

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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During the past one hundred and fifty years, thousands of rural schoolchildren were educated in one-room country schools. Children who attended these schools learned under a system that was ungraded, and teachers used individual tutoring, followed by older students helping the younger. Group interaction was constant in the learning process. There was a spirit of democracy and cooperation in the one-room school. The isolated one-room schools also served as community centers. Although there are several hundred one-room schools still operating in remote rural areas from New York to California, today most rural schoolchildren are educated in consolidated, graded, town schools. The abandoned schoolhouses can still be seen in rural areas; and some of the buildings have been converted to museums, homes, or still serve as community halls.

During the same one hundred and fifty years, American public education has attempted to provide efficient and standardized education for children. Professional educators, assisted by demographics, have pushed to close the rural schools in favor of consolidated, graded schools, in which the student could be among many others of the same age and skill level. Because part of the consolidated system revolved around testing and ranking the children, this grouping introduced competition to schoolchildren. Children were ranked not according to what they had learned, but what they knew compared to their fellow-classmates.

Modern scientific research has demonstrated that children learn less, and are most stressed when subjected to the graded, competitive, and standardized system the professional educators developed. This same research has proven that the atmosphere of learning with individual attention and cooperation yields greater learning. This was how children learned in the one-room, ungraded school.

LEARNING AND THE ONE-ROOM COUNTRY SCHOOL

A Thesis

Presented to

the Division of Social Sciences

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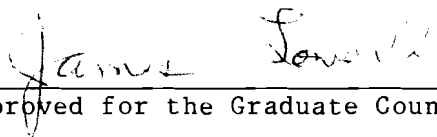
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PREFACE

Some words written by Jonathan Kozol in Illiterate America sum up the thesis proposal: "In speaking about written words, we are speaking by necessity about shared knowledge and that the way to gain that knowledge is by common, not competitive, endeavor."

Many hours of oral interviews led to this composition. My thanks go to all those retired teachers for their years of teaching the children, and their time in the interviews. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Professor Thomas Isern for his patience and integrity in helping me compose this thesis. My thanks also go to Professors Patrick O'Brien and Glenn Torrey for their faith in the project and counseling through the project. Thanks must also go to Professor Richard Douthit for his research help. Most of all, my greatest appreciation goes to my husband. It was his support and steadfast belief that helped me throughout my writing.

My childhood memories of a one-room school are shared by my brother, Jens Mikkelsen, and I dedicate this thesis to him.

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CHAPTER 1: A PERSPECTIVE ON LEARNING

The one-room country schoolhouse stands empty today. It is a lonely figure on the plains, or a delapidated object hidden in a grove of trees. There are a few filled with hay, and some have been converted into homes, museums, or community meeting halls. Only a few of them abound with children at recess; some remote places can still hear the bell ringing on an early morning. Today the majority of rural American children are educated in consolidated or town schools. For many years these one-room buildings sheltered dedicated teachers who taught future presidents and prepared their students for all walks of life. Why was this one-room, ungraded schooling abandoned?

Children attend school to learn skills, social as well as scholastic, to aid them in becoming responsible and thoughtful citizens in this democracy. Schools thus carry out the injunction of Thomas Jefferson, who wrote: "I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion."¹

A series of events in the history of American education led to the present system, starting with the common school that was to be disseminated across the land from Massachusetts westward; continuing with the one-room school that dotted the landscape of the early midwest; and finally progressing to the consolidated and graded school that is in operation today all across the country. Horace Mann believed in the wide propagation of an educational system through the common school, but in one of his writings he said:

Errors of Education--the unpardonable error of education has been, that it has not begun with simple truths, with elementary ideas and risen by gradations to combined results. It has begun with teaching systems, rules, schemes, complex doctrines, which years of analysis would scarcely serve to unfold. All is administered in a mass.

The learner, not being able to comprehend, has endeavored to remember, and thus has been put off with a fact, in lieu of a principle explanatory of an entire class of facts. In this way we pass our errors and our truths over to our successors done up in the same bundle, they to others, and so onward, to be perpetual sources of error, alienation and discord.

The phrase, "by gradations," indicated Mann's belief that children needed to be separated by grade level and taught in a systematic and efficient way. According to John Goodlad of the University of California, "By 1870, graded classes, graded content, graded textbooks, and even graded teachers meshed together in a school mechanism that has undergone little redesigning to the present."³

Leaders in the field of education believed that a graded system of grouping children for learning was the most efficient way to teach them and the best way for them to learn. In a 1908 Kansas Bulletin of Information, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, E. T. Fairchild, observed:

When we reflect further . . . one-half of the present number of teachers would be sufficient to teach all the pupils of the state could they be conveniently grouped, we will readily see that the ultimate outcome of consolidation means a great savings for the people.⁴

To gradation was added the philosophy of competition, by the efforts of James Cattell, an American scientist and professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and Columbia University, who developed testing devices during the later part of the nineteenth century. He theorized that speed of reaction and physical strength were related

to intelligence, and his tests attempted to prove that theory. His tests were even used at one time on students enrolling at Columbia University.⁵ "As measures of ability," according to Clark Wissler, American Anthropologist and professor at Yale, "Cattell's tests were chiefly negative in value."⁶

During the 1905-1906 era the Binet-Simon measuring scale of intelligence was developed and published. These tests further enhanced the grading and classifying of children in school. "By definition, mental age should equal chronological age in the case of the average or median child," according to Herbert Woodrow, Professor of Psychology at the University of Minnesota. He further stated, "The median child is one who stands at the middle of a large group of children of his own age. The most accurate rating of the intelligence of children that can be secured from school work is that obtained by classifying children of the same age according to their grade." Yet at the same time he made these statements in support of classification and grading of children, Woodrow hedged, "Certainly there are many objections to assuming a perfect correspondence between school grade and intelligence; but it is reasonable to expect a considerable correlation."⁷

As the testing, classification, and grading were being developed, to further the movement toward consolidation the Kansas superintendent, Fairchild, wrote:

It is the common experience that most of the causes of complaint against teachers do not exist after consolidation. The conclusion is that the complaints are largely chargeable against the system in which the teacher is placed, rather than against the teacher herself. Under close supervision, with a smaller number of classes, though the classes themselves be larger, the work of the teacher would be far more successfully done.⁸

Successful teachers could then arrange their classes according to the smartest and the dumbest, and all in between. That this classification and grading system introduced more competition and peer pressure to the students' lives escaped notice. It was more efficient and certainly made the teachers' work easier, with only one grade of students and all expected to reach somewhere near the median.

Since the turn of the century the educational system has expanded and embellished the consolidated, graded school; according to Leslie Hart, author of "Human Brain and Human Learning:"

First, the lockstep system forced the students into GROUPS, fixed groups. Not for educational reasons, note, but for administrative convenience, including economy and good use of what teachers were available.

