 1867, "is to guarantee to every child in the township as far as practicable an equal chance for a good education without regard to the numbers in the sub-districts respectively." When populous subdistricts organized as independent corporations, Russell argued, this high-minded purpose was defeated.

To the people of Buffalo Township in Winnebago County goes the honor of pioneering in the creation of a real consolidated school in 1897. This township, five miles south of the Minnesota

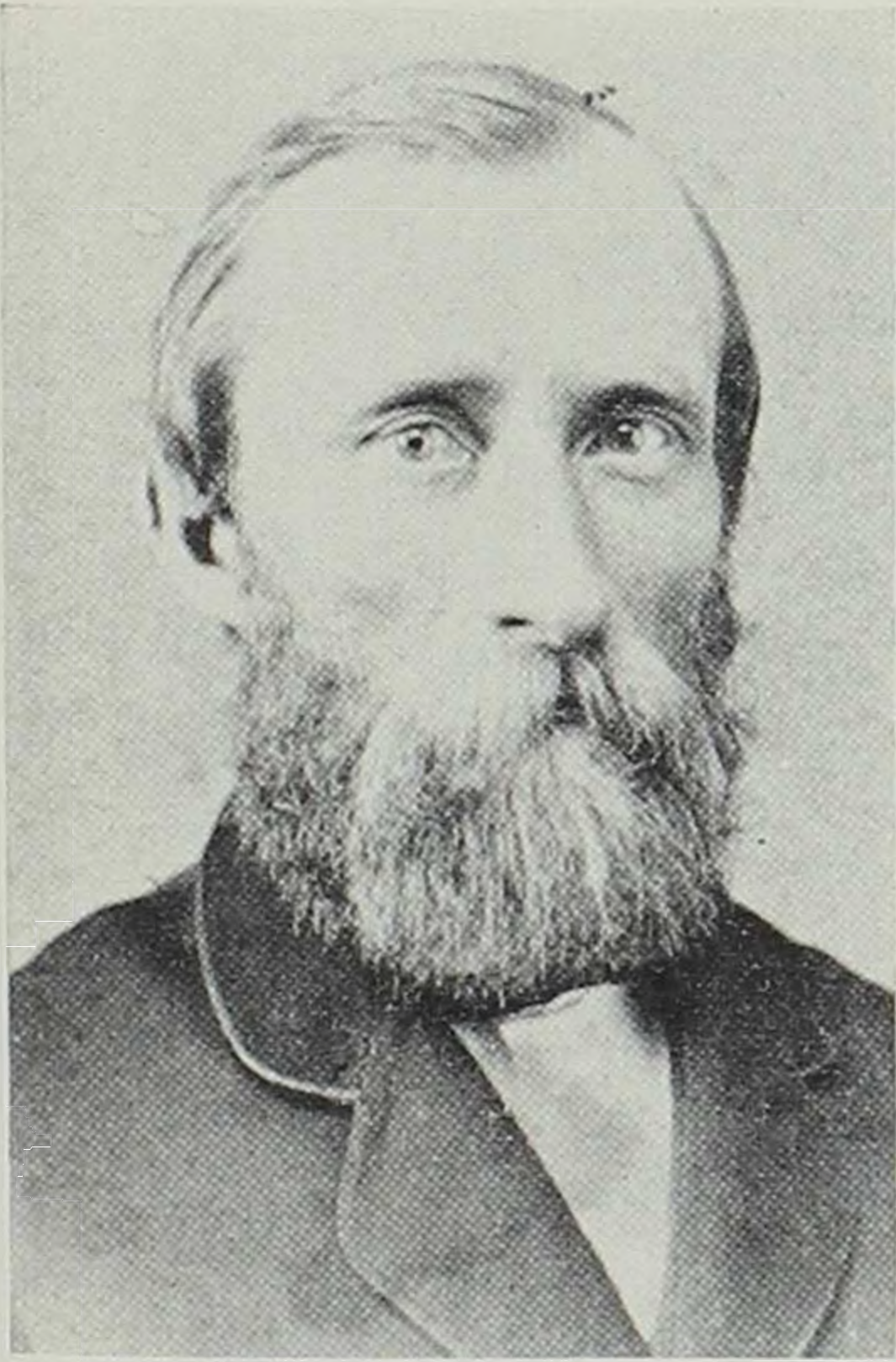
line, was one of the last parts of the county to be settled. Buffalo Center, its only town, was not platted until 1892. Founded on a branch of the Rock Island Railroad, the little settlement at first grew rapidly. It had a population of 350 when it was incorporated in January, 1894. By 1900 this figure had risen to 875, but fifty years later the town's population was only 1,087.

