

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
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IMPROVED OUT OF EXISTENCE:
RURAL SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION IN BLACK RIVER FALLS WISCONSIN

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ABSTRACT

Rural schools have a history in Wisconsin that begins with the development of the state itself. Throughout their century of existence, rural schools played a central role in uniting the communities in which they were located and served not only as a place for learning, but as an institution in which rural citizens took pride. Beginning in the progressive era, reformers began to view country schools as roadblocks on the path to progress and improvement for the next century. By the middle of the 20th century, officials at the national, state and local level began the process of reorganizing, consolidating and closing rural schools. Reformers felt that attendance at modern and centralized educational facilities was essential for preparing the next generations of Americans for the challenges that lie ahead. Numerous reports and other publications from officials at the state and local level clearly illustrate these beliefs. Those in power failed to see the break-down of rural communities and the demise of an agrarian lifestyle as justifiable causes to keep rural schools in operation. Using newspaper articles, letters and rural school histories, one begins to understand the significance of the rural school to the surrounding community. By examining the rural school consolidation process in Black River Falls, Wisconsin, it becomes clear that rural citizens were not stubborn and resistant to change as reformers thought, but were concerned about the future of their communities and their young people.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	4
 Historiography	
 History of Education in Jackson County	
ROLE OF COUNTRY SCHOOL IN RURAL COMMUNITY.....	13
 Rural Schools of Jackson County	
ORIGINS OF RURAL SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION.....	17
 Progressive Era Ideology	
 WWII Era Motivations	
OBJECTIVES OF REORGANIZATION.....	22
 Increasing Pressure to Consolidate	
REACTIONS AND RESISTANCE TO CONSOLIDATION.....	27
 Urban Reactions	
 Rural Reactions	
CONCLUSION.....	33
APPENDIX A: MAP OF JACKSON COUNTY.....	36

INTRODUCTION

“This is our school, not just a school in our community, but our school. The school is a major part of our community and we’ll do everything we can to keep it.” Kent Olson

When residents of Hixton, Wisconsin, learned in 1998 that their 80 year-old neighborhood school, the heart of their 400 resident community, would be closed and their children would be bused to the next town to receive their education, they were outraged. Citizens worried about the impact that consolidation and busing would have on their students, their sense of community and the local economy. Hixton residents expressed their belief that students are best educated in a “friendly, safe, close-to-home environment” and that without it, students would lose identity with their community and its heritage.¹ They also feared that their children were being used as “pawns in a board game.” Parents believed that students were being moved to the larger nearby Black River Falls elementary schools in order to make those schools appear crowded, thereby lending credibility to the notion of a need for new facilities there. Finally, Hixton residents argued that they did not feel it was necessary to “diminish one segment of a school district in order to enhance another.”² They asserted that agriculture and rural communities are important and that when any segment of the district grows, it provides a greater tax base for the entire district.

Administrators countered that the Hixton School was in need of costly repairs and was facing declining enrollment, making it more sensible to close the school. In addition, school board officials explained that they were concerned about keeping operating costs low so not to increase taxes while maintaining an equal quality of education throughout the district. Despite

¹ Hixton Area Education Association, “Black River Falls School Board Decisions Affect Everyone” 1998. Hixton residents created this pamphlet to inform area residents of the changes being proposed by the Black River Falls School Board and how those changes would affect their students as well as the community. “BRF School Board Opts to Close Hixton at end of 1999-2000.” As printed in the *Banner Journal* April 22, 1998. Black River Falls Public Library, History Room.

² Ibid.

the administrative reasoning given, Hixton citizens fought hard to maintain their school, circulating petitions and holding special meetings to discuss the issue. In spite of their efforts, the school board voted to close the Hixton Elementary School after the 1999-2000 school year.

For long time residents of Jackson County these concerns were not unfamiliar and in many ways were strikingly similar to a debate held in the county in 1948, exactly 50 years earlier, when the state of Wisconsin began to require the consolidation of small rural schools into larger, centralized facilities.³ While many of the arguments both for and against consolidation were the same in both cases, the greater motivations were different. The 1940s push for consolidation was a part of a greater social movement that was sweeping throughout the Midwest while the 1998 closing of the Hixton School was an isolated case.

In the 1940s, many of the rural schools in Jackson County were faced with declining enrollments and budget shortfalls. In addition, several of the rural school buildings themselves were growing old and in need of repair. While rural citizens wanted to maintain their local schools out of fear of losing their community altogether, reformers pushed to close the rural schools in favor of consolidating into more modern and centralized schools.

Concerns about consolidation and reorganization of local schools in the 1940s and 50s were not unique to Jackson County as the entire Midwest was facing a similar situation at that time. The push for consolidation was a region-wide movement resulting from numerous social and economic factors including the rural to urban transition and the push for a more equalized tax base for supporting schools. Although the first notions of consolidation came out of progressive era ideologies about improvement and progress, the process of consolidation was not actually implemented until the post World War II era. By this time, automobiles were more commonly used and the quality of roads had greatly improved making the transportation of

³ Hixton and Black River Falls are both located in Jackson County, Wisconsin, See Appendix I.

students to centralized schools more realistic. This, combined with rising per-pupil costs, difficulty in supporting teachers, physical age of rural school buildings and more, made consolidation almost inevitable.

This process may be better understood by focusing on the consolidation and reorganization process of rural schools in Jackson County as they were consolidated into the Black River Falls School District.⁴ Jackson County is a large, mostly rural county located in west central Wisconsin, just east of Trempealeau County. The county has a long history of prioritizing education that dates back to the establishment of the first school in 1849. From the beginning, citizens and public officials understood that education was crucial to the development of a strong community. This tradition carried on throughout the next century with more funding contributed towards education, including the construction of state of the art school buildings. The next stage in the county's educational history becomes much more complicated. This was the era of rural school consolidation, reorganization and closing. As an historian, it is important to ask several questions about this process, such as: Where do consolidation and reorganization fit in this tradition of educational excellence? What changes were happening in the county and the state that caused citizens to reevaluate the ways in which they viewed education? Were the changes in the best interest of the students or were there other factors at play? Finally, what were the reactions of citizens who were losing the schools they had taken pride in for generations? In order to understand this process it is necessary to understand the role that the rural school played in the community, to explore the motivations for rural school consolidation, to know who was pushing for consolidation and the reactions of various people impacted by it.

⁴ The author chose Black River Falls to focus on because the town is the county seat of Jackson County and absorbed the greatest number of rural schools of any high school districts in the county.