Second, it chopped up education (them elementary education) into neat equal SEGMENTS, like wedges of a pumpkin pie. This process has run on so far that today even our greatest universities give you a bachelor degree not when you prove understanding or accomplishment, but when you have sufficient number of POINTS . . .

Third, the class-and-grade system set these segments in a fixed time sequence, with segments coming one after another as undeviatingly as the vertebrae of a snake.⁹

Upon entering school the child is eager and motivated by great curiosity to learn. But John Holt, author of How Children Learn maintained that the motivation is broken down by the learning model that the child encounters in school. He said, "Only a few children in school ever become good at learning the way we try to make them learn. Most of them get humiliated, frightened, and discouraged. They use their minds, not to learn, but to get out of doing the things we tell them to do--to make them learn . . . The children who use such strategies are prevented by them from growing into more than limited versions of the human beings they might have become. This is the real failure that takes place in

school; hardly any children escape."¹⁰

Bettye Coughenour, a former one-room school teacher in Kansas who is now principal of Wellsville Elementary Consolidated School, stated that children of today are more competitive in terms of grades and rewards than her earlier students in the one-room school. There the children were more aware of self-development and helping other children. She also deplored the use of competition, which defines a winner and a loser and which destroys motivation.¹¹

While educators have divided and separated and classified children for learning, most of the committees, boards, and councils that run government, industry, and social institutions are governed by the cooperation, consensus model with "brain storming" being a popular chiche and a working technique used in these groups. Such procedure is motivated by beliefs that greater knowledge is gathered by several minds working together than by the accumulated knowledge of those same minds working individually, and that less knowledge is gathered when vying with each other for a fast answer.¹²

Alfie Kohn, author of No Contest: The Case Against Competition, wrote:

Many psychologists, instead of taking competition's reputed benefits for granted, have put them to the test. And with astonishing regularity, they have found that making one person's success depend on another's failure--which is what competition involves by definition--simply does not make the grade.¹³

Competition and productivity in the work place were studied by sociologist Peter Blau of Columbia University in 1954. His study was of two different groups of workers, one of whom used competition as its working model, the other cooperation. Productivity was measured

at the end of the project. The experiment involved people working for an employment agency. The productivity of the group using cooperation was superior to that of the group using competition. The competition group hoarded its information; the cooperation group shared its information; and predictably, the cooperation group filled many more positions.¹⁴

This study was followed by Robert Helmreich of the University of Texas, who studied achievement and personality traits such as competitiveness, orientation toward work, and seeking challenging tasks. Helmreich's project used questionnaire responses from 103 scientists. The responses indicated that those scientists who had received the most recognition from their peers were those who scored highest on mastery, sought challenging tasks, but ranked low on competitiveness. Helmreich's project had found an inverse relationship between competitiveness and achievement. The antithesis of competitiveness is cooperation, and according to his study cooperation is where the greatest achievement and performance occurs. Kohn's hypothesis of cooperation accomplishing higher achievement and performance is supported by these facts: that success usually is dependent upon shared resources; competition depends upon hoarded resources; and competition requires speed of response, not quality. Therefore, between the hoarded resources and quickness of response, competition can and does lead to poorer performance both in the classroom and at the work place.¹⁵

Professors David and Roger Johnson of the University of Minnesota have gathered statistics and studies from 1924 through 1981 concerning the relationship between achievement, competition, group work, and individual study. The Johnsons' study dealt with the learning situation,

and Kohn related their findings: "The discussion process in cooperative groups promotes the discovery and development of higher quality cognitive strategies for learning than does the individual reasoning found in competitive and individualistic learning situations." Ironically, their outcome was measured by traditional tests which are normally biased toward competitiveness, yet the group-work cooperative model was ahead of the competitive model by a two-to-one margin. The Johnsons established that problem solving, one of the most important learning processes, is best developed through the cooperative model.¹⁶

Kohn stated, "As of 1984, the Johnsons were able to cite seven studies showing that people prefer cooperative rather than competitive or independent learning experiences." Even the myth that people prefer competitive games was exploded by Terry Orlick, sports psychologist at the University of Ottawa. After a group of 9- and 10-year-old boys and girls had played in both competitive and cooperative games, they were asked for their preference. The boys chose the cooperative games by a two-thirds majority, and the girls unanimously chose the cooperative over the competitive games.¹⁷

The national obsession with competition has been paralleled by the compulsion for efficiency, especially when teaching children. The very teaching methods used have evolved out of studies with rats and other animals in behavior modification studies. Leslie Hart wrote, "Unfortunately, our class-and-grade school system, popularized by Horace Mann and others in the 1840's, was designed for rote teaching backed up by overt threat . . ."¹⁸

Today there are theories about the human brain that suggest that it is not only incorrect to teach using rote and behavior modification

methods, but it is actually counterproductive. Dr. Paul D. MacLean of the National Institute of Mental Health has proposed that the human brain is made up of three different components, and that the rat has only the first of these components. The last part of the brain to be developed is the cerebrum, and it is the aggressive, risk-taking portion of the brain. It does not merely record information, but makes up its own interpretations and draws inferences from that information. "For the cerebrum to function well, threat must be minimal," asserted MacLean. Cerebral processing (problem solving) is inhibited by threat.¹⁹

Dr. Benjamin Bloom of the University of Chicago and Northwestern University concluded from his studies on mastery of a subject that students learn best from group sessions and that problem solving (a vital part of reasoning and thinking process) is enhanced by group learning, followed by individual tutoring when necessary. Bloom also suggested that today's teachers telegraph their judgements of student ability to their students. This is unavoidable in a system that focuses on class rank instead of mastery of course content. "It's hard to think of any place in our society that is as preoccupied as the schools with comparing people with one another," Bloom observed.²⁰

Our present school system revolves around one teacher in a graded classroom using competition and behavior modification through threat and coercion. Modern teachers' retired counterparts, who taught in one-room, ungraded schools, knew that their best teaching model was the older student with the younger student, and that learning was accomplished best in the unthreatening and cooperative environment. Wilma Higbe, retired Kansas one-room teacher, related that there were times when she could not get an idea across to a young student, but that

often an older student could and did get that same idea across. She was uncertain whether it was because the child would listen to another child, or some other cause, but the outcome was that the younger child grasped the idea and the older child became even more familiar with the work.²¹

By the mid-1800s, when the white European settlers moved onto the Great Plains, they understood the need for their children to be educated. The one-room, ungraded country schools were built. The educators who fought so hard for consolidation both from the standpoint of efficiency and finer education were stopped from completely consolidating the rural school by the farmers of the small school districts. A few held onto their one-room schools until the 1950s, when the rural population decline was so great that consolidation became almost universal in rural America.²² Most of the one-room schoolhouses stand empty today, yet much of the scientific findings of the past fifty years would support the circumstances of the learning that was accomplished there. One of the hallmarks of the one-room, ungraded school was the older student helping the younger with lessons. A spirit of cooperation and working together existed in the learning process.

