

LAKESIDE SCHOOL (1876-1942): A ONE-TEACHER SCHOOL DISTRICT IN KANSAS

by
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April 24, 1942, was the last day of school. Summer vacation would begin the following day. The seven students at Lakeside School were excited, but their enthusiasm was tempered by a mixture of

be as kind as Miss Duerksen?¹ The day ended and the building quieted. Miss Duerksen dumped the leftover drinking water from the crock fountain, swept the classroom one last time, and gathering her things, quietly walked out the front door, closing it behind her. With the closing of the door, seventy years of education at Lakeside School died with barely a whimper. The school, like so many others, was said to have fallen victim to declining enrollments and the rising costs of education.



Lakeside School. Courtesy of Marie Loet

anticipation and anxiety. This was the last day of the 1941-42 school year and the last day for school at Lakeside School. In the fall of 1942, Lakeside School would be permanently closed and its students would attend nearby Buhler's school. Town school offered the adventure of bus rides, larger, self-contained classes, and new playmates. But there were also nagging fears. What would it be like in a classroom with only one grade level? Would the teachers

Lakeside School, in northeastern Reno County, was typical of many one-teacher school districts in Kansas prior to state reorganization and consolidation. Schools existed in Kansas in one form or another from the time the first pioneers settled the prairie. The first schools frequently were little more than a mother giving her children a basic education in her spare time. In 1861, the first legislature convened after statehood called for the county superintendents of education "to divide the county into a convenient number of school districts."² This encouraged the formation of numerous small school districts. Schools, no matter how small, though, were a status symbol, and in Kansas as elsewhere, they grew rapidly. In 1859 there were 222 school districts in Kansas; by 1896 they reached their peak of 9,284 districts.³ Many schools founded in this manner proved to be substandard and were of special concern to State Superintendent Isaac T. Goodnow. In 1863 he wrote that it was "far better for

a scholar to walk three or four miles to a first-rate school, than forty rods to a poor one."⁴

One-teacher school districts varied dramatically from location to location. Buildings might be constructed of logs, sod, stone, bricks, or lumber.⁵ The average one-teacher school had 18 to 35 students on its rolls, although some had as many as 70 pupils.⁶ Any student between the ages of 6 and 21 years of age could attend an elementary school in Kansas, but the attendance of many older students was sporadic, due to work obligations on the farm.

The legislature's first serious attempt at consolidation of the state's school districts was in 1901. The plan called for combining several one-teacher school districts to form larger graded schools. Although western Kansas had some success with this plan, the legislature tabled it a few years later, due to a lack of interest in most other parts of Kansas.⁷

Declining enrollment proved to be a more serious threat to the one-teacher school district in Kansas. By the 1930s, the population in Kansas took a decided urban turn, and one-teacher school districts lost most of their students. During the early 1930s, 250 schools closed each year, and by 1939, 1,000 school districts were no longer in operation.⁸ During the 1930s, the state legislature once again began to promote the consolidation of school districts.

In 1942-43, the legislature conducted a comprehensive survey of public schools in Kansas, and found that there were 5,445 functional school districts in the state, with an average attendance of twelve students per school district. Further, it discovered that more than one-half of the schools surveyed had fewer than nine students, and several had only one or two pupils.⁹

The School District Reorganization Law was passed by the state legislature in

1945. It instructed county commissioners to appoint five-member reorganization committees in each county, and during the first two years, they eliminated 2,674 school districts.¹⁰ There was considerable opposition to the plan. At first many citizens complained, and when that failed to stop reorganization, the Rural School Association hired an attorney to lobby its views in Topeka. The protest reached its peak in 1947 when 1,000 farmers marched to Topeka to personally lobby their legislators. The legislature bowed to public pressure and on June 26, 1947 gave local communities the right to accept or reject proposed reorganization.¹¹ The Kansas Supreme Court, however, declared the law unconstitutional because it had given the county committees too much unspecified power.¹²

Although the legislature lost its outright bid to reorganize the state's elementary school system, it enacted a variety of laws which encouraged consolidation, and in 1951, the decision was made to disband all school districts which had not maintained a school in the previous three consecutive years.¹³ Under constant legislative pressure, consolidation was inevitable.