While focusing on the supposed economic advantages of the consolidation and closing of rural schools, state officials and school administrators often failed to understand the impact that these changes would have on rural communities. While some demonstrated an awareness of the role the rural school served as the center of community social, political and educational interaction, they did not seem to feel that this was enough to justify keeping them open. When rural citizens resisted consolidation, they were often viewed as overly conservative and stubborn in the face of progress and improvement. Those in power were unable to understand that rural citizens were concerned about preserving their communities and that it was primarily the best interests of their children that they had in mind.

Historiography

Despite the historic and social significance of rural school consolidation, there has been little writing done specifically on the topic. There are countless works available about the history of education in the United States as a whole. Many others have been written about the history of country schools, their educational practices and traditions but these books generally end with the consolidation period. Research has been conducted on the history of rural schools and the role they played in the community. Other research has been done on the reasons for consolidation. There has also been little work done analyzing how rural citizens felt about and were impacted by the consolidation process.

Published writing on the history of education in the United States goes as far back as the late 19th century and continues through the early 20th century, with a boom in publications shortly after the completion of rural school consolidation in the mid-1960s. This influx in publications may be attributed to a number of factors. With the completion of consolidation, the world of education had entered a distinctly new era and scholars wished to document and

analyze that transition. In addition, the 1960s was a time of great social change and social history was moving to the forefront of historical studies. American citizens had a rejuvenated interest in public institutions and practices, leading to a demand for documents addressing these issues.

Comprehensive writings on the general history of education are numerous. These types of sources focus on the story of the evolution of education in the United States beginning with the dawn of organized schooling in the country and ending with the present day. Some of the best work for gaining a general overview of education comes from Joel Spring.⁵ The book highlights the role of cultural domination in shaping American schools as well as how economic issues factor into the comprehension of the evolution of American schools.⁶

Another useful general history of education comes from Warren Button and Eugene F. Provenzo. Their textbook, *History of Education and Culture in America*, puts the history of education in the United States into a cultural context. It covers the traditional history of education but with a deeper analysis of the impact of the family, media and other institutions on the evolution of education.⁷

While sources like these are great for providing a broad overview of educational history and some background on the rural to urban transition of schools, they often do not provide explicit information about rural school consolidation and its outcomes.

Another popular topic for rural social historians is that of the country school. Countless books and articles have been written about the “little red school house”, covering topics like physical structure, subjects taught, teachers, playground games, Christmas programs and more.

⁵ Joel Spring, *The American School: 1642-2004*. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2004).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Joseph W. Newman, review of *History of Education and Culture in America* by Warren H. Button & Eugene F. Provenzo Jr. *History of Education Quarterly* 30 (Spring): 106-108.

Jerry Apps' book, *One Room Country Schools: History and Recollections from Wisconsin* focuses on the history and legacy of rural schools in Wisconsin.⁸

In addition to general histories of the rural school era, many counties and local organizations in Wisconsin have published their own histories of the country schools that previously existed in the area. One such collection is *Schools of Yesteryear in Jackson County, Wisconsin: A Collection of Memorabilia*, published by a local community association⁹. These types of works play an important role in illustrating the prominent position that the local school played in the rural community and help historians to understand the strong connection that rural citizens felt to their school. Stories about the operation of rural school, teachers, lessons and methods also provide necessary background information for understanding the context in which consolidation occurred. In order to understand the significance of the end of an era, it is necessary to understand what that era entailed. Works like this rarely cover the topic of consolidation, however, except to credit it as the death of the rural school era.

During the era of rural school consolidation and the years prior, many sources were published on the topic of what could be done to save rural schools and how they can be made more functional. One such publication is *The Rural Community and its Schools* by Charles H. Lewis. In his book, Lewis argues for the necessity of maintaining a highly intelligent rural population in order to avoid a breakdown in our democratic institutions.¹⁰ This source comes

⁸ Jerry Apps, *One Room Country Schools: History and Recollection*, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996.

⁹ Citizenship & International Committee of the Jackson County Association of Home and Community Education. *Schools of Yesteryear in Jackson County, Wisconsin: A Collection of Memorabilia*. (Black River Falls, WI 1997).

¹⁰ Charles D. Lewis. *The Rural Community and its School*. (New York: American Book Company, 1937).

from the era prior to the huge wave of consolidation and argues for the preservation of rural schools.

Works examining rural school consolidation in retrospect are not altogether common. The works that do exist often explore the reasons for consolidation and how it occurred, but fail to address the perspectives of rural citizens themselves on the topic. David R. Reynolds' book, *There Goes the Neighborhood: Rural School Consolidation at the Grass Roots in Early Twentieth-Century Iowa*, is an invaluable source for researchers hoping to gain a better understanding of the rural school consolidation process in the Midwest.¹¹ While this book centers on schools in Iowa, it presents broad historical insight to explain the consolidation movement as a whole and serves as a great example to researchers in this field. Part I of Reynolds' monograph discusses the theoretical and historical contexts of rural school reform and explains social role of the rural community and places the country life movement in the continuum of the move towards modernization.¹² The second part of the book discusses "Resistance and Place" covering who opposed school consolidation and why. The second section also presents a case study of Buck Creek, Iowa.

While Reynolds' monograph presents relevant information, it is about Iowa and not Wisconsin. The Midwest does share several common factors related to consolidation but they are two separate states with different consolidation laws and other discrepancies in the consolidation process. In addition, the reactions of citizens to consolidation vary greatly by region and a monograph about consolidation in Iowa is not sufficient for understanding the process in Wisconsin.¹³ There is also a greater "rural vs. urban" story at play that can be better understood

¹¹ David R. Reynolds, *There Goes the Neighborhood: Rural School Consolidation at the Grass Roots in Early Twentieth-Century Iowa*. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ The reasons for regional differences in reactions to consolidation are still debated by historians.

through the lens of the rural school consolidation process. By conducting a case study on Black River Falls and carefully examining the primary sources related to the consolidation process there, one can develop a solid understanding of how the consolidation process fits into the greater social picture of the time.

In order to ensure this understanding of the consolidation of rural education in Wisconsin, this paper will analyze the history of rural school in the context of greater social movements. It will discuss the role of the country school as a community center in order to illustrate why rural citizens fought to keep these schools in operation. It will also analyze the consolidation process from both a rural and urban perspective in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the movement. Finally, the paper will present a case study of a rural county in Wisconsin.