Notes to Chapter One

1. Excerpt of letter from Thomas Jefferson to William Charles Jarvis, 1820, as quoted in David Madsen, Early National Education: 1776-1830 (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974), 17.
2. Quoted in Joy Elmer Morgan, Horace Mann, His Ideas and Ideals (Washington: National Home Library Foundation, 1936), 142.
3. Quoted in John I. Goodlad, School, Curriculum, and the Individual (Waltham, Massachusetts: Blaisdell Publishing Company, 1966), 115.
4. Quoted in E. T. Fairchild, Bulletin of Information Regarding Consolidation of Rural Schools, Issued by Kansas State Superintendent of Public Instruction (Topeka: State Printing Office, 1908), 36.
5. Herbert Woodrow, Brightness and Dullness in Children (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippencott Company, 1919), 30.
6. Ibid., p. 33.
7. Ibid., p. 33.
8. Quoted in Fairchild, Consolidation of Rural Schools, p. 46.
9. Quoted in Leslie A. Hart, The Classroom Disaster (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1969), 231.
10. Quoted in John Holt, How Children Learn (New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1967), viii.
11. Bettye Coughenour, excerpted from Joanne McBane, One-Room Country School: Teachers' View (Videotape produced by Instructional Media, Emporia State University, 1986).
12. Alfie Kohn, "How to Succeed Without Even Trying," Psychology Today 20 (September 1986): 27.

13. Ibid., p. 22.
14. Ibid., p. 23.
15. Ibid., p. 24.
16. Ibid., p. 26.
17. Ibid., p. 27.
18. Quoted from Leslie A. Hart, "The Three-Brain Concept and The Classroom," Phi Delta Kappan 62 (March 1981): 505.
19. Ibid., p. 505.
20. Paul Chance, "Master of Mastery," Psychology Today 21 (April 1987): 46.
21. Wilma Higbe, excerpted from One-Room Country School.
22. Wayne E. Fuller, The Old Country School: The Story of Rural Education in The Middle West (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 245.

CHAPTER 2: LEARNING CAN BE FUN

On a cool September morning the children came to school. They came running, walking, swinging their lunch pails, some even riding horses to an isolated one-room schoolhouse. All were laughing and excited about the new school year. This scene was repeated for over 100 years all across the Great Plains and Middle Border states. In some of the more remote areas, the rural population was very poor and some of the children came barefoot, and in ragged clothing, but they still felt excitement and enthusiasm for the opening day of school.¹

These schools usually consisted of one large room, often with an anteroom, or cloakroom, adjoining. In Montana and Wyoming some were built on skids so they could be moved as the population shifted.² In the large room would be a potbellied stove for heat, and most had a blackboard on one wall. The teacher served as janitor, nurse, cook, and counselor. There was often a new teacher, who was also excited and perhaps a bit nervous. And so a new school term began in the rural one-room school houses.

"We taught children instead of subjects," said Bettye Coughenour. The rural children came to learn to read, write, communicate and cipher. Along with these skills they learned about getting along with older and younger children, and about sharing and fairness.³

"Well, we opened with a flag salute . . . and a prayer." Beth Muilenburg, retired one-room teacher who went on to teach at Emporia State University, described the opening exercises that she instituted in her first country school. Wilma Higbe added, "I read to the children every morning." Thus a new day began with a flag salute and a prayer,

and then storytime. It was the same in the little school west of Humboldt, Iowa, in 1940; as it was in the country school near Wellsville, Kansas, in 1932. The teachers in the one-room schools developed their own sense of consistency and discipline with the children, and somehow it occurred similarly in each school, but teachers had the liberty and autonomy of setting up a schedule in their own way. Many had been taught in a one-room, ungraded setting, and therefore, were following the pattern they had learned as children.⁴

The one-room country school teachers were quite young, and many did not have the privilege of college training. During the years from 1890 through 1910 in Lyon County, Kansas, the average age of teachers was 21 years, and most were teaching on a Second Grade Certificate, which meant they had to be 19 years old, have 7 months experience, and pass an examination with an 80 percent average grade. In Nebraska during the 1914-15 school years, 50 percent of the rural teachers were between 17 and 20, 38 percent were 21 through 25, and the remaining 12 percent were 26 or older. Normal training classes taught in high schools were the main foundation for these teachers, who often started teaching at 17 years of age.⁵

The children who attended these schools learned independently and could progress at their own pace. By the time they had reached third grade, they knew what to expect, as they had heard the older students, often their brothers or sisters, recite the year before. Most of the attention the child received from the teacher came in the first and second grade, when the teachers, again with marked similarity, sensed that the young student needed a good start. In most cases the numbers of students in a single grade would not exceed two, and so competition

was kept minimal, but the children were eager to achieve.⁶

"Teacher, Teacher, I can!," exclaimed a newly immigrated German boy of seven to Beth Muilenburg. It was Christmas time and he could say the flag salute in English well enough for the class to understand him. In Edwards County, Kansas, where Muilenburg taught, there were twelve children in her first school, and three of them came from one German family. She related that the language barrier would have been great even though she had studied German in college, as the spoken language is often quite different from the academic language. But with the help of Miriam, an eighth-grade student who spoke German, all three of the German children became fluent in English. The little German boy was so proud to be an American, and Muilenburg related that his flag salute was one of the highlights of her teaching career.⁷

Language was often a problem in the rural setting, where many newly immigrated people settled and sent their children to school. Katherine Houston, a retired one-room teacher from Wyoming, demonstrated the dedication she felt to the students, and also showed creativity in teaching: "This school included students of Finnish, Swedish, and Italian backgrounds who worked in coal mines. Some were 15 years old, but hadn't yet learned English." She recalled how she taught them English from the blackboard, not from books. The blackboard was an indispensable tool for the one-room teacher, as books were scarce, and the teacher could copy work on the blackboard. Also lessons could be changed for each recitation group.⁸

Ruth Geier Rice, Montana rancher and former County Commissioner, strongly defended the old country schools. She was both a student and a teacher in the one-room setting, and she said, "Younger students

learned from older students in one-room schools, students of every grade level were seated in the same room. While the teacher was drilling the fourth graders, the third graders could hardly avoid listening." Rice believed that this aided learning. According to Wayne E. Fuller, author of The Old Country School, the one-room school education ". . . made the Middle Border the most literate part of the nation through the years."⁹

"Discipline was a factor then as now," recalled Rice. At one new school she encountered a problem with the children throwing spitballs. She had a talk with the class, and admonished them that their homes were not treated this way, and also that the school was theirs, and even if she left as the teacher, they would still have to come to their school. "She said the next day a few younger children again tried to throw spitballs, but the older students put an end to it."¹⁰

The student who graduated from the one-room school experience usually had acquired self-assurance. Herbert Quick, teacher and author, related how, at sixteen, he attended an institute which was to enable him to teach in a one-room school. He and his friends were placed in the C Teacher class. This class meant the students from it would teach on a temporary certificate and would not get a first-, second-, or third-grade certificate. He and his friends carried on such endless debates that the teacher in annoyance "promoted" them to the A class, which was taught by Professor Gaylord from New England. Quick graduated from this institute with high marks.¹¹

The teachers used their autonomy to arrange extra-curricular activities for their students. Mr. Carl Livingston began his teaching career in a one-room school in Ellis County, Kansas, and retired as

Principal of Butcher Elementary School at Emporia State University.

