

AN INTRODUCTION TO "EDUCATION IN KANSAS"

by

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Education--a topic of great interest to the American public today--is the focus of this issue of *Heritage of the Great Plains*. There is a growing belief that our schools no longer meet our needs, and if steps are not taken to correct their many failings, America will become a second-rate power by the 21st century.

This issue looks to the past rather than the present for answers. It examines two of America's most successful educational experiments--the normal school and the one-room school. At the turn of the century, these institutions produced industrious and skilled workers for the farm and factory, and their labors enabled America to assume its dominant position.

Can we learn from the past? Specifically, can successful teaching methods of the past be applied to an America that no longer relies solely on manufacturing and food production, but instead is becoming dependent for its subsistence on service industries and the manufacture of information and knowledge? I will leave it to the reader to decide.

Charles Webb's essay on the Kansas State Normal School in Emporia reveals its place as the "cultural and social center" of small-town life. Prominent artists, musicians, politicians, and educators from across the nation visited and revisited "the Athens of America," and brought their talents and ideas to the "educated" public. We can only wonder at the impact of the New York Symphony or a fiery speech by William Jennings Bryant on teachers; on those about to march into the countryside and enlighten the less privileged.

Shawnee County was one of the earliest counties settled in Kansas. As Roy Bird points out in his essay, it did not take long for schools to sprout up across the county, ready to educate the state's residents. Bird disproves the myth that most early schoolhouses were either red or made of stone or sod. His essay also reminds us that Shawnee County, in the first half of this century, was no different than other counties in the state in its desire for schools, nor was it different in the type of learning that occurred there.

By the late 1930s and mid-1940s, the lack of students, the state's push to consolidate districts, and the belief that students were not receiving a "proper" education, resulted in most one-room schools being closed. For those who attended them, though, fond memories linger. Dave Schroeder's essay permits us a glimpse at daily happenings of a one-room school in Reno County. It is obvious that the school--next to the church--was the center of the community's activity.

Was the one-room school effective or not? Was it really possible for one teacher--often only a few years older than some of the students--to educate a group of twenty to thirty children in eight grades? That question will probably never be answered to anyone's satisfaction. Joanne McBane's essay gives us numerous reasons to believe that much learning, both scholarly and social, did occur in that one room. Certainly we can name many creative and intelligent people who began their educations in one-room schools.

Today the one-room school has been all but forgotten. Only a few remain, relics of an earlier era. Should we look to them for solutions to modern problems? Or should they be discarded and forgotten, victims of a long-standing American malady, first mentioned by the French writer Alexis de Tocqueville in the 1830s? Tocqueville concluded that Americans were a restless people who were virtually indifferent to the past. Does American education today somehow reflect our national obsession with progress?