History of Education in Jackson County

The origins of education in Jackson County go back as far as the beginning of the state of Wisconsin itself. Throughout the nineteenth century, people from many countries moved their families to Jackson County envisioning a better life and improved future for their children.¹⁴ As a result, one of their top priorities was providing their children with an education. As rural communities began to develop around the county, early settlers started to organize public and parochial schools. Early Wisconsin settlers planned for the development of schools via various policies. Upon the completion of the Wisconsin survey in the mid-1850s, one section of each township was designated as school property.¹⁵ The first classroom in Jackson County was established in 1848 in the boarding house of Black River Falls founder Jacob Spaulding.¹⁶

¹⁴ Citizenship & International Committee, *Schools of Yesteryear*, 3. This arrangement was not unique to Wisconsin as property was set aside for schools throughout the United States. The basis for this arrangement is constitutional.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁶ Grace Holder, "Schools" as printed in as printed in Spring Creek School Museum informational booklet, available from Black River Falls Public Library, History Room.

Fourteen children from five families crowded into the classroom and classes were held between three and seven months of out the year for the first few years.

School districts were formed around the state and families within each district were expected to attend and financially support the school in the district.¹⁷ As the communities continued to develop, citizens held meetings to set up school boards that governed each school district. Each board was given the right to hold meetings, collect taxes, select textbooks, decide the length of the school term and hire teachers.

In addition to rural schools, the need for higher education was realized early in the county. In reference to this issue, an 1867 newspaper article stated, “Years ago the neglect to properly provide for the education of the youth was to a certain extent pardonable. Those days have past.”¹⁸ The article went on to explain in order for the town to continue to thrive, a larger grade school building would have to be constructed, along with a high school. Residents of the town were in agreement and in 1874 the first high school was established in Black River Falls.¹⁹ Merrillan was the second town to begin high school training in 1882, quickly followed by the towns of Alma Center, Hixton, Melrose and Taylor. The high schools, situated at the center of the largest towns in the county, provided the centers towards which rural schools would be moved and consolidated. By 1907, there were 123 rural schools in Jackson County.

By the end of the 19th century, public schools became much more bureaucratic with a hierarchy consisting of a county superintendent, principals, and teachers. In addition, a system of

¹⁷ Citizenship & International Committee, *Schools of Yesteryear*, 1. Excerpt from the 1850 edition of *The Western Tourist and Emigrant's Guide* (F 597 C7225), Wisconsin made far-reaching provisions for an extensive system of education. The University of Wisconsin, at Madison was established just one year after Wisconsin became a state, in 1849. According to that publication, the number of schools districts was 2,200 and the number of children in the state between 4 and 20 years of age was about 46,000.

¹⁸ Excerpt From the 8 June 1867 issue of the *Jackson County Banner* article, “Shall We Have a Union School?” printed in “History Repeats Itself With Crowded School Conditions” *Banner Journal* 29 April, 1959. Available from Black River Falls Public Library History Room, Black River Falls, Wisconsin.

¹⁹ *The Breeze*, 1950 Black River Falls Senior High School Yearbook. Black River Falls Public Library History Room, Black River Falls, Wisconsin.

grading was also established.²⁰ In the latter part of the rural school era, some larger schools were referred to as “State Graded Schools”.²¹

In 1948, Melrose became the first town in the county to organize its school system into an integrated district with a central high school and surrounding rural schools all being operated by one central governing system. This is the organizational method generally used by schools today. The Black River Falls, Alma Center, Hixton and Taylor districts followed the lead so that by October, 1949, Jackson County became the first county in the state of Wisconsin to become fully consolidated.

ROLE OF RURAL SCHOOL IN THE COMMUNITY

Rural neighborhoods in the first part of the twentieth century were composed of farms, churches and schools. These three institutions allowed rural people to carry out the necessary daily functions of working, worshiping and learning. Rural communities were built on a solid foundation of interdependence and group cooperation. This arrangement was necessary for survival and the preservation of an agrarian way of life. The central institution was typically the country school due to its role in bonding rural people together in pursuit of common goals as well as fostering common values in the neighborhood.²² Because rural schools were run and supported by the surrounding community, social cooperation was necessary. Country schools throughout the Midwest were more than just structures in which rural children learned how to read, write and work with numbers. They served as a community staple, bringing neighbors together for township meetings, celebrations and school fundraising. The schoolhouse was

²⁰Betty Epstein, “This Schoolhouse will be an Education for Happy Home Visitors”, *Banner Journal*, 12 August, 1981.

²¹ Ibid.

²² David R. Reynolds, *There Goes the Neighborhood: Rural School Consolidation at the Grass Roots in Early Twentieth-Century Iowa*. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999) 27.

deliberately situated so that all students traveled an equal distance to and from the building, literally situating the school at the center of the community.

The Midwestern rural neighborhood usually consisted of fewer than two dozen households, many of which were linked through kinship and marriage.²³ Because of this, school children often grew up together and knew all of their classmates their entire lives. A community existed among the students where the bigger kids looked out for the younger and everyone generally got along. As a result of its educational and social roles, the country school was really a social extension of the family itself.²⁴

Rural Schools of Jackson County

The central role that rural schools played in their community is evident in the 1948 state centennial celebrations conducted by each country school in Jackson County.²⁵ The observance of the centennial of Wisconsin's statehood began in rural school classrooms with a study of Wisconsin's history. Throughout the 1947-1948 school year, rural school students spent time researching the history of Wisconsin as well as their own communities. In the spring, programs were held where community members were invited to partake in the celebration of the state centennial. Many programs including talks by community elders, in which they described what life was like in the community decades ago. Students often presented plays about Wisconsin and exhibited any 100 year-old heirlooms from their families. There were also old-time costume parties in which residents wore old clothing similar to what would have been worn 100 years earlier. Programs also included songs, "old time" dances, spelling bees, games and more.²⁶

Through these celebrations, it is evident that rural students and parents felt a tie to their state and

²³Ibid., 17.

²⁴Ibid., 27.

²⁵ State Historical Society of Wisconsin, "1948 State Centennial as Observed by Jackson County Schools", vol. 1-2. Box 1.

²⁶Ibid.

outside world through their community by way of the school. They saw their state history as interwoven with their community history and celebrated them simultaneously. The following is a description of the centennial celebration held at the Squaw Creek country school.

