Adams County Schools

Country Schools

"May we hope that the near future may develop an understanding and unity of thought, and purpose, that shall make everything pertaining to our schools of the highest order, physical, moral and mental."
(J.M. Higbee, County Superintendent of Schools, 1879)

In 1856, Sophronia Temple, who had just settled near Plainville, wrote that "we have a good district school within one mile of us." Her son Justin was a student that winter but, as she continued, "it is too snowy for [daughters] Nellie and Annie....They have a fine time in summer among the wildflowers. They bound over the bluffs like roebucks."

It was, of course, concern on the part of parents that their children do more than "bound over the bluffs" that led to the creation of the public school system. In Adams County, as elsewhere, it began at the most local of levels. When the population of children grew large enough, neighbors asked their town government to organize a school district. In some places, they didn't wait for the town, but started on their own..

The first school mentioned in early county histories was started by Thomas Rich in Plainville in 1850, but records are sparse. It is not clear where this "academy" was located, how long it lasted, how many scholars attended or whether or not it was a public school or a private venture of the three Rich families who lived in the village and probably had enough children to fill a school all by themselves.

A few years later, settlers in Jackson hired 15-year-old Amelia Seward, set her up in a twelve foot-square smokehouse donated by the Vroman family and told her to teach. Among her qualifications, Seward could list that she "was educated in the common schools of New York and Beaver Dam." She was also reported as being a "close" relative of New York Governor William Seward, who also served as Abraham Lincoln's secretary of state. Seward's wages were reported at $1.25 per week when school was in session, plus room and board in the homes of her students. Seward continued to teach until she married William Hyatt and took up farming in New Haven. It was pre-

Above: *A souvenir of the school year presented by teacher Zilpha Merriman to her students at Diamond School, Lincoln, in 1921.*

Teacher and students at the Diamond School, in the 1900s, when the county had over eighty country schools.

County school teachers at a training "Institute" at the county court house, 1902. A high school diploma certified a teacher to begin teaching in a rural school, but additional training at Institutes and at a Normal School was also required.

sumed in the 1850s and for many years after that a married woman 's first responsibilities were at home and, like Seward, she would stop teaching after her wedding day.

As settlement progressed in the county so did the establishment of schools. In 1855, the county board minutes record only one school on the east side of the Wisconsin--in Jackson. By 1867, seventeen schools appear in county records. Among them are: Jackson, East Easton, Prairie View, Strong's Prairie, Pilot Knob, Richfield; Diamond, Buckhorn, Stafford, Hadlock, Chester, Twin Valley, Springville; Friendship, White Creek and Tamarack. Most of these schools started as log buildings, some with dirt floors, and were later replaced by frame buildings on stone footings.

The length of the school year varied and usually started with a three month "winter" term. Additional spring and fall terms were added over the years and in 1885, the state mandated that school be held for at least six months of the year. The winter term, when children were needed less for farm chores, was the most heavily-attended. At planting and harvest time boys in particular were needed on the farm and fewer attended school. Many parents also felt that boys who were destined to be farmers didn't need much "book learnin'" anyway.

The first Friendship school, located in one room at what is now the north side of Lake Street at West was typical of the pioneer era. In 1858-59, teacher L.M. Higbee was employed there for seven months, with Mary Oliva Hanford assisting when attendance increased during the three winter months. Higbee received $31.50 per month for his efforts and Hanford $13. The discrepancy in pay between female and male teachers was common and lasted until well into the 20th Century. The presumption was that a male needed higher pay because he was or would be supporting a family, while a female was only working for herself until she married and left teaching. Mary Hanford, for example, left Friendship after one term to accept the marriage proposal of Andrew Jackson Turner of Portage. Their son, Frederick Jackson Turner, born in 1861, became the pre-eminent historian of the American west, renowned for his "frontier thesis."

A lower pay scale did not stop young women from teaching and, in fact, making up the large majority of the teaching corps. In 1881, for example, the county employed 72 teachers, fifty of them female, who were paid anywhere from one-third to two-thirds as much as their male colleagues. Needless to say, these young women were a good deal for the taxpayers. While it held down taxes, the presumption that teaching was only a temporary occupation for the large majority of teachers encouraged a great deal of turnover and inexperience in the class room. It also made

teacher training an important part of the county school program.

Attendance was not compulsory until the 1880s, when a state law decreed that all children between the ages of seven and fifteen attend school for at least twelve weeks. However, any person--regardless of race, gender or nationality--between the ages of four and twenty could attend and was counted on the census of potential students. In 1873, for example, the county had 2,607 eligible students, better than one-third of the total population.

In the 1850s and '60s, Ho-Chunk children attended local schools, even though they were supposed to be deported to reservations in the west. The story is told of one Ho-Chunk mother who sent her two boys to school in New Haven, but habitually peeked through the window to make sure they were still there. In the 1890s and 1900s, the children of the Maxcey family, African-Americans living in Dell Prairie, attended the Point Bluff School while the children of the Russian-Jewish immigrant Rosin family went to school at Olin.

Open to all, the country school was the place where the melting pot simmered and transformed a nation of immigrants into Americans. This process was less necessary in Adams County, which had the highest-percentage of native-born white Americans of any Wisconsin county throughout the 1800s, than in other parts of Wisconsin, but still important. It was at a country school, in classes usually conducted by a young woman often still in her teens, where the children of Strong's Prairie Norwegians, Big Flats Danes, New Haven Irish, Lincoln Bohemians and Quincy Germans learned the basics of English grammar, American history and citizenship.

