

THE RURAL INTELLECTUALS: KANSAS COUNTRY SCHOOLS

by
Roy Bird

American Education Week traditionally arrives during the third week of November (November 19-25, 1989).¹ While this is generally a cue for teachers and administrators to press for improved education of our young people, it might also be a time for some of us to reflect back to the little schoolhouses with one or two rooms that were the main source of learning in the early rural Kansas school districts. The Kansas country schools are representative of the broad liberal arts and the educational experiences of pioneers in all Great Plains states.

"The one-room schoolhouse is too much a part of America to be forgotten, and it lives on in the words of those who learned there as children and grew up to mold the nation. The little red schoolhouse did its job well."²

Eric Sloane ended his book, *The Little Red School House*, with those words, and most Americans cannot help but share his feelings. Perhaps we reserve a tender spot in our hearts for the one-room schools because they remind us of simpler days, days before education was a big business, before it became a massive political and social bureaucracy.

The image of George Washington rowing to school on the Potomac River; a young Samuel Clemens and his school teacher as depicted in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; pioneer children riding to class on horseback or on mules; these scenes seem to be etched in the nation's image of itself.

The development of rural education in any particular part of Kansas can be used as a microcosm of its development across the state. Among the best

documented of pioneer schools and scholars are those in small towns and townships surrounding Topeka, the state capital. In many ways country schools in Shawnee County, in which Topeka is located, were the same as those in other parts of the state while in less important aspects they were slightly different.

Pioneer Shawnee County schools and instructors were widely scattered, and invariably the first classrooms were in the cabins of one of the scholars' parents. In *Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier*, Joanna L. Stratton observed that early settlers in all parts of Kansas "recognized that education was vital to the advancement of their families."³ Those settlers in the capital's county were no exception and numerous letters to newspaper editors recognized the importance of education. In the early days Shawnee Countians set an example for the state by making it a common practice for settlers to pool their funds, erect a building, and hire a teacher.

Elizabeth Eddy, a Shawnee County educator known throughout Kansas, once wrote: "We will not forget the little Red School house of other days when Kansas was struggling for her place in the union."⁴ Few if any, of local rural school buildings in Kansas were red, and, indeed, schools in early Kansas history were seldom even wooden. A *Kansas Daily Commonwealth* reporter, a native of New York state, made note of one of the rural schools in Monmouth Township in southwest Shawnee County in 1869: "Here they have a log schoolhouse, which forcibly reminded us of a (to us) well known, similar institution, nestled far away amid the hills

and maple groves of the old Empire State.⁵ Even that early, the schoolhouse was fondly recalled.

Although building materials were scarce, schools of log began to appear all over the eastern part of Kansas as the use of private homes in the state's educational scheme became undesirable and the size of the classes increased. A few of the early schools were of frame construction although brick was used in some areas where this building material was being made available. But in eastern Kansas, native limestone became the major building material. By the 1870s stone structures, which would be built with little expense from easily available material, took the place of temporary log schoolhouses in existing districts or became the original buildings in newly created districts. Pleasant Hill School in the southwestern Shawnee County community of Auburn seemed to have been typical of rural schools of eastern Kansas. "This District," reported the *Commonwealth*, "has built one of the best school houses in Kansas. It is of stone, 22 x 34, with patent seats, and all the appointments of a first class modern school house."⁶ The interior was described in the same paper, portraying a structure that had been "lately completed and is a model of neatness, and convenience. It has white ceilings and a black blackboard, (in some of our school houses it is *viceversa*), a Webster's dictionary, outline maps, globes, mathematical blocks, etc."⁷

The stone school buildings were duplicated in central Kansas as noted by Graec Muijenberg and Ada Swinford in *Land of the Post Rock*. In a study of five central Kansas counties the authors found that in 1875 from 25-100 percent of the schoolhouses were of stone. These early educational facilities gradually became a minority.

By 1880 the shift was clearly toward lumber. A reasonable explanation of that trend might be that at first stone, which was available where lumber was scarce, could be used to erect a schoolhouse at almost no cost, provided the settlers contributed the labor. They seemed willing to do that before their children became deeply involved proving up their homesteads, and most wanted their children to have access to schools as soon as possible. Later, there were more settlers to share the cost of building materials; at the same time railroad towns with lumber yards were within hauling distance. Because it was faster to erect frame than stone buildings, settlers were willing to contribute toward the purchase of lumber. Even so, if we interpret our reading of historical accounts correctly, many of those frame structures were considered to be temporary.⁸

On the high plains, where building materials were not only scarce but totally nonexistent, sod schoolhouses cropped up among the short buffalo grasses. They were almost the only things to break the monotony of the never-ending sea of grass that blended with the horizon. Just as the homes and farm buildings of sod that dotted the treeless high plains-- and as with the stone educational structures of central Kansas-- all of the sod schoolhouses were considered to be temporary until a more substantial edifice could be erected.