“On Friday evening, April 20, 1948 a large crowd gathered at the school house to celebrate the 100th anniversary of our state. As it was a great privilege to be able to take part in this event, everyone responded willingly to do what was asked! The evening started out with a program by the school children, which included songs, recitation readings and plays about Wisconsin. One outstanding play being “Wisconsin Birthday party” which had been prepared just for the centennial. Next a history of the community by Mrs. Ida Stein and Levis Stein, others adding any incidents they knew... Lunch was then served and the rest of the evening spent sociably by the people. Nearly 100 people attended and all seemed to enjoy the evening.”²⁷

Also as a part of this celebration, each country school in operation at the time starting recording a community history that included information about century farms in the area, family trees and many other types of family histories.²⁸ Rural citizens took pride in the progress that they and their families had made in the last century, as many had emigrated from countries such as Norway, Germany, Ireland and England.²⁹ It is evident through this centennial display that many students were still living where their ancestors had first settled when they came to this country. In addition, most students were continuing a generational tradition of attendance at their particular school.

To rural citizens, “home” was more than just their individual family’s dwelling, but also included their neighborhood school and surrounding community. As was previously stated, the school itself was an extension of the home in the eyes of rural residents. Students felt a sense of comfort and belonging in the presence of their neighbors and classmates and felt at home in the neighborhood social institutions in which they took part. The following song was written by

²⁷ Citizenship & International Committee, *Schools of Yesteryear*.

²⁸ A century farm is one that has remained in the same family for at least 100 years.

²⁹ State Historical Society of Wisconsin, “1948 State Centennial as Observed by Jackson County Schools”, vol. 1-2. Box 1.

students of the Kenyon Valley School in 1951 and shows the distinct school-community-home connection and the pride students felt for each.

Kenyon Valley has some woodlands
A creek yes, rocks and rills,
Farm homes adorn her valleys
Trees and flowers clothe her hills,
She is ever striving upward,
She has work for big and small,
But the Kenyon Valley School,
Has the greatest work of all!³⁰

The song clearly shows that rural residents were not ashamed that their home and community was not up-to-date with reforms being made in urban areas, but were proud of the progress and accomplishments that they were making.

By the time of the centennial celebrations, rural citizens had become quite accustomed to celebrations and social gathering at the local school. Throughout the year they would gather for Father/son baseball, Christmas programs, end of the year picnics and one particular favorite, the basket social. In a basket social, rural women would prepare a meal, package it in a basket and auction it off. This purpose of this annual tradition was to raise money to offset the operating costs of the community school. As time wore on, and rural populations decreased, basket socials and local fundraisers no longer generated sufficient revenue to support the school. As it became clear that many rural communities were not independently capable of sustaining their own schools, other options had to be considered for educating students.

³⁰ Citizenship & International Committee, *Schools of Yesteryear*, 83.

ORIGINS OF RURAL SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION

The reasons given for the consolidation and reorganization of schools in Wisconsin, more specifically Jackson County, are numerous and vary depending on the source and the time period. Historians point to two distinct origins of rural school consolidation efforts. The first notions of consolidation and reorganization of schools began in the progressive era as a result of the social ideologies of the time. The second push for consolidation began just before World War II and carried much more force than the previous ones. From as early as 1896 and up to the beginning of the 1960s, the motivations for consolidation continually changed and evolved.

Progressive Era Ideology of Consolidation

The ideological motivations for rural school consolidation have their roots in the progressive era and the idea of modernization and improvement. As much of society was moving off the farm and into the cities, reformers felt that students would also be better educated in more modern, centralized facilities than in the local country school of their rural neighborhood. After the depression of the 1890s, efforts to expand modern systems of public schooling into the countryside led to the use of the public school as an agent for transforming the nature of rural people and rural places as an indirect means of dealing with growing class conflicts.³¹ The consolidation of rural schools was a change that state officials and those in power could make, knowing that it would lead to greater rural to urban transformation as a result.

Beginning in 1897, the topic of rural education reform was an issue of national importance for the first time. In that year, a law was passed giving school district boards the authority to work with adjoining districts so that children in those districts could attend the same school.³² As a result, there were already several joint districts in the state at that time.

³¹ David R. Reynolds, *There Goes the Neighborhood*, 7.

³² Jerry Apps. *One Room Country Schools*, 179.

In 1899, the state superintendent of schools, Oliver Wells, prepared a report on consolidation and free transportation explaining that with this reform, the health of children would be improved thereby increasing their attendance, reducing the cost of maintaining schools and improving overall instruction.³³ Freeman B. Dell, the Jackson County superintendent of schools at the time, was in agreement with the state superintendent. Mr. Dell expressed his belief that the addition of more rural schools was not the best solution to a good education and instead advocated consolidation and transportation of students.³⁴ The following year, Mae E. Hardie, a local education professional, advocated the consolidation of country schools in order to educate students more effectively. A teacher shortage in the 1920s forced consolidation of many rural schools. A parent-teacher association was also formed at that time in order to generate deeper interest in education.³⁵

Rural school reform became a substitute for a more radical democratic transformation of the U.S. political economy. Rather than forcing greater social changes, reformers saw that they could shape the future of the economy by reforming the ways in which young people were educated. In 1899, educational reformer John Dewey wrote, "...population is hurriedly gathered into cities from the ends of the earth; habits of living are altered with startling abruptness and thoroughness; the search for the truths of nature is infinitely stimulated."³⁶ He observed that knowledge was becoming an important aspect of all areas of society and that as the use of knowledge evolved, so should the means of imparting knowledge upon others. Dewey, like other reformers of the era, realized that education in the coming decades would need to prepare students for the revolutionary journey from the farm to the city. He understood that the world in

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Grace Holder, "Schools"

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Rebecca Edwards, *New Spirits: Americans in the Gilded Age, 1865-1905*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 58.

which the next generation of students were to live would be far different than that of their grandparents.³⁷

On the same note, the growth of the professional sector was flourishing during the late nineteenth century. Nationwide high school and college enrollments were booming as young people were faced with an expansive choice of new professions not available to the generation before them.³⁸ With these new professions came standardized requirements and testing, pushing the necessity of a more equalized education for all young people in order for them to have equal opportunities in the future. Reformers pressed to restructure spatial conceptions of rural community in a way that would make more revenue available for the provision of an expanded, more standardized, modern public school curriculum.³⁹

While the ideological motives for consolidation began during this time, the practicality of consolidation was not yet possible. Without modern roads and the means for transportation, busing rural students to centralized town schools was not yet possible. Had it not been for the transportation issue, consolidation of rural schools may have occurred much earlier. In addition, the country life movement occurring in the United States in the period from about 1900-1920 countered many of the efforts for consolidation. This movement called for the strengthening of a more agrarian way of life and emphasized the notion that country life was “closer to God” than city life.⁴⁰ Those who adhered to this belief asserted that a "community life...will stimulate mental activity to amply satisfy the social aspirations of the countryman and his family" and that this was essential for a "contented and intelligent rural population." A drive to strengthen an

³⁷ Ibid., 57-58.