Livingston recalled that in the spring of the year, often he and a teacher from a nearby school would arrange a baseball game; he would load all the children in his car, and away they would go to play ball.¹²

Schools came together not only for athletic games, but for scholastic fun as well. Hamlin Garland, author of Boy's Life On The Prairie, wrote a child's (Lincoln Stewart) view of one such event:

To Lincoln the whole world had changed. The monotonous routine was broken up delightfully. The crowded seats, the lovely big girls from the [Oak] Grove [School], the wiggling boys of his own age, the temporary relenting of rigid discipline--all of these were inexpressibly potent and significant changes.¹³

The children participated in scholastic games such as spelling bees or geography matches, and these events usually were reserved for a Friday afternoon. The entire school participated. The little first grader could see how well he measured up against the knowledge of the fourth grader. This was something that the children looked forward to with great glee. Each hoped to be the last one standing, having spelled the word correctly, or found the right place on the map.¹⁴

The children did a great deal of memorizing, but Muilenburg recalled that she enjoyed making a game of the memorizing and then afterward, they would set a poem to music, or draw a mural from a story they had read together. There also the eighth grader would help the first grader, so that the mural would look like the story.¹⁵

Teachers often showed their dedication to their students in unusual ways. Katherine Houston recalled in the early 1900s that she disagreed with an immigrant father who was about to take a bull whip to his son for not completing his chores. "I told him he couldn't do that. But

he paid no attention to me and raised the whip. So I stepped between and caught the whip myself."¹⁶

Sometimes the dedication was shown by extra work in preparing the students for the eighth-grade examination. Carl Livingston got one of his teaching positions because some of the students had not passed their eighth-grade examination the previous year. He was to get those students ready for successful completion of the exam. He worked for a number of months with the students, and when spring came, they took the tests. Their scores were not just adequate, but quite high. Margie Thomas, retired Montana one-room teacher, recalled that several of her students had needed similar help when she first started teaching prior to World War II. She tutored them during the fall and winter months, often taking them home with her after school. The students passed the eighth grade examination. Then after several years had passed, she received a letter from one young serviceman, thanking her: "I never would have made it (the rank he had achieved in the service) if you hadn't taken me home with you and worked so hard with me that winter."¹⁷

The eighth grade exams were very difficult. Muilenburg stated, "We didn't give them ourselves. They went to town for the eighth grade exams." Students who failed remained in school one more year, so there was motivation to work hard preparing for the tests. According to Minnie Wellman Hillman, who taught for many years in Greenwood County, Kansas, the exams often took two days to be given and covered reading, mathematics, spelling, writing, geography, and history. The student had to achieve a certain average to pass.¹⁸

The students worked hard at their lessons and played hard at recess. Some examples of the games they played in the country schools were "Annie Over," "Dare Base," and "Fox and Geese." These traditional games involved a principle of the winning side "capturing" the loser and that individual became part of the winning team. Most of these games involved a lot of chasing, and so a lot of energy was quickly spent. The teachers rarely took part in the games, because they were usually busy with preparing classwork. But on the occasion that the teacher did participate, it was as a player, not a referee. The children thus learned to settle their own disputes. Fairness did not always abound, but the children learned to recognize it when it was displayed. Also, they learned to be resourceful in determining what they were going to play, because they had few objects to play with. "Annie Over" used the schoolhouse roof and a ball, which had to be thrown over the roof to the opposing side. "Fox and Geese" involved tramping a pathway in the snow, which made the boundaries of the game. Wilma Higbe remembered one of her first schools when she was very young, and three of the seventh- and eighth-grade boys were much bigger than she. She said that she never played at recess with the children that year because they all loved to play tag football. Occasionally visiting schools would share in a recess, and then the older boys kept fairness in and roughness out of the games.¹⁹

The country school became a second home to the children. They felt responsible for it and often carried in wood, coal, or corncocks for the stove to heat the room. These children helped the teacher and considered the school their own. Hillman recalled that when she first started teaching, there was a school board member who would

rearrange her classroom at every school board meeting, and she would have to put it all back to her liking the next day. This school board member had attended that school as a child and wanted the classroom arranged as it had been then, as if it had been his childhood home. The one-room school was a home away from home to the rural children, and their classmates and teacher made up the family.²⁰

The children cared about each other in the country schools. Muilenburg recalled that the same little German boy who had said the flag salute carried lunch to school each day; the lunch consisted of lard spread over homemade bread. The other children noticed this, and asked if they could bring something extra for him and his sisters. The children brought extra fried chicken, and offered it to the little boy. He said, "No thanks. No danke, thanks." He went on eating his lard bread and said, "Lard bread, yum, yum, Schmalzbrot." He was a very proud child.²¹

Many of the youthful teachers of the one-room country schools were born and raised within the community and benefited from working among friends. Such was the case of Frances Martin Bruce, who taught for thirty years in Lyon County, Kansas. Bruce recalled that she began teaching in the early 1930s in a one-room country school near Admire, Kansas. Her mother died during her first year of teaching, leaving Bruce with several younger brothers and sisters at home to help care for. Due to her workload, her school board relocated her after just one year, from a school where she had to do janitor work to a school where no janitor work was required.²²

In Crook County, Wyoming, Mildren Morgan, a retired country teacher, recalled that a rule of her one-room school was that the doors were

never locked and kindling was always left in the building, so that anyone needing shelter could find it there. However, there was one day that she came into the classroom and found the kindling gone and sardine cans littering the floor. She remembered how angry she was over that misuse of the privilege of shelter. Morgan reminisced about another time when a particularly bad blizzard struck. She sent all the children home early, but allowed too little time for herself, and she was caught there overnight. She spent the night using her coat as a pillow, alternately sleeping and getting up frequently to feed the stove.²³

According to Andrew Gulliford, historian and former one-room teacher, "The teaching and learning that took place in country schools was, at best, a fulfillment of Thomas Jefferson's vision of public education and, at worst, a haphazard process. In all cases, the quality of education was determined by the teacher's abilities, the local community's resources and the students themselves."²⁴

These isolated buildings that the children thronged to on a fall morning, were places of learning, and also shelter during a storm, but just as important for the isolated rural people, they were community centers.