The cost of constructing a new rural school is exemplified by the following article about the school at Berryton in southeastern Shawnee County in 1872: "Nine bids for building a new schoolhouse

in the 39th district were opened yesterday by the board of education. They ranged from \$1,814 to \$2,250. No award was made from a lack of funds. It was decided to either reduce the bids or the size of the house, and here the matter rested."⁹

Charles Hall--Manhattan, Kansas, architect--wrote this description of school attendance:

It has been said that in those early years the prairie grass grew so tall that fathers feared the little children might become lost, and so a furrow was plowed across the prairie to the town for children to follow back and forth to school. The children's playground around the school had no limit, for there were no fences or houses in the area around the school, no busy streets and no cars to watch out for. Some of the land near the schools had buffalo wallows and when the spring rains filled them with water, wading was lots of fun. At recess they could roam the prairie, picking wild flowers playing games. On cold winter days the children loved to skate on the frozen waters of the creek if one were nearby.¹⁰

Shawnee County was one of the counties organized during the territorial period of Kansas history. Only 34 of the eventual 105 counties were organized before statehood. Of these, the westernmost were Saline and Cloud counties and the southernmost were Butler, Woodson, Allen and Bourbon. The pattern of county organization was closely followed by the development of rural school districts, and thus country schools appeared across Kansas in layers that

extended decade by decade further west and south. By 1870, country schools could be found as far west as Hays and as far south as Cherokee County around Columbus. By 1880, the educational frontier followed the county pattern in a broad arc stretching from Oberlin in Deatur County to Sedan in Chautauqua County. It was not until about 1890--when the last counties in Kansas were being organized--that rural schools could be found throughout the state.¹¹

Regardless of what part of the state was being settled or in what sort of building classes were held, public education was of genuine concern among Kansas pioneers. Education has always been an important factor in the history of the state. In the mid-19th century a discussion mushroomed in newspapers of the eastern part of Kansas concerning the first school master in Kansas after its organization as a territory. At that time a Topekan, J. B. McAfee, claimed to have opened the Leavenworth Collegiate Institute on May 4, 1855. The first country school of record opened its doors in Douglas County in February, 1855, three miles north of Lawrence. The earliest rural school in Shawnee County was probably in Tecumseh, a proslave town and early rival with Topeka for county seat. It was founded a short time before the future capital city, and probably was in a log house with one of the handful of scholars' mothers serving as schoolmarm.

The state's sentiment towards education was depicted by a letter describing a visit to the school of Shawnee County District 36 on the eastern edge of Topeka Township. The school was still far enough from the city limits to be considered a country school. "Its patrons are wide-awake, active men, who believe that district schools may and should become the most successful educational institutions in the State." In this notice of the visit made by a reporter to the *Topeka*

Daily Capital in 1870, District 36 was called "one of the most advanced schools of the county."¹² It could have been used as a sample for the rest of the state, because during the 19th century rural school districts were the most common form of public education in Kansas.

Settled areas of the state improved existing schools, while new settlers saw the need for educating their children. Those passing through the settled parts of eastern Kansas on their way to the frontier could witness the success of the rural educational system in places such as Shawnee County. As soon as people began settling another portion of the state homes, churches and schools were among the first structures erected. The mushrooming effect of this pattern of development spread westward with the progress of settlement. When a region became populated, one of the first requirements for the pioneers was a school. Silver Lake in northwest Shawnee County offers an example of the educational urge reached by the summer of 1870:

In the township of Silver Lake alone, where, less than five years ago, a single furrow had not been turned, seven schools, costing in the aggregate about \$13,000, have been erected within the year. At the *village* of Silver Lake the school now numbers seventy pupils, and is one of the most successful and best conducted in the county.¹³

Even with all this active interest in public education, many parents needed their children at home to help with farm work or household duties. It was not an uncommon opinion that farmers could be wealthy in children as well as in crops and livestock, and they could be especially fortunate to have many sons to help with

the chores and labor-intensive agricultural methods of the 19th century. A letter to the *Kansas Daily Commonwealth* in 1872 demonstrates the concern that rural educators expressed regarding this neglect:

We feel a deep interest in those placed under our care, and labor earnestly to promote their best interest and happiness. Teachers can accomplish very little in comparison with what could be done provided they procure the cooperation and assistance of the parents. Could parents realize how much their children lose by such absence or tardiness and the trouble it gives both the school and teacher, we think there would not be as many who "have to stay at home and nurse the baby while Ma washes," or "to chop wood," or to "go on errands," or to be absent from school a week to have a boot or shoe patched.¹⁴

On the other side of the argument, another letter to the paper demonstrates the manner of instruction advocated by some:

Every elector should read his county paper or papers and every school officer, every teacher, every parent, and every young man or woman who expect to act a successful part in the great drama of life.