³⁸ Ibid., 16.

³⁹ David R. Reynolds, *There Goes the Neighborhood: Rural School Consolidation at the Grass Roots in Early Twentieth-Century Iowa*. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999).

⁴⁰ *The History of Wisconsin, v.4: The Progressive Era, 1893-1914*. (Madison, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1973-1998).

agrarian way of life may be attributed to a number of factors including the issues of crime and morality that arose in urban centers. Americans were concerned that country values were disappearing and called for a return to them. The argument for the preservation of country values would come up again in post WWII era efforts to resist rural school consolidation.

WWII Era Motivations for Consolidation

By 1939, the Wisconsin legislature began to see that local areas were not independently capable of changing their schools and began cutting aid to schools with ten or fewer students⁴¹. According to the law, the state superintendent was authorized to attach district valued at less than \$100,000 to other districts.⁴² This legislation got the ball rolling on the consolidation and reorganization that would be taking place in the following decades.

In August of 1940 Henry E. Merrit, Wisconsin superintendent of schools and one of four men in charge of redistricting for the state, spoke to Jackson County board members about the 1939 legislation.⁴³ According to a local newspaper article, he called the board members, “The most intelligent he had encountered...you listen whether you like it or not.” His comment suggested that previous school boards he had spoke to had been less receptive to what he had to say. The article also mentioned that rural citizens were surprised when they heard that consolidation could be compulsory. In addition to being surprised, many other Wisconsin residents were angry about the law as they felt that it gave to much power to the state, especially the state superintendent.⁴⁴

World War II and the following years brought about greater societal changes and improvements to urban areas, but did not significantly affect rural regions. Many rural farmers

⁴¹ Ibid., 182.

⁴² *Banner Journal* (Black River Falls), August 1940.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Jerry Apps, *One Room Country Schools*. p 182-183.

were still using the same farming practices that they had for years, seeing no real need to change. Urban schools saw significant modernization efforts including indoor plumbing, central heating, electricity, libraries and a broadened curriculum. These changes served to make the country schools seem even more outdated.

In addition to societal changes, the nation was involved in a continuing rural to urban movement which led to declining enrollment in rural schools. Reformers felt that it was not economically sensible to maintain an old-fashioned building and hire a teacher at a school that less than 25 pupils attended. It was also very difficult to find and maintain good teachers, especially when the school's primary financial support was through the rural community members themselves.

By the mid 1950s, the issue of rural school reform became more urgent, both at the national and local level. With the 1957 Soviet launch of the satellite Sputnik, United States reformers became even more concerned with the academic lag of American students. If our country was to compete on the world stage, a more rigorous and formalized educational system would have to be implemented. The general opinion of reformers was that rural schools could not sufficiently serve the national interest, regardless of the pride their communities took in the school.⁴⁵

OBJECTIVES OF REORGANIZATION

A list of objectives of the reorganization program was given in a 1941-44 reorganization proposition from the state superintendent of public instruction.⁴⁶ These objectives represent a comprehensive sampling of reasons given for consolidation throughout the 1940s and first half

⁴⁵ DeYoung, Alan J. "The Political Economy of Rural School Consolidation" *Peabody Journal Of Education*, 67 (1990): 63-89 p.8

⁴⁶ Wisconsin State Superintendent "Proposed Reorganization of School District Boundaries and Consolidation of School Districts in Wisconsin by County. Madison, 1941-44. Introduction

of the 1950s. The first objective was, “To give rural children, wherever possible, the benefit of attending schools in which twenty to thirty pupils are in average daily attendance.”⁴⁷

Many rural schools were indeed experiencing declining enrollment at this time. Black River Falls experienced a 64.6% population increase from 1900-1958 (1,938-3,000 people) while the population of Jackson County as a whole decreased by 8%.⁴⁸ This illustrates the typical rural to urban movement that many cities were experiencing at that time. The Commission on Improvement of Educational System from the state government describes this situation as a result of changing rural demographics. The commission explained that at the time when many rural schools were built, they had enough children who lived near enough to walk to the school. These schools also had enrollments of thirty or more. But at that time, farms were smaller and the families were larger.⁴⁹

The second objective was to keep the necessity for transportation to a minimum.⁵⁰ Busing was a complex issue for a number of reasons. First, it had been costly and difficult to maintain busses during WWII when there were gas rations and rubber rations on tires. In an August 15, 1949 school board meeting, the board approved the borrowing of five thousands dollars in order to purchase one or more school buses. In addition to this resolution, it was decided that an additional tax be levied upon all the taxable property in the school district for the year 1949.⁵¹ In a district where residents are already paying high taxes to support the local school, this decision was a difficult one to make.

⁴⁷ Most schools in reorganized area have an average daily attendance between twenty and twenty-five.

⁴⁸ Education Survey of School District Joint No. 2 (April 1960)

⁴⁹ Tentative Proposals of the Commission on Improvement of the Educational System Higher Education and Teaching Personnel. Madison, WI 1948.

⁵⁰ *Proposed Reorganization of School District Boundaries and Consolidation of School Districts in Wisconsin by Counties*, from Wisconsin State Superintendent, Madison, Wisconsin, 1941-1944.

⁵¹ School District of Black River Falls Annual Meeting Minutes August 15, 1949. Obtained from the School District of Black River Fall Vault, Third Street School, Black River Falls, Wisconsin.

The next objective of reorganization was to equalize the tax burden for local school support.⁵² In a 1944 report, Wisconsin state superintendent of public instruction John Callahan describes several instances in the county in which gross inequalities existed in the financial burden being carried by rural citizens to educate their young people. For example, the Bear Bluff school district had had 23 students in its one-room school and each year for the previous six years (1934-1940). The citizens levied a local tax of \$500-\$600, a respectable tax burden in any district. The owners of the most productive property in the district happened to be cranberry marsh owners and carried much of the burden. This was because many other residents of the area who had children enrolled in the school, were not property owners at all and therefore, paid no property taxes.

Another objective was to “eliminate or alter district boundaries wherever they prevent children from attending the most conveniently located school.” The school in the town of Alma had 52 students enrolled during the 1939-1940 school year. This is only because 52 was the maximum number of students the school would hold. There were nine other elementary school children that could not be accommodated so the Alma school paid a neighboring school a considerable sum of money to have those nine students attend that school. The neighboring school had too few students enrolled, so they were happy to oblige.