The Life and Death of Lakeside School

Reno County opened its first schools in 1873 when 28 schools were organized. Lakeside School was unofficially organized January 3, 1876, when the community raised \$270 to build a school building.¹⁴ Eli Payne, County Superintendent, officially recognized Lakeside School August 26, 1885.¹⁵ The school had two rooms--a large class-room approximately 35 feet long by 20 feet wide, and a small entryway/cloakroom. A small closet in one corner of the large room housed the school library, and a large coal stove in a back corner provided heat.¹⁶ Chairs were arranged in six rows, with six desks in each row, and the teacher's desk

was on a slightly raised platform at the front of the room. The building was painted white with green trim, and behind it was a tool shed in which coal was stored. Two outhouses were located to the south of the school, one for boys, the other for girls.¹⁷

The teacher's job at Lakeside School consisted of many tasks, instruction being only one of them. Teachers were expected to fill out state attendance reports and handle all disciplinary problems, and at the end of the school day, the teacher had to sweep the room, clean the chalkboards, and do any necessary dusting and minor repairs. They were responsible for keeping the stove supplied with coal, and an adequate supply of drinking water always on hand.¹⁸ In addition, the teacher was expected to teach all subjects to students from 5 to 21 years of age, from those highly motivated to the lazy, timid or hostile. For their efforts, teachers in the 1880s received \$85 per month.

One-teacher school districts had no student transportation system, and Lakeside School was no exception. When the weather was cooperative, students living a mile or less from school usually walked to school. During snowy winter weather, though, some families brought their children to school on a sleigh, and on one occasion when several inches of frozen rain fell--covering the ground with a sheet of ice for six weeks--several of the older boys skated to school cross-country on the ice.¹⁹ Students living further from school were usually brought to school by horse and buggy by a parent or grandparent. Even this simple mode of transportation could be hazardous. C. C. Epp took his grandchildren Rich and Lillian to school every morning in the family buggy. One spring day as they approached the Little Arkansas River, the bridge was covered by a spring flood. The guardrails of the bridge were still visible, so Mr. Epp urged the

horse toward the bridge. Unknown to him, the flood had opened a gap in the flooring, and as the horse approached the bridge, it suddenly fell through, nearly dragging the buggy and its passengers into the rain-swollen river. Mr. Epp and Rich jumped into the water to release the horse from its harness, and Lillian sat in the teetering buggy, screaming at the top of her lungs. Eventually, though, everything turned out fine--the horse was freed, the buggy's occupants were unharmed, and Rich and Lillian were only one hour late to school.²⁰

Students at Lakeside School studied a wide variety of subjects, including reading, orthography (spelling), writing, arithmetic, grammar, geography, history, physiology, civil government, Kansas history, classics, and agriculture.²¹ The school day began at 9:00 a.m. when the teacher led the class in the flag salute, all sang a patriotic song, and there was a short prayer. Then students would begin their lessons. Seats in the front row were usually reserved for recitation of lessons by students,²² and spelling was usually conducted in a competition format. The teacher would line the students up in the front of the room, and they would take turns spelling words from their grade level spellers. If a student missed a word, he or she would "go to the foot"--to the end of the line of spellers.²³ Then, there was the study of penmanship which required students to perfect handwriting skills by making seemingly "endless ovals."²⁴ At 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m., students were given a 15-minute recess. After recess, students were called back to work by a large brass hand bell that the teacher shook violently.