In 1861, the state mandated the position of county superintendent to administer and improve the schools. "The motto is Advance," wrote Superintendent Jesse Higbee in his report to the county board for 1880. Higbee, who served for a decade, and other superintendents, counted the number of students in the county and compared it to the number actually attending--and recorded truancy rates. The Superintendent also reported on the construction and improvement of school buildings, organized summer "institute" training sessions for the education and certification of teachers, then tested teachers and judged their suitability for work. In the 1900s, most of this work was turned over to the Supervising Teachers, such as Maybelle Douglass, who also became the first female Superintendent in 1916. Her successors as Supervising Teacher were Freda Hoeft, Dora Dittburner and Katherine McGowan.

Above: *The original Tamarack School, Strongs Prairie.* ***Below:*** *the "improved" version, with students mugging for the camera.*

Arkdale School students and teacher, about 1910.

A superintendent could, in extreme cases, withhold state and county aid from local districts that failed, for example, to supply desks for the schools, install a "back house," or build a fence around the schoolyard to prevent the neighbor's hogs from sleeping beneath the classroom floorboards. In 1879, Jesse Higbee evaluated the country schools and told the county board that "nearly all are wanting in very essential particulars: proper lighting, good ventilation and comfortable seats. To the want of comfortable seats I attribute one half of the seeming lack of order in the school room, to say nothing about the much more troublesome effects--physical deformities and lasting diseases." Each local district was authorized to spend up to $75 per year on improvements to their schools, a goal few school boards met.

Superintendents often had to balance between contending interests, as in 1884, when E.C. Morse reported that his efforts to encourage teachers to take training courses to qualify for higher certificates clashed with the reluctance of local school boards to increase the pay of better-qualified teachers. They had to be advocates, too. When the state enacted a school library law empowering towns to divert a small portion of state aids to buy books for school libraries in 1888, Morse reported that he had "respectfully asked [town boards] for their assistance and co-operation. " By 1892, Superintendent George Reynolds enthused that "No money expended for school purposes in the state during the year has done more good..." than that spent on school libraries. In 1893, he recorded that eleven towns had spent $199.55 to purchase 233 books and in '94 stated that "it is hard to understand why some towns are so slow to see the benefit of the library system."

When John P. Lewis began his first term as superintendent in 1897, he set the goal of seeing a dictionary, globe, United States flag, state flag and a "world flag" in all of the country schools and persuading local districts to provide them. He served his last term in 1911 but did not reveal if he had met his goal. Either way, it illustrates the state of the schools when, by 1897, many years after the pioneering era had ended, some county schools did not have a dictionary or a globe.

From the late 1860s until the mid-1890s the county had approximately seventy schools. As more settlers arrived in the 1890s, the number of schools rose past the eighty mark. They were all one-room schools, with students from first to eighth grade, except in Friendship, which had two divisions. Class size varied across the county. In 1891, Colburn had 86 students and Richfield had 106 students with four schools in each town. Of the most populous towns, New Haven had 283 students in four schools and Strong's Prairie had 324 in six schools. In addition to children of "school-age," enrollment lists also included a few children younger than four years of age in need of day care and a few older than twenty who were

usually immigrants learning English or native born adults overcoming illiteracy.

Country schools were more than institutions of learning. From their earliest days, they were community centers and centers of their communities. Religious congregations met at schools until they built churches of their own. Political meetings and elections, club and lodge gatherings, entertainments and shows, took place at country schools. More importantly, country schools defined communities. Adults and children identified themselves as hailing from Flintville, Gales Corners, Van Driessen, Coonville, or Spring Bluff, because of the school. In the 1910s, when young men in the northern part of Quincy fielded a baseball team they identified themselves as the Hadlocks, after the school located on what is now Highway Z and Dover Drive.

The country school was also important because until well into the 20th Century, it was the last school the majority of rural students would attend. Until the country schools were consolidated into larger districts providing bus service, many rural students could not get to high school. In many cases, the belief that farm people did not need to go beyond grade school persisted. Likewise, until the 1950s people who had not completed high school still had a good chance of finding and keeping a job paying a living wage. Since so many students would not attend high school, the country schools took part in county-wide eighth-grade graduation ceremonies. Held at first on the court house lawn, then moving to the fairgrounds, these ceremonies continued until the country schools were closed.

The country school era peaked in the 1910s. Then a combination of factors--declining rural populations, better means of transporation, and starting in the 1940s, state policy mandating consolidation--brought about the demise of the one-room school. From a peak of eighty-four schools in 1920, the number of country schools declined to sixty-four in 1940. By 1948, there were only twenty one or two-room schools left in the county, plus five state graded schools and one city school system. In 1952, schools in the southern part of the county joined the Wisconsin Dells district, with schools in the eastern part of the county joining Westfield and Tri-County districts, while the northwestern towns merged with Nekoosa.

While the one-room schools were gone, the rural school did not disappear. Multi-graded schools were built at Pineland in Big Flats, Roche-A-Cri in Strongs Prairie, Castle Rock in Quincy, Lincoln in Lincoln, De George in Richfield, and Big Spring in New Haven. They continue the tradition of the county school inaugurated by young Amelia Seward in the Vroman smokehouse in 1853.

The up-to-date Sweet School, Strong's Prairie, 1905. The teacher is Lotty Bloss.

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