The final objective was “to make district units large enough so that the equalization law, Section 40.87, can operate under conditions of fluctuating enrollments with a minimum of inconvenience to the citizens and with reasonable education returns for state and county aids.”

⁵² *Proposed Reorganization of School District Boundaries and Consolidation of School Districts in Wisconsin by Counties*, from Wisconsin State Superintendent, Madison, Wisconsin, 1941-1944

This means that schools should be large enough so that a minor decrease in enrollment would not force it to close, or greatly inconvenience taxpayers supporting the school.⁵³

In 1947 the Wisconsin State Legislature created a state commission under Section 40.303 to investigate all areas of the problems of public education in Wisconsin.⁵⁴ The commission then then recommend to the 1949 legislature legislation for the “betterment of public education and the modernization and more efficient operation of the educational system and for its financing as may be found in the public interest.”⁵⁵ As a result of that legislation, John Callahan issued a “Guide for Country School Committees” in 1949, as well as his own list of reasons to consolidate.⁵⁶

Mr. Callahan stated that there were some who supported rural schools and believed that they did a good job. According to him, these people do not understand the educational offerings necessary to prepare young people for modern living. This statement illustrated his lack of understanding for the rural perspective and perhaps a low level of respect for the intelligence of rural people. In his list of reasons to consolidation, he mentions that consolidation would allow for closer supervision by the school superintendent as it was difficult for this person to travel to and closely monitor all of the rural schools. He further revealed his lack of understanding of the rural situation, stating that the urban school would serve as a community center, and argued that the town now serves that role and not the country school.⁵⁷

⁵³ This was precisely the problem rural school were facing, declining enrollments forced them to close. This is a 1941 piece of legislation related to common school equalization.

⁵⁴ Wisconsin Blue Book, 1949, Chapter 248, An Act to amend 40.303 (8) (a) of the statutes, relating to country school committee.

⁵⁵ John C. Callahan, State Superintendent of Public Instruction, *Guide for Country School Committees* (Madison WI: State Department of Public Instruction, Jan. 1949). Report house at Black River Falls School District, Black River Falls, Wisconsin.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Increasing pressure to consolidate

By 1960, rural school consolidation was not yet completed in Jackson County and reformers were pushing harder and harder to complete it. Lists of objectives given in the early 1940s for consolidation focused primarily on easing the tax burden of rural residents and included a few points regarding improvements in the quality of education for rural students. By 1960 the objectives list was titled, “Why Rural Schools Should be Closed” and focused specifically on the declining quality of rural school buildings themselves and the inferior quality of education provided in them.⁵⁸ Writers worded the list in such a way as to make rural schools seem incredibly antiquated and obsolete. Objectives previously given for consolidation seemed to emphasize the benefits of the movement to rural citizens. This later set of reasons seemed more like an attempt to embarrass them into consolidating. The list also provides a description of each rural school building and what is wrong with it. The explanation for why rural schools should be closed also included the fact that per-pupil cost was greater in rural than city elementary schools and that it was difficult to gain and keep certified teachers in rural schools.

One of the most debated issues from the side of reformers and rural citizens was the notion that students who attended a centralized school facility had greater educational advantages over those who had attended rural schools. For example, in a report from the University Of Wisconsin Department Of Education, Professor Burton E. Kreitlow argued that when boys and girls reach sixth grade in reorganized school districts, their academic achievement is superior to that of boys and girls who had been attending school in communities with many independent

⁵⁸ Education Survey of School District Joint No. 2 April 1960. Black River Falls School District, Black River Falls, Wisconsin.

districts.⁵⁹ Professor Kreitlow mentioned that the average socioeconomic status is higher among students in reorganized schools than in non-reorganized schools, perhaps hinting that this makes an impact. He also stated, “It could be anticipated that in a community which has not voluntarily reorganized its school districts there would be a tendency towards more traditional rural attitudes.”⁶⁰ He went on to say that there was a direct relationship between children’s interest in agriculture and the parents’ choice and level of schooling. This report suggests that rural parents were focused on farming and traditional ways of life and as a result, were preventing their children from progressing with the rest of society towards subjects that would benefit them in the future.

The report brushed on the fact that teachers spend more time with individual students in rural school classrooms than those in reorganized districts, deliberately minimizing a point that would illustrate superiority of rural schools in a given area. It also focused on the physical outdatedness of several of the school buildings, showing that they were not interested in using funds to bring these facilities more up to date.⁶¹ Finally, Professor Kreitlow reminded readers that consolidation is the trend statewide. Rural residents and supporters of rural community schools however, were not easily convinced that the transition was in the best interests of their children and fought to preserve this vital community staple.

⁵⁹ Burton E. Kreitlow Professor of Education. *New facts on School District Reorganization* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Department of Education, 4 August 1959). Report house at Black River Falls School District, Black River Falls.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ The report mentions high fire danger as a problem. Three school buildings, Papoose Creek, Squaw Creek and Kenyon Valley burned down within less than a ten year period. One school building in the area had an extra room just for the purpose of accommodating students who had lost their school to fire.

REACTIONS AND RESISTANCE TO CONSOLIDATION

It is difficult to imagine how it would feel to go to a local school meeting and hear that your neighborhood school, the school that your family, friends and neighbors had attended for several generations, was outdated, inadequate and about to be closed. As a result, your children would be transported out of your community each day to a different school you are not familiar with. Feelings and reactions about the consolidation and reorganization of rural schools were mixed but there was a definite distinction between rural and urban opinions.

Urban Reactions

A 1944 report on the proposed reorganization of school district boundaries from the Wisconsin State Superintendent of Public Instruction included opinions and testimonies that painted a very optimistic picture of the outcomes of consolidation.⁶² The report admitted that these quotations were a matter of opinion, but assured the reader that the opinions the organization had received were overwhelmingly positive. The first quotation came from a teacher, who stated,

...there is no question about the beneficial effects of the reorganization. Small enrollment in our county schools that have been in the doldrums for years as far as building maintenance, textbooks, all sorts of instructional materials and general interest of the citizens, have come to life now that they have a full complement of children.⁶³

Teachers in the urban school or “attendance center”, viewed consolidation as an entirely positive change, seeing only what was to be gained for students, educators and the urban community at large. This is not surprising as those in the urban centers had nothing to lose as a result of consolidation. The reorganization report also included a reaction from a mother and former school board member in Adams County. The letter perfectly characterized the reaction

⁶² Wisconsin state superintendent Madison, 1941-44. Proposed reorganization of school district boundaries and consolidation of school districts in Wisconsin by counties.