Notes to Chapter Two

1. "Country School Success," Humanities On The Frontier (Silt, Colorado: Country School Legacy, 1981), 15; Fuller, Old Country School, p. 186.
2. Ethel Gillette, "The Biggest Little Room in the World," Sheridan (Wyoming) Journal, 29 March 1978.
3. Coughenour quoted from One-Room Country School.
4. Beth Muilenburg, and Higbe, quoted from One-Room Country School; author's experience at Corinth #7, four miles west of Humboldt, Iowa, 1940-41; Fuller, Old Country School, p. 185.
5. Records of the County Superintendent of Schools, Register of Deeds, Lyon County Courthouse, Emporia, Kansas; Kansas Educational Commission, Bulletin No. 1, Reprinted in Kansas State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Sixteenth Biennial Report, 1908, 63; C. W. A. Luckey, ed., The Rural Teacher of Nebraska, U. S. Department of Interior, Bulletin No. 20 (1919), 23.
6. Humanities on The Frontier, p. 15; Margie Thomas oral interview taken by Joanne McBane, May 21, 1987 (collection at Lyon County Historical Museum, Emporia, Kansas).
7. Muilenburg quoted from One-Room Country School; Beth Muilenburg oral interview taken by Joanne McBane, November 5, 1986 (Flint Hills Oral History Project).
8. Lois Emrick, "Nurse Turns Teacher Long Ago," Sheridan (Wyoming) Press, 14 April 1981.
9. Lois Emrick, "Country Schools Defended," Sheridan Press, 21 April 1981; Fuller, Old Country School, p. 245.

10. Emrick, "Nurse Turns Teacher Long Ago."
11. Herbert Quick, One Man's Life (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill Publishing Company, 1924) 244.
12. Carl Livingston oral interview taken by Joanne McBane, November 17, 1982 (Flint Hills Oral History Project).
13. Hamlin Garland, Boy Life on The Prairie (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1959), 284.
14. Higbe, One-Room Country School.
15. Ibid., Muilenburg.
16. Emrick, "Nurse Turns Teacher Long Ago."
17. Livingston interview; Thomas interview.
18. Muilenburg quoted from One-Room Country School; Humanities on The Frontier; Minnie Wellman Hillman oral interview taken by Tom Isern, 1982 (collection at Greenwood County Historical Museum, Eureka, Kansas); Fuller, Old Country School, p. 214.
19. Tom Isern, "Recess Games of the Old Country School," Tales Out of School (Center for Great Plains Studies, Emporia State University, February 1987); Higbe recollections in One-Room Country School; Garland, Boy Life on The Prairie, p. 286.
20. Hillman interview.
21. Muilenburg interview.
22. Frances Bruce oral interview taken by Joanne McBane, November 11, 1982 (Flint Hills Oral History Project).
23. Lois Emrick, "Country School Teaching Methods Varied," Sheridan Press, 31 March 1981.
24. Andrew Gulliford, America's Country Schools (Washington: The Preservation Press, 1984) 47.

CHAPTER 3: THE SCHOOLHOUSE AS A GATHERING PLACE

Isolation was the constant companion of the rural settlers on the Great Plains as well as in the Middle Border states. Because of this isolation, as soon as there were several families in an area, building a school was the first task accomplished. Many of the schools were erected, or dug out of the ground as in some Kansas and Nebraska districts, even before a church was built. These one-room buildings averaged twenty feet by thirty feet. They were run by an elected school board, which typically consisted of three men; a moderator or chairman, who conducted the school board meetings; a clerk, who took notes at meetings; and a treasurer, who was in charge of the collecting and disbursing of funds. All three men also gave permission for any use of the school building.¹

The community took its identity from the schoolhouse, as it was the only public building of any size on the Great Plains. Edward Everett Dale, author and historian, after teaching one year at the Deep Red school in Oklahoma, wrote, "I now felt very much at home in the Deep Red community." Often rural people would identify the area in which they lived by saying they were from Corinth School community, in much the same fashion that town people would identify themselves with the name of their village or town. This has continued down to contemporary times. For example, the Rinker Corner is so named because of the Rinker School located nearby in Lyon County, Kansas. The school ceased to function years ago, but the corner is still identified. According to Gulliford, "The more isolated the community, the more important the schoolhouse."²

Besides its obvious task of providing basic learning, the role of the school in the rural community was threefold: it provided identity to the community as a whole, identity to individuals within the community, and a social gathering place for all.

In many small communities church services were held at the schoolhouse by religious groups who did not have the money to build a church. Lillian Van Natta Smith, whose mother immigrated to Kansas in 1860, recalled from her childhood an abandoned log cabin that was used as both a church and school: there was no musical instrument, so the little group used an old-style tuning fork to start the hymn, and her mother and father always started the singing because they both had such good voices. She reminisced on the happiness among those people at the services.³

Rancher-become-president, Theodore Roosevelt, loved to hunt in the West, and Colorado became one of his favorite camping places. While there on April 30, 1905, he attended and spoke at a church service held by an itinerant minister at the Blue School (later called the Blue Goose School), near Rifle, Colorado. Roosevelt wrote, "The crowd was so large that the exercises had to take place in the open air, and it was pleasant to look at the strong frames and rugged, weather-beaten faces of the men; while as for the women, one respected them even more than the men."⁴

Often special school programs were put on to raise money for the school to buy extra luxuries, perhaps a set of encyclopedias, a new clock, or treats for the Christmas program. The most popular of these fund-raising events were box socials. The ladies--old, young and even pre-schoolers--spent much time decorating boxes or baskets, which then

were filled with delicious food. The boxes and baskets were amassed at the front of the classroom and auctioned off to the highest bidders. Cupid occasionally made his presence known among the young men and women, because the added treat of buying a box was eating supper with the young lady who had brought it.⁵

One of the most joyful times in the country schools was the Christmas pageant or play. The children loved to make decorations for the event and often spent all their spare time making colorful paper chains. Bettye Coughenour recalled that one of the fathers would bring in a tree and set it in the corner away from the woodstove, and then the children would decorate it. Also, each child performed in the Christmas program, according to Margie Thomas. For some students this would be their first big accomplishment, and the program provided reward and motivation. All the families in the community came to the Christmas program to see the children perform. They also came to enjoy a fine time afterward when sandwiches, cake, and coffee provided by the families were shared with neighboring farmers and ranchers. Usually the small building became extremely crowded, but no one seemed to mind.⁶

Perhaps the biggest event of all was the picnic held on the last day of school in the spring of the year. School finished at noon, and the children and their parents gathered to spend the afternoon eating picnic lunch provided by the families, playing games, and just sitting and visiting with the other families. There was always a bountiful table of food--fried chicken, sandwiches, cakes, and pies--as well as a crowded schoolyard, with lots of activities going on simultaneously. This school picnic tradition has carried down to modern times. Near Decker, Montana, there are three one-room schools that all meet on the

last day of each school year for a shared picnic and afternoon of sports and games participated in by students and families from all three schools.⁷