In fact I shall rejoice when the worthy county paper shall supplant the *Fifth* and *Sixth* Readers in our public schools. Then our young men and women will know less of "Greece and Rome," perhaps, but vastly more of "what we do and say at home."¹⁵

That interest in the practical side of education was carried a step further in farming areas at the end of the 19th century. By then the industrial age had caught up to agriculture in Kansas. Farmers wanted to learn modern technological methods of production and marketing. The surest medium for this learning was a good general education. Naturally, the Land Grant College in Manhattan assumed a leading role in the rapidly unfolding drama of agricultural instruction. The vast majority of scholars who enrolled in the agricultural courses were the products of rural schools.¹⁶

While the exteriors of Shawnee County schoolhouses were usually either of stone or frame construction, the interiors were remarkably similar. One student--David Zirkle, who grew up in Monmouth Township in the southeastern part of the county--wrote of his own days in his own school as he fondly remembered them years later. But the atmosphere of the interior was not especially conducive to learning:

The big coal-burning stove took up a lot of room. This stove was alternately too hot or too cold. At recess and noon we played hard doing lots of running. When the bell rang calling us in, we took our seats and the fire in the stove got low, of course, we cooled off quickly. The result was that most of us had colds most of the time, and as handkerchiefs were a luxury, coat sleeves and shirt sleeves served as a substitute.¹⁷

The interiors of many of the permanent rural schoolhouses found anywhere in the state had stoves. They also had blackboards at the front of the one room, perhaps a piano, always the teachers' desks, rows of seats for students, coat

rooms at the rear, usually a hand-rung bell somewhere in the building and often portraits of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln on their walls.

A typical day at a country school opened with reading of the Scriptures, beginning with the teacher who was followed by all the students who could read. The teacher then rang the bell and the classes recited in order: first a primary class with the alphabet, printing, and reading letters as they wrote them; then came a class in primary reading; following that came a class using scholars and the second reader. At last upper level students copied definitions of uncommon words from the dictionary. During the arithmetic session, the young children learned addition by counting kernels of corn while the older class members did multiplication problems. Those in the spelling class spelled off their lesson as they had previously written it on their slates, then again as the teacher pronounced it, followed by the class in concert. Thus, reading, writing, and arithmetic were learned as each term in the manual school passed. Such scholarly scenes daily occurred not only in Shawnee County schools but also in thousands of one-room schools all over the state.

Kansas took stock of her educational resources in 1874. Rural school districts had grown in numbers since statehood in 1861 from 214 to 4,181. The school population had mushroomed from 4,900 students to nearly 200,000. This was a rapid yearly increase with "no year being marked by a falling off or a cessation of growth, showing that the people of Kansas were not to be diverted by any vicissitude from the upbuilding of the common and public school," as early state historian Noble Prentiss wrote about the turn of the century.¹⁸ District schools dominated rural learning in Kansas until consolidation began nearly a century after statehood.

The school was not only the site for

local education, it was also the source of nearly all social activity of many Kansas communities. Spelling bees were popular, as were local lyceums. The lyceums consisted of questions placed before the audience followed by a debate and a resolution being derived from the discussion. The rural school building itself was the meeting place for many different organizations. Political party gatherings met in the schoolhouses in farming localities. Many church services and revivals were held in the schoolhouses. The list of uses for the structures throughout the state's history is long and varied.

Surely the biggest event for the scholars in the country schools of Shawnee County was the end-of-school picnics. Most often the teacher requested the parents in the district to arrange something nice for the school on the last day of class. As a result a dinner accompanied by speech-making ensued and a pleasant party assembled in an equally pleasant grove "with a most delicious repast, which did credit to the heart as well as the culinary abilities of the ladies of the district. This was followed by literary exercises by the pupils and speeches by prominent citizens." It was at this time that the teacher was awarded the position for another year if he or she was to get the appointment.¹⁹

By contrast, other than normal holidays such as Christmas, one festive day in all rural schools was always Kansas Day. In most Kansas schools, elaborate programs were prepared, essays were read on various aspects of Kansas history and Kansas poems were recited. "On these festive occasions," wrote Noble Prentiss, "the walls are decorated with the national colors, the motto of the State in evergreen letters, and everywhere the sunflower."²⁰