⁶³ Ibid.

that reformers would ideally like rural people to experience and with this publication, they attempted to show how they understand their situation, but were confident that rural opinions would change. The first paragraph of the letter does an excellent job of illustrating the feelings that many rural citizens had regarding consolidation. It illustrates their fears, concerns and anger about consolidation. This serves as an effort to show rural readers that consolidators understand their concerns.

When you had your first meeting in this area, a year ago and I realized that this reorganization meant that we would lose our little school where mother taught, where I went to school and where I taught before I was married, where I was a board member and where my children were attending, I was mad enough to ring your neck. But it is the law and I believe in abiding by it even if I don't like it. I realized after the Supreme Court decision and our failure to get the law repealed in the legislature that we were licked, and I have coopered every since.

The second paragraph of the letter is equally significant because it illustrates the feelings that consolidators hope that rural parents will have. It is essentially a piece of propaganda for the consolidation movement. It strives to highlight all the positive aspects of consolidation and includes nearly all of the objectives for consolidation with a description of how they are beneficial. The letter, in a way, makes parents feel as though they are doing their students a disservice by keeping them in a rural school.

Now I am almost reconciled. My little boy and girl are picked up by car every morning and taken to school, and then brought home the same way at night. They spend less time on the road going the three and one-half miles than they spent walking one-half mile to school, and I believe they are safer. Here, we haven't had more than ten pupils attending our school, and I know that my children would vote for transportation and the larger school with enthusiasm. We have an excellent teacher this year; I know that my children never made the progress they are making now. They like to have other children in their classes and other children to play with. Scarcely a day goes by but that my older boy, who is a freshman, tells his little brother and sister how fortunate they are to be going to a school where there are enough children to make a school. During the eight years he attended our little school he never had another child in his class, and he believes that adjustment to high school would have been much easier if he had had other pupils in his grate at country school.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Proposed reorganization of school district boundaries.

The proposed reorganization report also includes the opinions of county superintendents who could not say enough about how much easier the transportation of students had become since consolidation and praise the equalization of teacher loads.⁶⁵ The report acknowledged that there were people who do not like consolidation, but explains that they had been unable to find any of those people.

Rural Reactions

Rural citizens not only feared that the ties that bound their community would be severed, they were also concerned about losing their children to urban life. What boy or girl would want to come back and work on the farm after being exposed to the bright lights of the city? The fact of the matter was that small family farms were losing ground to larger farming operations just as schools were being consolidated. The whole state and country was immersed in a rural to urban transition.

Educators in the rural schools had a better understanding of what they had to lose as a result of consolidation and were more reluctant to see their schools dissolved. This difference of opinions is not surprising as rural school teachers played a much more prominent role in the governing and day to day affairs of their school. Rural teachers were often the only official in the school building and were charged with not only teaching, but general building maintenance and other administrative duties. The following reflection on the experience of consolidation comes from the memoirs of Ms. Grace Holder, a long-time teacher at Spring Creek country school,

⁶⁵ Wisconsin state superintendent Madison, 1941-44. Proposed reorganization of school district boundaries and consolidation of school districts in Wisconsin by counties.

“Big buses came rolling in to carry our children off to the city to learn of the bees and bugs, bears and butterflies in a science room full of exhibits instead of the woods back where I live. Instead of getting physical exercise walking to school and then going home to do chores, they now have physical education teacher to give them push ups. They no longer hear the song of the thrush and meadowlarks as the walk to school—the busy is far too noisy with its load of youngsters.

Every since Henry Ford put our neighborhood on wheels, things haven’t been the same. Instead of using [the school] for box socials and neighborhood get-togethers of various kinds, [I watch] the parents load up their families and buzz off to the nearest movie.”⁶⁶

Mrs. Holder’s reaction shows not only her sorrow at the lost of the school itself, but her feelings on the overall rural to urban transition that was taking place in the community. While the country school was not the most modern, up-to-date location for education, it still had many positive attributes that rural students would lose out on as a result of attending an urban school.

Resistance to rural educational reform throughout the United States was particularly strong in the rural neighborhoods of the Midwest.⁶⁷ In Iowa, for example, farmers did not hesitate to write to one of the farm journals or the state superintendent himself, expressing their concerns.⁶⁸ Rural residents also commonly circulated petitions to keep their schools open. These petitions were often then signed by every member of the community. According to 1949 state law, citizens of a given territory could begin the process of resisting consolidation through a petition signed by 15% of the electors in the territory.⁶⁹ Two years later in 1951, this is exactly what residents of the Pine Hill School did.⁷⁰ While they were not able to put a stop to

⁶⁶ Grace Holder, “This Schoolhouse will be an Education for Happy Home Visitors,” as printed in Spring Creek School Museum informational booklet, available from Black River Falls Public Library, History Room.

⁶⁷ Minutes and meeting records from rural school boards from 1950-1960 are missing from the Black River Falls School District Vault where all other records and historic documents are kept. It is interesting that not just some, but all of the rural school records are missing, however, it is not surprising that rural school boards would not want to submit records of their resistance to consolidation to the school district that they were being consolidated into. This lack of primary source documentation of reaction and resistance on the part of rural schools makes understanding how the school reacted difficult.

⁶⁸ Reynolds, David R. *There Goes the Neighborhood, Rural School Consolidation at the Grass Roots in Early Twentieth-Century Iowa*. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999), 86.

⁶⁹ Chapter 248, An Act to amend 40.303 (8) (a) of the statutes, relating to the county school committee. 1949 Wisconsin Blue Book.

⁷⁰ “Petition from Pine Hill Residents, 1951” as submitted to school board. Available from Jackson County Historical Society, Black River Falls, Wisconsin.

consolidation completely, they were successful in delaying their consolidation until 1962 when the rest of the schools were all consolidated.⁷¹

On July 3, 1950 a special meeting of the Black River Falls School Board was held in order to allow petitioners from Kenyon Valley an opportunity to express themselves as to the question of what to do about replacing the Kenyon school which had been destroyed by fire. They discussed several options including rebuilding the school and busing students to a nearby rural school. One petitioner, Mr. James Klir expressed, “There would be no community life in Kenyon without a school—there was no Sunday picnic at the close of school this year...”⁷² Mr. Klir even offered to donate more land if needed to build another school and asserted that the majority of people in the valley wanted another school.