The schoolhouse provided a meeting place for community gatherings, such as literary societies, elections, and dances. One of the most famous and popular activities of the literary societies was the debate. Some of the topics for debate were quite bizarre. "Is a load of seed potatoes or a load of women most needed in the community?" was the subject for a debate in Uinta County, Utah, in 1933. Some of the topics were equally humorous, but most were quite philosophical and moralistic. The people themselves did the debating; they learned about Robert's Rules of Order and conducted their debates with a great deal of vigor. However, sometimes the debates became too heated and fist-fights broke out. The rural people used this debating as a political activity also. There were many politicians who got their start from debating or speaking in a literary society meeting at a country schoolhouse.⁸

One very notable example was President Abraham Lincoln. He spoke before a literary society near New Salem in the early 1830s. Later, his debates with Stephen Douglas stirred a nation's interest, and ultimately helped his presidential campaign.⁹

Local, state, and national elections were important to the newly immigrated people, and they used their schoolhouses as a place to vote; to hear a political figure speak on the issues; or just to find out from their neighbors what was happening in their own state, county, or district. Marshall A. Barber, author of Schoolhouse at Prairie View, wrote a child's eye view of elections:

Presidential elections interested us children greatly. I experienced just one of them in Prairie View--it was in 1876; I can fix the date because most of us hurrahd for Hayes and Wheeler.

The elections taught us one thing, that with the privilege of free citizenship went that of free spitting--especially in the back part of the schoolhouse occupied by the big scholars on school days. There some citizens doubtless long debated before they cast their ballots, then voted as they had ruminated. It was eventually the teacher who suffered most through elections: he had to clean up the building after them.¹⁰

The rural tradition of voting at the schoolhouse has continued into modern times. Many precincts in the rural areas of counties across the Middle Border and Great Plains still use the country schoolhouse as a voting place.¹¹

Dancing was a popular custom in some communities, and using the school for a dance was a direct reflection of the community's feelings. In some other communities dancing was thought to be sinful. Where it was approved, dances were important and well attended events at the schoolhouse. People would load the whole family in the wagon and come from miles around when they heard that a dance was to be held. The children played, danced, and when sleepy were put to bed on the school desks and chairs pushed around the edge of the room. Sometimes there were wedding dances at the school. In one instance, because of the scarcity of musicians, the bride did not once get to dance with the groom, as he was the only person in the community who could provide music, and he spent the entire evening playing the violin.¹²

Families came to these activities, dances, literaries, elections, box socials, picnics, and Christmas programs. Children were welcome. But there was one society that met in some of the rural one-room schools

that apparently did not welcome the younger family members on some occasions. M. A. Barber explained:

We children were not welcome at the secret meetings of the Grange, but our parents must have attended them. Once in rummaging in the school coal house we found a chest which contained some strange robes--regalia of the Grange, we were told. These must have belonged to a secret meeting, for who would wear such ridiculous things in the open? Maybe it was people's having to dress up at the meetings that caused the ultimate death of the society.¹³

The schoolboard that directed the activities of the school also did the hiring and firing of teachers. These schoolboards were responsible for making the rules governing the teacher's behavior. In some instances these rules were onerous. One of the rules was against marriage for the female teacher. Mary Ellen Sissman who taught for many years in Kansas, recalled that her first teaching contract for the year 1940-41 stipulated that she could not marry during her tenure, could not date high school boys, and had to attend church once a month. (Sissman later served in the Navy during World War II and received a Master Teacher Award from Emporia State University in 1970.) According to other retired teachers there were further capricious and unfair requirements. Every weekend had to be spent within the community, and no smoking or dancing was allowed. Frank Poppewell, Professor Emeritus of Missouri Western College, noted that these arbitrary rules were equally enforced with no thought of hearing for the teacher or protection of their rights.¹⁴

Before World War I many schoolboards required teachers to reside in the districts where they taught. It was not uncommon for a female teacher to be expected to room and board with some family previously selected within the community. In rural Nebraska one teacher's

experience with room and board was that she paid \$54 per year and had to help with the milking and getting supper for the family. E. E. Dale recalled that in the early 1900s he taught at Deep Red school and boarded with the Robinson family. They were exceptionally fine people. The family of five lived in a one-room dugout home, with two double beds, one of which Mr. Dale shared with Mr. Robinson, and the other of which was shared by the mother and three children. Privacy was a problem, and Dale quickly learned to dress under the covers. He recalled that the family worked out an excellent system so all could be comfortable.¹⁵

Most one-room schoolteachers were remarkably caring. The teacher became a friend to the community. Teachers not only roomed and boarded within the community, but they made the rounds of all the families to have dinner with them. This was a time for the teacher, family, and student to discuss any problems that were being encountered. Herbert Hoover, President, recalled from his childhood that his teacher was so close to his family that when his parents died, she wanted to adopt him, but the choice went instead to an aunt and uncle in Oregon.¹⁶

Because discipline was an important part of the school and community life, the family usually supported the school and teacher in every way possible. For example, Ruth Murphy, a retired Kansas one-room teacher, recalled meeting Elizabeth Maddox, who had boarded at her home and been her son's teacher. The conversation led back to a time when Murphy's son was naughty at school, and Maddox spanked him. When he got home his mother spanked him again. Maddox shared with Murphy how appalled she had been when she discovered that the child had received two spankings for such a minor misdeed.¹⁷

On the other hand some parents had to be fair and stand up to the over-zealous teacher who was bent on disciplining the children too severely. Such was the case related by John Ise in Sod and Stubble, when his teacher raced to his home after he had ducked out of school to avoid a whipping. Complaining to his parents, the teacher was told by Ise's father that it was her problem and she would have to solve it. Rosie Ise, the mother, commented that she could not understand it, because the child was good at home.¹⁸

Sometimes the discipline worked wonders. J. W. Crabtree, secretary of the National Education Association from 1917 to 1934, observed that his parents thought he was a "changed boy" after he received a whipping from Lizzie Moore, his one-room schoolteacher. She had wept after whipping him, saying it was the hardest thing she ever had to do. Then she implored him to be good and not cause her to do it again. Crabtree recalled that he never misbehaved in school again, and brought in fuel and swept the floor and steps for the teacher after that. His attempts at helpfulness even extended to the point that he and two other boys trounced another boy for sassing Lizzie Moore.¹⁹

Families were involved and cared about the school and the teacher. For example, Nona B. Thompson, retired Kansas teacher, recalled an extremely cold morning and a stubborn coal stove. This was her first year of teaching and she usually lived at home and drove back and forth to school, but an arrangement had been made with a family living a quarter mile from the school that she could board in bad weather. The weather turned cold, the temperature was below zero, and so Thompson was boarding. She walked to school and arrived to find a cold building and coal stove. Her hands were numb, and she could not get the fire

started. Then help came: ". . One of the parents arrived with his two little boys. He stripped off his heavy mittens and made me put them on, still warm from the warmth of his work-coarsened hands. Then he built up a roaring fire . ."20