From the outset Buffalo Center showed a strong interest in its children's education. The first school was held in the upper floor of a private home, which also served temporarily as a Sunday School, church, and town hall. In February, 1894, a frame schoolhouse was opened, and two teachers were employed to instruct fifty pupils.

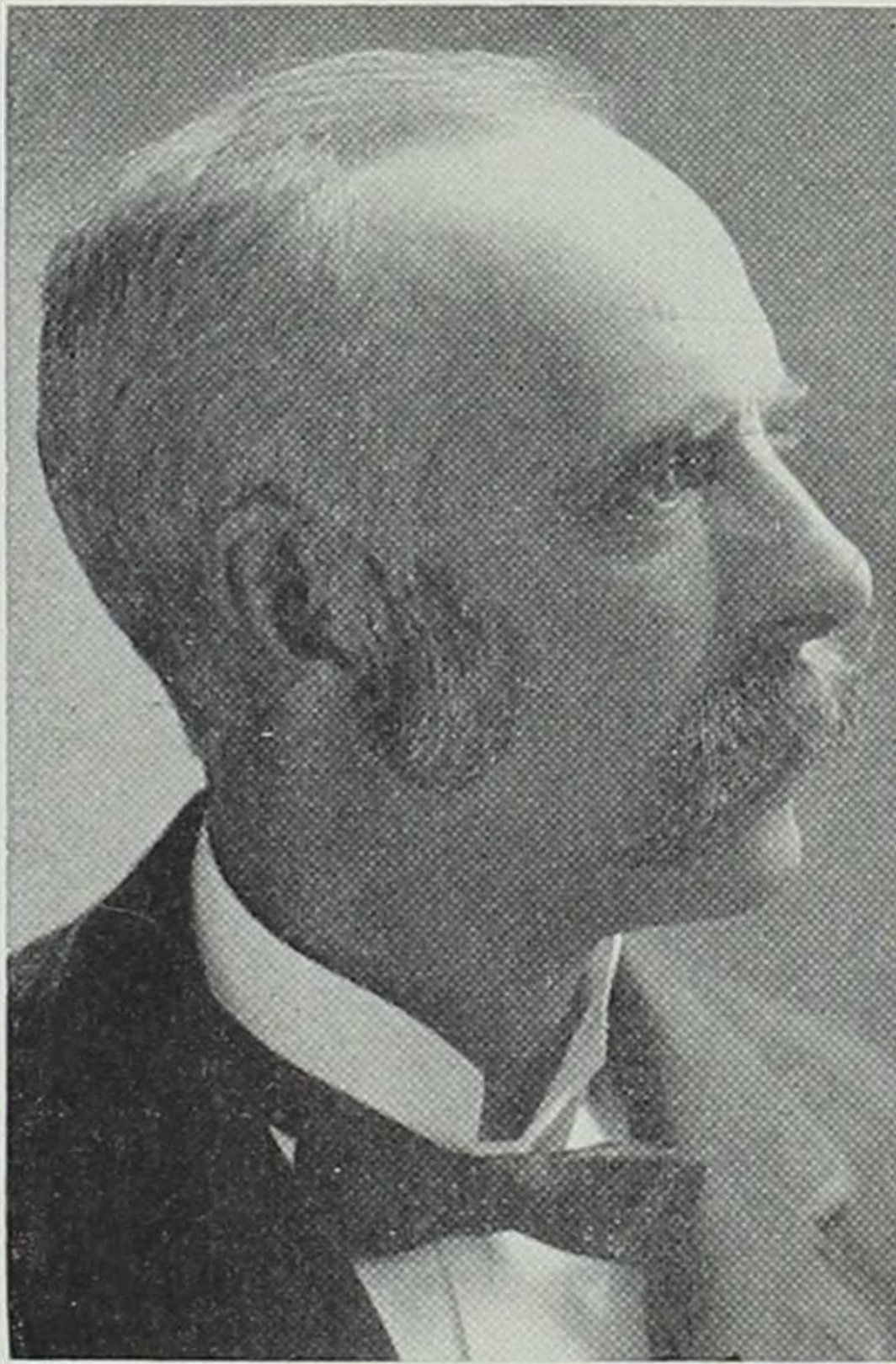
With the establishment of this school, townspeople and farmers in adjoining sections proposed the creation of an independent school district. Farmers in outlying parts of the township opposed such a step on the grounds that it would be detrimental to their interests. This led to a movement to convert the entire township into an independent school district. Brown Township in Linn County had set a precedent for such action in 1887.