In addition to their individual concerns about the loss of community, rural residents were not entirely convinced that consolidation was the only option available for handling the issues that plagued the schools.⁷³ Why couldn't the local school board provide a better salary to rural teachers to keep good ones in place? Farmers often felt that school superintendents were basing their arguments for consolidation on the transportation issue alone, which was not entirely legitimate in their eyes. Aside from the economic impact of supporting a fleet of school buses, rural parents were concerned about their children spending up to two hours a day being jostled around country back roads on a school bus.

There was also much debate among rural citizens over which schools to bus students to and from. At a special meeting of the Kenyon Valley School, petitioners discussed their feelings

⁷¹ Citizenship & International Committee of the Jackson County Association of Home and Community Education, *Schools of Yesteryear in Jackson County, Wisconsin: A Collection of Memorabilia*. (Black River Falls, WI, 1997), 158.

⁷² Meeting of Kenyon Valley Petitioners, 3 July, 1950. Black River Falls, Wisconsin. Available from School District of Black River Falls Vault, Third Street School, Black River Falls, Wisconsin.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 89.

on the possibility of bussing their children to the nearby Squaw Creek School. One petitioner, Mr. Joe Bohac, explained that he had seen the results of overcrowding upon the consolidation of other rural schools and was concerned that that would be a problem in this case.⁷⁴ Mr. Klir, another local resident, stated that there had been no improvement in bus transportation previously, but that road conditions would improve in the future.

Rural citizens argued that smaller class sizes allowed for more one on one interaction between the student and teacher; a circumstance that most would agree today leads to higher achievement. Judith Hopkins, a student of Squaw Creek School throughout the 1950s recalled that as a student in a one-room school, she overheard the same lessons over and over throughout the years. This kind of review helped her to cement the information in her mind. When she got to the central town school in 6th grade, she felt that she had an advantage over the students who had gone to the town school throughout their entire education because they had not received the same individualized attention that she had.⁷⁵

Most leaders did not understand that rural resistance to school reform was a result of farm peoples concerns that the execution of consolidation would drastically alter the community landscape and the longer-run sustainability of family farming itself. Instead, rural resistance was perceived to be based on ignorance and general misunderstanding of the situation.⁷⁶ State reformers and local school district officials failed to see the situation from the side of the rural citizens, often viewing them as overly conservative and stuck in their ways. As they were nearing the completion of the consolidation process, reformers saw the issue as increasingly pressing and were become more firm in their approach to dealing with rural residents. The

⁷⁴ Special meeting of Kenyon Valley School Meeting Minutes Available from School District of Black River Falls Vault, Third Street School, Black River Falls, Wisconsin.

⁷⁵ Interview with Judith Hopkins, 24 September 2007.

⁷⁶ Reynolds, *There Goes the Neighborhood*, 6.

following is a letter from Black River Falls High School principal Mr. Schmalenberg on January 18, 1968,

“Relative to public acceptance of reorganization, I would like to remind you that many people do not like to change things that they now have. In other words, the status quo is easier. This is true in many fields. I think when a community or settlement loses its school-it loses something that has the common interest of all. However, these changes are taking place and most people accept them as progress.”⁷⁷

In 1961, the state of Wisconsin passed a law mandating the consolidation of all rural schools into the local city school.⁷⁸ With this legislation, consolidation became compulsory in all rural districts making efforts to stop or delay it futile. The power to bring about change was in the hands of state and local officials and there was little that rural citizens could do to stop them. Administrators wrote the laws and policies as they coincided with their own agendas and rural people, even together, did not have the means to resist the changes. The process of rural school consolidation in Jackson County was completed in 1969 with the closing of the Squaw Creek State Graded School.⁷⁹

CONCLUSION

The question of whether or not the fears of rural citizens regarding consolidation were realized and justified is a complicated one and varies from person to person. Some rural residents may have felt that their community was destroyed and their children were negatively affected by the loss of the rural school. Others may say that urban schools offered a wealth of opportunities and in retrospect, they are glad consolidation occurred. The outcome of consolidation and its effects on students and the community would be a great topic for another paper. Here we have seen that whether rural citizens were justified in their concerns or not, their feelings were largely ignored

⁷⁷ Mr. Schmalenberg to Mrs. Ralph Norton, 18 January 1968, Available from School District of Black River Falls Vault, Third Street School, Black River Falls, Wi.

⁷⁸ Wisconsin Blue Book, 1961, Chapter 304. An act to amend 66.023 (1) of the statutes.

⁷⁹ Citizenship & International Committee, *Schools of Yesteryear*, 51.

by those in power. The rural school consolidation movement illustrates a loss of voice in the public sphere for rural people who did not have the means necessary to combat consolidation. Urban officials in power realized that by consolidating rural schools and moving those students to more urban areas, society as a whole become more urban-centered. This transition was viewed as change for the better on the part of those in power and whether rural citizens agreed or not, they had no choice but the change as well.

It is clear that from the mid-nineteenth century until the present, community schools have played a central role in uniting the neighborhoods they serve. The rural schools of Wisconsin, more specifically Jackson County, have a century-long history of existence that is filled with changes and transitions that directly reflect those of society at large. Rural schools especially felt the pressure of progressive era modernization efforts and the WWII rural to urban transition. Throughout those changes, rural schools endured as a community center and an institution that rural citizens took pride in. The country school served as a neighborhood staple, uniting neighbors and preserving traditions and rural American values. When reformers asserted that the closing of rural schools was essential for preparing the next generations of Americans for the challenges that lie ahead, rural citizens were cautious and concerned about the loss of community they faced. Urban reformers did their best to make rural education appear outdated and obsolete. They printed numerous reports and conducted evaluations, all concluding that consolidation was necessary. They also pointed to economic reasons for consolidation, a difficult issue for rural citizens to argue with when they were struggling to financially support their schools. Despite rural concerns, a 1961 state law mandating consolidation also made acceptance of consolidation

necessary. Since then, rural communities have seen many changes and traditions but none so significant as the loss of their neighborhood schools.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Feelings of connectedness and reminiscing about rural schools still today are not uncommon in Jackson County. Grace Holder turned Spring Creek School into a museum and the local newspaper frequently runs articles reminiscing about the rural schools of yesteryear.

APPENDIX A: MAP OF JACKSON COUNTY



http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/5/52/Map_of_Wisconsin_highlighting_Jackson_County.svg/200px-Map_of_Wisconsin_highlighting_Jackson_County.svg.png

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