Families were frequently involved with the building of the school-house. Such was the case with the Sarkowitz family. The mother and father were polish immigrants, homesteading near Sheridan, Wyoming, and their children were walking quite a distance to school. So the mother wrote a letter requesting a new school to President Woodrow Wilson. In 1913, Mr. Sarkowitz, some of his neighbors, and his son, armed with permission to build and plans for the new school, built Upper Dutch Creek school. They contributed their labor. In recent time this building went on the auction block to be sold and moved. One of the Sarkowitz daughters, Mrs. LaGala, a retired Chicago music teacher, heard of the sale of "papa's school" and contacted the rest of the family. The Sarkowitz children put their money together and made a bid for the building, hoping to move it to the family homestead.²¹

Families with children who had slight handicaps in learning were helped by the cooperative classroom structure. Margie Thomas recalled one little girl she taught who was slow in learning, but was progressing and was a sweet and helpful child. Thomas remarked, "She would make a good and productive citizen." When the child progressed to town school at the seventh grade, the school authorities promptly placed her in a class for the retarded. Thomas recalled how shocked and hurt both she and the child felt, for it was completely unnecessary.²²

The term "mainstreaming" was not even thought of in the one-room situation according to Sally Smith, author of No Easy Answers: The

Learning Disabled Child. She stated that in the one-room schoolhouse of the past, the student was allowed to mature at his own pace, remained with his schoolmates, and in fact, was tutored by them and the teacher. Smith claimed, "Putting learning disabled or educationally handicapped children back into the classroom is not applicable to country schools, for these children were never excluded."²³

The students who graduated from these small, isolated buildings were truly educated. One study done at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln in 1932 revealed that a single one-room school in Jefferson County, Nebraska, graduated students during the drought and crop failure years of the 1890s, ". . . Eleven of whom graduated from college, and three from a conservatory of music. Twelve became teachers, one an attorney, one an engineer, one a noted eye specialist, one a prominent artist, and two were widely known musicians. Several were successful farmers . . ." ²⁴

They could read, and had skills in writing, arithmetic, and spelling, but even more important, they had a sense of community and identity through that school and their community which enhanced their education. They were people such as Mrs. LaGala, or Presidents Herbert Hoover or Abraham Lincoln, or Walter Chrysler, the auto maker. They were people who went on to work and succeed with their lives, because they were educated in academics, creativity, and responsibility. They knew how to think. Specifically, Beth Muilenburg recalled that her little German family had done quite well. The oldest daughter became a scientist at NASA, and the younger was a nursing supervisor until her retirement.²⁵

Perhaps the success of the one-room school was that there was a support system that included the community, the family, the teacher, and the student. They all worked and played together. That is what made the school not just a gathering place, but a learning place.

However, these small, autonomous units could not withstand the kind of pressure placed on them by professional educators and by demographics. With few exceptions, they finally succumbed to consolidation.

Notes for Chapter Three

1. Fuller, Old Country School, p. 80.
2. Quoted from Edward Everett Dale, Frontier Historian: The Life And Work of Edward Everett Dale (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975), 69; author's experience at Corinth school and in present day Lyon County, Kansas; Humanities on The Frontier, p. 39.
3. Joanna Stratton, Pioneer Women, Voices From The Kansas Frontier (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981), 173.
4. Quoted from Theodore Roosevelt, Outdoor Pastimes of An American Hunter (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1908), 96.
5. Humanities on The Frontier, p. 40.
6. Coughenour, One-Room Country School; Thomas interview; Humanities on The Frontier, p. 43.
7. Author's experience at Corinth school; Terry Punt oral interview taken by Joanne McBane, May 18, 1987 (collection at Lyon County Historical Museum).
8. Gulliford, America's Country Schools, pp. 84, 85.
9. Carl Sandburg, Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years (Volume I, New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1926), 138.
10. Humanities on The Frontier, p. 38; Marshall A. Barber, Schoolhouse at Prairie View, 1868-1953 (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1953), 64, 65.
11. Author's experience in North Lyon County.
12. Humanities on The Frontier, p. 38.
13. Barber, Schoolhouse at Prairie View, p. 64.
14. Mary Ellen Sissman oral interview taken by Tom Isern, May 19, 1982 (collection at Greenwood County Historical Museum);

Erma Peterson oral interview taken by Tom Isern, February 24, 1982 (collection at Greenwood County Historical Museum); Frank S. Poppewell, Teacher In Missouri: 1925-1972 (St. Joseph, Missouri: Poppewell Printing, 1981), private collection at St. Joseph Public Library, 80, 81.

15. Rural Teacher of Nebraska, p. 45; Dale, Frontier Historian, pp. 58, 59.

16. Herbert Hoover, Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: Years of Adventure, 1874-1920 (New York: Macmillan Company, 1951), 5.

17. Ruth Murphy, Wilma Higbe, and Bettye Coughenour oral interview taken by Joanne McBane, November, 1986 (tape is in author's possession).

18. John Ise, Sod And Stubble, The Story of a Kansas Homestead (New York: Wilson Erickson, 1936), 237, 238.

19. J. W. Crabtree, What Counted Most (New York: University Publishing Company, 1935), 12, 13.

20. Quoted from Nona Brown Thompson, "Teen Age 'Teach'," (manuscript at Kansas Collection, Spencer Library, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas).

21. Judy Skalla, "Sarkowitz Children Want 'Papa's School'," (unidentified clipping, Rural School Collection, Sheridan County Fulmer Public Library, Sheridan, Wyoming).

22. Thomas interview.

23. Gulliford, America's Country Schools, p. 123.

24. Fuller, Old Country School, p. 3.

25. Muilenburg interview.

CHAPTER 4: END OF AN ERA

"The most pressing educational problem today is the rural school."