In the 1890s, a report by Commissioner Harris of the Bureau of

Education in Washington, DC, showed that Kansas had more of her school-aged rural population enrolled than any other state--87.66 percent.²¹ Unfortunately, the poll did not show that rural schools were in sorry shape. Incompetent teachers used outmoded methods of instruction. Salaries failed to attract superior teachers. Scholars lost interest and dropped out of school at early ages. Farmers began to realize that education was even more important as more new technologies for agriculture were introduced, and they concluded that the most important crop that they could raise was enlightened children. Fred L. Parrish once wrote "if youth could receive a scientific education, perhaps they would be more content to seek a future on the farm, and follow agriculture as a way of life."²²

From the turn of the century until the 1930s the certification requirements of teachers were raised, modernization of buildings and grounds took place and school facilities were upgraded. The Russell Sage Foundation graded Kansas rural schools as 24th in the nation during the 1930s.²³ It was only with difficulty that rural communities shook off the "education-for-the pioneer" complex that Parrish said they had, and it was equally difficult to achieve the willingness to spend enough money for the modern rural school.²⁴

But already the small country school was becoming a thing of the past. After World War II the interest in consolidation of country schools increased and the number of schools declined. They were closed one after another throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s. The last one-room schoolhouse with a single teacher in Shawnee County closed in 1951. By the end of the decade very few, if any, single-room and single-teacher schools could be found anywhere in Kansas.

A comparison and contrast of country schools in Shawnee County to those in other parts of the state reveal little difference. Only in minor details, such as

the time that they were built or the material with which they were constructed, is the difference noticeable. The recognition of the importance of education, the cooperation of rural communities to provide that education, the way that pioneer schools developed through the district system, the common concern among teachers for attendance and curriculum and the common concern among parents for help at home and practical education, even the typical descriptions of the country schools are threads that were woven into all parts of Kansas. An examination of country schools in Shawnee County, then, can be used to

illustrate the development of all Kansas country schools.

Despite the movement in education to the modern techniques, theories and facilities, rural unified school districts today still adhere to the ideals of the "little Red School house" as expressed by Shawnee County educator Elizabeth Eddy: "While the practical side of education is of vast importance we want the children to go forth from the school, as nearly as possible a perfect man or a perfect woman, standing always for what is high, noble and true. No less than this should be the high aim of our cooperative efforts."²⁵

END NOTES

1. Information Services, Kansas State Department of Education, telephone interview, January 5, 1989.
2. Eric Sloane. *The Little Red School House*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972), 46.
3. Joanna Stratton. *Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981), 170.
4. Elizabeth Eddy, ms., Box 120, Manuscripts Division, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, KS.
5. *Kansas Daily Commonwealth*, September 21, 1869.
6. *Kansas Daily Commonwealth*, January 4, 1871.
7. *Kansas Daily Commonwealth*, May 7, 1871.
8. Grace Mulenberg and Ada Swinford. *Land of the Post Rock*. (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1975), 64-65.
9. *Kansas Daily Commonwealth*, March 10, 1872.
10. Charles Hall, quoted from memo to Kansas Rural Electric Cooperative members, n.d.
11. Homer E. Socolosky and Huber Self. *Historical Atlas of Kansas*. 2nd ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 38-41.
12. *Topeka Daily Capital*, February 27, 1870.
13. *Kansas Daily Commonwealth*, June 4, 1870.
14. *Kansas Daily Commonwealth*, March 8, 1872.
15. Roy D. Bird and Douglass W. Wallace. *Witness of the Times: A History of Shawnee County*. (Topeka: Shawnee County Historical Society, 1976), 172.
16. George E. Ham and Robin Higham (eds). *The Rise of the Wheat State: A History of Kansas Agriculture, 1861-1986*. (Manhattan: Sunflower University Press, 1987), 178-179.
17. David Zirkle. *Yesteryears and Yesterdays*. (Topeka: n.p., 1956), 70.
18. Noble L. Prentis. *A History of Kansas*. (Topeka: n.p., 1899) 148.
19. *Kansas Daily Commonwealth*, July 18, 1872.
20. Prentis, 166-167.
21. *Ibid.*, 238-239.
22. Fred L. Parrish, quoted in Bird and Wallace, *Witness of the Times*, 175.

20. Prentis, 166-167.
21. *Ibid.*, 238-239.
22. Fred L. Parrish, quoted in Bird and Wallace, *Witness of the Times*, 175.
23. Russell Sage Foundation. *The Topeka Improvement Survey*. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1924), n.p.
24. Parrish, quoted in Bird and Wallace, *Witness of the Times*, 175. 25. Elizabeth Eddy, ms., Box 120, Manuscripts Division, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, KS.