Led by Henry Gardner, a Buffalo Center druggist, a petition was drawn up, signed by a majority of the township voters, asking the school board to hold a special election to decide the issue. Legally, this left the board with no choice but to do as asked. However, an independent district

SUPPORTERS OF CONSOLIDATED SCHOOLS



AMOS N. CURRIER



LESLIE M. SHAW

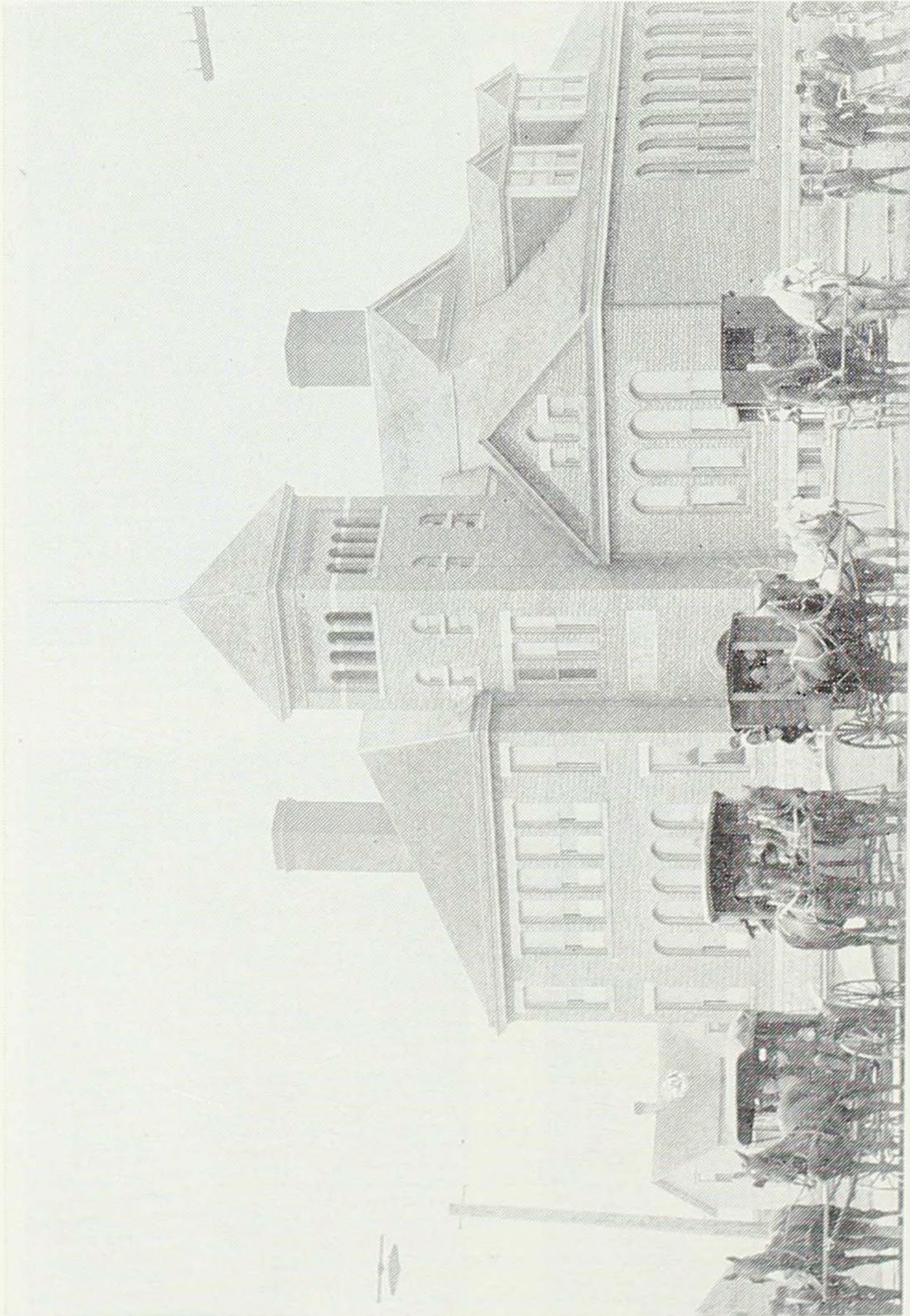


ALBERT M. DEYOE



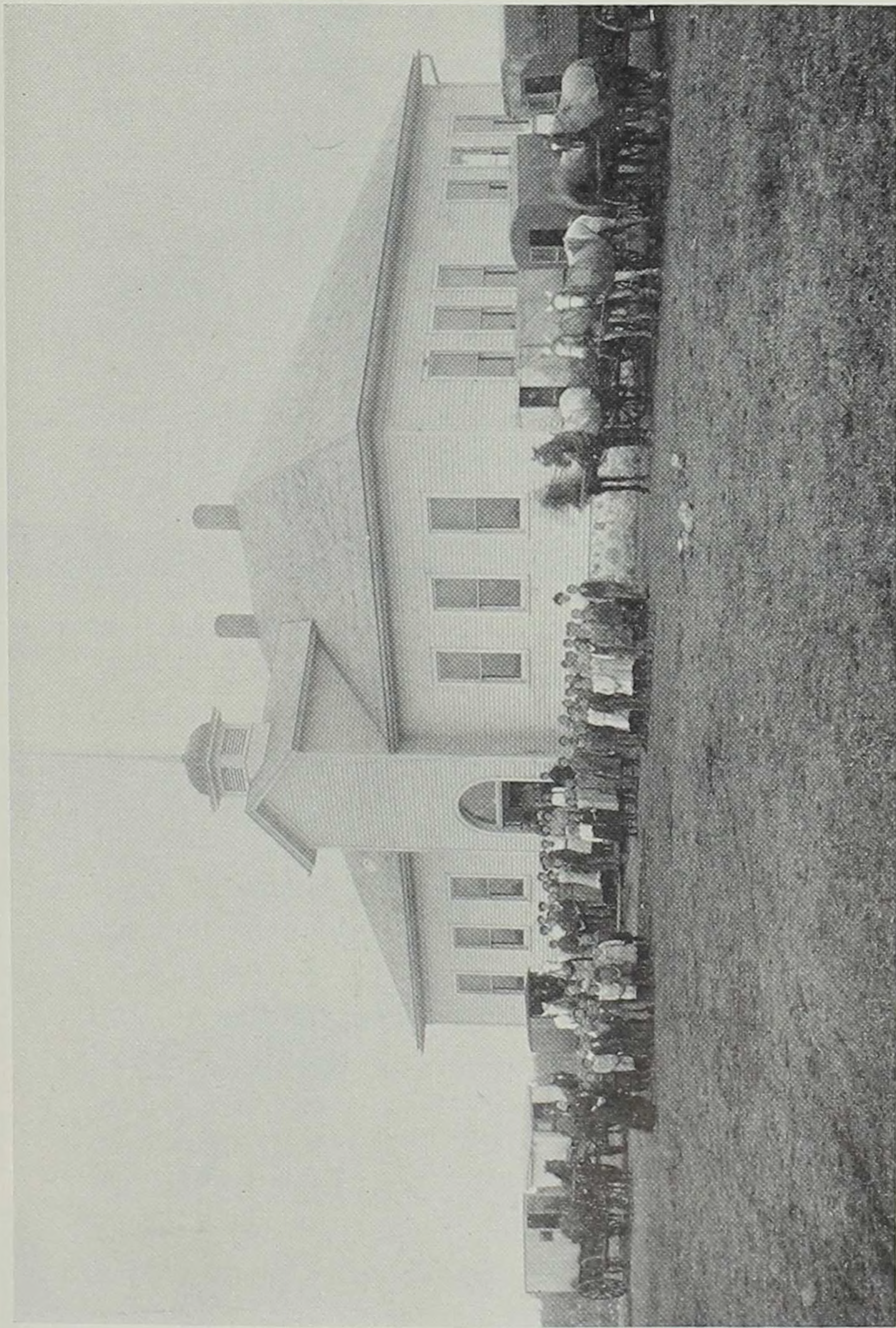
MACY CAMPBELL

IOWA'S FIRST CONSOLIDATED SCHOOL



Courtesy Supt. Irving Larson

This picture of the Buffalo Center Consolidated School was taken in the late 1890's, just after transportation of students was begun to that school. In January, 1956, sixty years after this first consolidated district was formed, Supt. Irving Larson reported 660 students were enrolled at the modern schoolhouse erected in 1923.



Courtesy Supt. Fred O. Wood

Students and faculty of the Lake Township Consolidated School pose for their picture in 1903, when the school was opened. Hacks used for transportation stand ready, with some of the horses evidently impatient to be off. In 1956 Supt. Fred O. Wood reported an enrollment of 220 with the school using five 48-passenger busses.

EARLY CONSOLIDATED SCHOOL BUILDINGS



Courtesy Supt. R. L. Kinkead

The original Terril Consolidated School building, erected in 1901 and replaced by a modern structure in 1915. Total enrollment of the school in 1955 was 326. Richard L. Kinkead was superintendent.