One-room teachers at Lakeside School could be very innovative. For example, one day student Elmer Gaeddert brought his .22 caliber rifle to school, and the teacher used it to illustrate certain principles of physics. Students were asked to compare

the penetration of .22 caliber short, long and long rifle bullets in a 2x4 and a tin can.²⁵ When migrating birds came to the local lakes in spring, teacher Agneitha Duerksen brought her binoculars to school and students were asked to observe the ducks as a nature study. On another occasion, Miss Duerksen brought a portable radio--quite a novelty in the early 1930s--to school so the children could listen to a radio broadcast based on Mary Mapes Dodge's book, *The Silver Skates*.²⁶

Teachers also had the knack of transforming "failed projects" into civic lessons which might demonstrate the benefits of teamwork and cooperation. For example, one day during a science program, students were taught the wonders of the egg. Students were told that an egg could not be broken if it was squeezed on the ends of the shell, and each student took turns vigorously squeezing it. Everything was going according to plan until Ray Butler tipped the egg slightly, and as he squeezed it, it exploded violently, splattering egg all over the ceiling. Both students and teacher were worried about the Board's reaction, so the next day students smuggled a little flour to school, and the teacher got the stepladder from the shed and whitewashed the stains, hiding them from the Board.²⁷

Discipline was sometimes a problem at Lakeside School. Students were expected to be well-behaved at all times and to give full attention to their studies. They were told at the beginning of school "not to look at each other."²⁸ Distractions were many, though, and it was especially difficult for children not to eavesdrop on recitations being given in the front of the room. If younger students got too fidgety, they were given an extra recess.²⁹

Disciplinary techniques for more serious matters varied with the individual teacher. Some preferred spankings with a razor strip or hedge switch; others sent

students into the corner with a pointed dunce hat or out into the hall.³⁰ Discipline was both expected and demanded by the Board. In 1909, for example, Clara Schmutz was hired as a teacher at Lakeside, and on the first day of school, she stood in front of the class, and slowly rolled up her sleeve and flexed her arm. Pointing to her bulging muscle, Clara calmly informed the students that she could whip any of them, and would be happy to do so at that moment if any questioned her resolve. Miss Schmutz had few discipline problems.³¹

As with any school, most students found recess to be the most pleasant time of the day. Students received a 15-minute recess in the morning and afternoon, and an hour break at lunch. In bad weather, students stayed inside and played games like "Blind Man's Bluff" in the entrance hall, or shot beanbags at the trash can.³² Games also varied by season. During the winter, children played "Fox and Geese" in the snow or skated on the lake. In fall and spring, games like "21 Eskadoo," "Annie Over," "Dare Base," "Land," and "Telephone" were common.

Students at Lakeside--like most children--created several of their own games that often reflected local fears and prejudices. "Hit the Coon" was an example. One student was the "coon" and would turn his back to a line of players, bending over and closing his eyes. The other players would then throw snowballs at his posterior. When the "coon" was hit, he would stand and try to guess who hit him.³³ At other times, students are said to have pumped water down a gopher hole until the hapless creature had to come up for air. When he did, a student would lasso him with a string and the boys would take turns leading the gopher around the school yard. This usually continued until the teacher made the boys release their captive.³⁴

Mysterious visitors from outside the community were the convenient "outgroup" that provided living lessons in deviance and improper behavior. For example, on a spring day in 1938, a band of gypsies (who had visited the Lakeside School area throughout the Depression) ventured by the school. The teacher, fearing for the students' safety, immediately called the children in from recess. Then a student, Stanley Fehdrau, noticed the gypsies near his home, which was unoccupied at the time. He and Rich Epp jumped on Rich's horse, galloped toward the intruders, and--screaming and yelling like a pair of "wild Indians"--scared the uninvited guests away. Students left behind at school, who witnessed the entire episode from their vantage point atop the school outhouses, not only received a lesson in community standards but understood better the boundaries of their world, and what it meant to be a member of the Lakeside community.³⁵

Lakeside School had no organized competitive athletic programs, but once or twice a year Lakeside would play a basketball game against Lakeside's archrival--Lily Dale School. Games were played outdoors on a grass court, and players wore overalls and boots, but the competition was always keen. The games never failed to draw a partisan crowd of students, complete with cheerleaders. The Lakeside cheer went as follows: "Lily Dale, Lily Dale, sitting in a high chair! Who put her up there? Ma, Pa, Sis, Boom, Bah! Lakeside, Lakeside, Rah, Rah, Rah!"³⁶ Local bragging rights hinged on the result of the game.