Courtesy Supt. W. A. Ortmeyer

Although the Armstrong Consolidated School District was not formed until 1915, students from a nearby rural school had been transported to this frame schoolhouse as early as 1905. It was replaced by a much larger brick building in 1917.

would mean a new board of directors, elected from the township at large instead of from each sub-district. As a result, four of the existing board members, who may have doubted their ability to win in a township-wide vote, opposed calling an election. Four others supported the petitioners, while the ninth member was absent.

As the board remained deadlocked, Henry Gardner obtained a writ of mandamus summoning the four recalcitrant board members to district court at Forest City to explain why they opposed the petitioners. The judge fined them each \$27 and ordered the election to be held. On December 13, 1895, the voters of Buffalo Township approved the creation of an independent school district. Henry Gardner became president of the new board, while the other directors included two Buffalo Center bankers, E. E. Secor and Oscar Ulland, and two farmers, A. A. Harris and E. R. Overbaugh, who was also a rural school teacher. The first superintendent was A. A. Sifert.

In 1896 a \$15,000 brick schoolhouse was erected in Buffalo Center after the necessary bond issue had been approved. At first it was the board's intention to maintain the rural schools as well as the town school, the rural children having the opportunity of securing advanced training at Buffalo Center should they desire it. But this arrangement proved unsatisfactory. Therefore, when the new Iowa Code of 1897 opened the way

for public transportation of students, Buffalo Center decided to close some of its rural schools and bring the pupils to the central school. On August 23, 1897, the patrons of old Subdistrict 3 asked the board to close their school and furnish transportation to Buffalo Center.

This date marks the beginning of consolidation in Iowa, for without the provision for public transportation the Buffalo Center school was scarcely different from those at Charles City or Monticello thirty years earlier. One week later the board agreed to close two more schools. By 1899 transportation had proved such a success that all rural schools were closed except two located in the extreme northeastern and southeastern corners of the township. Buffalo Center, its name notwithstanding, is actually two miles west of the center of Buffalo Township, and in the early years of transportation it was felt to be impracticable to bring in students from the district's more remote areas. The two remaining rural schools were under the control of the district's superintendent, who sought to make them superior to the average one-room school. Eventually the southeastern corner set itself up as the Kayser Independent District. The last rural school in the consolidated district was closed in 1921.

Persuading the parents to consent to the transportation of their children was not accomplished without much tact on the part of the board. In one

ward agreement was obtained after a promise that its country school would be reopened after four months if the residents did not like the new plan. A teacher, who had been popular in another district and whose father was an influential farmer there, was hired to teach in the central school. The farm families were then happy to have their children ride with her to school each day. In a third district nature took a hand when a cyclone blew away the schoolhouse.

In the first five years enrollment in the Buffalo Center school rose from 170 to 350, of whom 115 were transported by six horse-drawn hacks. The average daily attendance was 93 per cent of the total enrolled, as compared with only 76 per cent at the two outlying rural schools. Prior to consolidation educational costs in the township had been \$5.04 per month for each pupil, but by 1901 that amount was reduced to \$1.80 at the central school. The staff consisted of a principal and an assistant, five grade teachers, and a music instructor.

Superintendent C. J. Johnson listed among the advantages of the central school "the stimulating influences of large classes, giving a long time for recitations and individual work and placing of pupils in classes of equal ability." Classes were undeniably large, averaging 47 pupils to each teacher! Johnson reported that he had heard no one asking for a return to the old system, even though Buffalo Center was admittedly poorly lo-

cated from a transportation standpoint. In May and June, 1901, three farmers hired extra help in order that their boys might finish school. One of these youths was an honor student in his class.

Since its founding, Iowa's pioneer consolidated school has continued to develop. Only the traditional subjects were offered during the first year — reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar, rhetoric, literature, spelling, geography, and botany. Baseball and declamatory work were the only extracurricular activities. In 1911 an addition was constructed to take care of the increased enrollment. The same year the school was placed on the state's accredited list and courses in agriculture, domestic science, and manual training added. Normal training was introduced in the high school in 1913. Meanwhile, the extracurricular offerings had been expanded to include football, basketball, baseball, and track, glee clubs, band, dramatics, and debate.

On May 10, 1923, a new building, costing \$135,000, was dedicated. Nearly twice as large as the old structure, the new school boasted such features as a modern cafeteria, and, for better community service, an auditorium, stage, and gymnasium designed to be opened into one large hall on special occasions. With such facilities Iowa's first consolidated school remained an outstanding example of consolidation's benefits.

GEORGE S. MAY