Christmas was a special time at school. Around the turn of the century, local church congregations were too small to stage a program, so the school program

became a community-wide affair.³⁷ Students began practicing for the Christmas program in November, and compiled a 60-minute program of skits, songs, and recitations. On the night of the program, the schoolroom was dimly lit by two kerosene lamps in the front of the room, and a large Christmas tree with live candles decorating its boughs usually was placed to one side. By the rich smell of the tree and the soft glow of the lamps and candles, students performed--and for their efforts each student received a bag containing nuts, candy, and an apple.³⁸

The All-School Picnic at the end of April was the highlight of the year. To students, it was a joyous time when small gifts, such as jackknives or ball caps, were given to them by parents, and friends and neighbors celebrated their successes. Everyone in the community attended the picnic, food was abundant, and children enjoyed the opportunity to sample "exotic" foods from town, such as baloney, white bread, and Jello. Young people played games like softball with their parents, and women sat inside the school trading the latest news and gossip.³⁹

Lakeside School, District 64, in northeastern Reno County, closed its doors permanently on April 24, 1942. The student population had dropped to seven, and it had become impractical to keep the school open. In many respects, Lakeside School was typical of most one-teacher school districts scattered throughout the state, serving both as a vehicle for learning and a community center. While consolidated schools were more organized and efficient, they were neither community centers nor sources of pride. The one-teacher school reflected a vision of America that is no more--a world that was simple, personal and uncomplicated.

Endnotes

1. Interview with Ray Schroeder in Buhler, Kansas, March 21, 1989.
2. John D. Bright, *Kansas: The First Century*, Volume II (New York, 1956), p. 215.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 216.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., pp. 217-18.
8. Ibid., p. 217.
9. Ibid., p. 218.
10. Ibid., pp. 219-20.
11. Ibid., pp. 221-22.
12. Ibid., p. 222.
13. Ibid.
14. Written reminiscences of Martha Schroeder Wiens of Buhler, Kansas, undated, p. 2.
15. Reno County School Records, 1885.
16. Interview with Martha Schroeder Wiens in Buhler, Kansas, March 19, 1989.
17. Interview with Ray Schroeder, Buhler, Kansas, March 21, 1989.
18. Interview with A. R. Epp in Buhler, March 28, 1989.
19. Interview with Rich Epp in Buhler, March 23, 1989.
20. Ibid.
21. Interview with A. R. Epp, Buhler, Kansas, 1989.
22. Ibid.
23. Interview with Marie Nachtigal Schroeder in Buhler, Kansas, March 20, 1989.
24. Interview with Ray Schroeder, Buhler, Kansas, 1989.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Interview with Marie Nachtigal Schroeder, Buhler, Kansas, March 20, 1989.
29. Interview with Ray Schroeder, Buhler, Kansas, 1989.
30. Ibid.
31. Interview with A. R. Epp, Buhler, Kansas, 1989.
32. Interview with Martha Schroeder Wiens in Buhler, Kansas, 1989.
33. Interview with Ray Schroeder, Buhler, Kansas, 1989.
34. Interview with A. R. Epp, Buhler, Kansas, 1989.
35. Interview with Ray Schroeder, Buhler, Kansas, 1989.
36. Interview with Martha Schroeder Wiens in Buhler, Kansas, 1989.
37. Interview with A. R. Epp, Buhler, Kansas, 1989.
38. Interview with Ray Schroeder, Buhler, Kansas, 1989.
39. Ibid.