With these words a campaign for consolidation was expanded by the Kansas State Superintendent of Public Instruction in 1908. Fifty years later the following headline accompanied an article in the Emporia Gazette on August 22, 1957: "Another Landmark Fades Away . . . Ruggles Schoolhouse Sale Closes a 70-year Chapter." In this span of time the consolidation of rural schools was almost completely accomplished in Kansas and across the Middle Border and Great Plains states.¹

Frances Jones, a retired Lyon County Superintendent and the person who oversaw the auction of Ruggles School, recalled that when she began her term of office in 1953, there were 67 to 70 one-room schools in Lyon County. When she retired in 1963, there were just 6. She remarked:

The state took care of [eliminating] the schools themselves because the law stated that the State could not give aid to any school who had less than [so many pupils]. One year it jumped to 6, and then on to 7, 8, 9, and 10. So in five years they increased [the quota] by 1 student [per year].²

Beth Muilenburg recalled that during her tenure as county superintendent from 1945 through 1951 in Howard, Kansas, the number of school districts shrank from 90 to 16. It is a paradox that the same office of superintendent which originally was in charge of training the youthful one-room teachers, would be the one to accomplish the closing of those one-room schools. Finally, the consolidation movement achieved its culmination in the post-World War II period.³

Yet as early as 1877, the Kansas law for the common school required a minimum of fifteen children between the ages of five and twenty-one to reside in a district for that district to qualify for any bonded indebtedness. Apparently that law was not chosen to be enforced until the 1950s.⁴

Professional educators were the major influence in the consolidation movement; efficient use of economic resources was the central theme of their campaign. But there were other forces at work simultaneously. Demographics played a part both in post-World War II population movement, rural to town, and in the opening of job markets for women. Also, the small, autonomous school boards and teachers played an unwitting role in the consolidation of schools; again economics played a part, as costs for maintenance of the buildings and paying teachers salaries was a burden taxwise.

Cost efficiency was one of the main arguments used by the professional educators to further the consolidation cause. Yet this cost efficiency was not always so well served. In 1907 the Kansas state superintendent wrote: "If through consolidation or otherwise these rural schools could be brought to have an average attendance of say 35 pupils, the number of teachers required therein would be one-half the number now employed." By 1960 the State Superintendent of Public Instruction in Kansas had a staff of 40 professional persons (none of whom taught in a classroom) and 39 clerical and secretarial employees. The report did not mention how many maintenance persons were employed. In the 1958-60 fiscal year almost one-third of the budget of the Kansas Department of Education was for administrative cost, including accreditation and certification. The duties of this

State Department of Education was described: "Before recent years the State Superintendent and his staff had an inspectorial function; now persuasion and leadership are the chief means used to improve education in Kansas."⁵

Other cost efficiencies were claimed in the transportation of students to the newly consolidated schools. Whereas walking to school was the main transport to the one-room rural school, consolidation required transporting the students to a central school. With cost efficiency in mind, the State Department of Public Instruction recommended in 1908 that person (preferably a high school student) could be hired to drive the wagon and carry the children to and from the school. This would entail an estimated four hours a day, and it was recommended the driver be paid \$30 per month. Additionally, the \$30 per month for the driver was said to be "clear profit" for the entire school year. Ironically, in that same year (1908) teachers in Lyon County one-room schools were earning \$42.50 per month.⁶

Besides efficiency, the professional educators stressed that the supervision of rural education was poor. In the 1917-18 Biennial Report, the Kansas State Superintendent of Public Instruction wrote:

School laws need revision particularly because of the rural school. It is the most backward and undeveloped element of our school system . . . Expert guidance . . . is almost wholly lacking in rural schools.

Following that in 1923, J. M. Foote of the National Education Association, commented that "the justification for change from [one-room to consolidated schools] was based wholly on administrative conditions prevailing in the centralized school." He claimed the superiority

of consolidated schools in elementary instruction was administrative difference.⁷

From the 1860s through World War II, the local farmers were the autonomous rulers of the education delivered within their districts. They were locally elected. These farmer-school board members hired, fired, and replaced teachers; made sure the building was in repair; and took care of the funding for the books, wood, and other requirements for the one-room school.⁸

Unfortunately, these school boards characteristically believed that teachers were being overpaid, according to Roy Chambers, who taught at several one-room country schools during the 1930s. He related how the school board members often tried to persuade the teacher to work for less salary in their second or third year of teaching.⁹

Low salaries accounted for much movement by teachers from school to school, and often from school to a job other than teaching, as was the case with Vernon Grundy. In the early 1930s he began his teaching career at Climax, Kansas, with salary of \$75 per month in a one-room country school. Later at another school he had to take his paycheck to each school board member for his signature before it was negotiable. Grundy recalled that his salary ranged up to \$90 per month by the late 1930s. During World War II Grundy worked in a refinery, and after the war he owned and operated a hardware store. He did not teach again.¹⁰

In the post-World War II era, school boards changed in composition with the consolidation movement. The state departments of education also altered the methods of election to school boards. According

to Nancy Lalouette, a resident of Chase County and graduate student at Emporia State University, the Kansas State Department of Education in the early 1970s mapped out how consolidation of five high schools and twelve grade schools would be accomplished in Chase County. Of necessity, a central school board also needed to be established. A locally-governed planning board was appointed and after study, they recommended to KSDE:

One Unified District in Chase County Planning Unit and board members elected from three sub-districts, two from each sub-district. The entire district will vote for every board member.

KSDE approved all the recommendations except allowing the entire district to vote for each board member.¹¹

When the population was sparse and mostly rural, in 1880, there were 100,000 school districts in the United States. These three- to four-mile square districts were administered by three-man school boards. In 1981, with a population near 225 million, there were only 16,000 school districts in the nation. These school districts covered whole counties in some instances, and were technically run by a school board; but in fact, they were run by the professional educators from the state departments of education dispatching through the superintendents of the districts to the principals of the schools. At the bottom of the chain was the teacher.¹²

Although professional educators, demographics, economics and local farmer-school board members played a part in the demise of the one-room country school, there was at least one other cause. One of the basics in learning, along with reading, writing, and arithmetic, was the teacher. The turnover of teachers in the one-room country

school was rapid. It was rare for a teacher to remain in a particular rural school for more than one year. This turnover of individual teachers played a part in the closing of the one-room school.

Teachers moved from school to school with the regularity of migratory birds. The turnover rate in Nebraska prior to World War I was averaged at 1.85 terms taught in one school. Lyon County, Kansas, experienced a similar trend for the year 1893 through 1910 (as noted on Table I). In the eight districts surveyed, the average teacher tenure was 1.35 terms taught in one school. District #242 in Wabaunsee County, Kansas, had a similar rapid turnover in the year 1869 through World War I, and then the teacher tenure became more stable.¹³

In moving from one school to another teachers cited higher salary as the primary reason in most cases. The lows and highs of salaries in Lyon County, Kansas, for 1902 ranged from \$25 per month through \$50 per month. These were teachers with third- and second-grade certificates, respectively. The average salary of teachers for the 1914-15 school year in Nebraska was \$47.69 per month.¹⁴

There were other reasons for teachers to leave the one-room school, one of which was furthering their careers through higher education. Standards in the field of teaching created requirements far beyond the simple high school normal training that was the foundation for many rural one-room schoolteachers. In 1922 a national survey of one-room schools showed that one-third of all teachers had no professional training and that one-fourth left teaching every year to be replaced by inexperienced teachers. Therefore, furthering their education became an important part of teachers' lives. Frances Bruce returned to college each summer to attain her diploma. Others took

TABLE I
 TABLE ILLUSTRATING TEACHER TURNOVER
 Teachers, Type of Certification, and Monthly Salary
 in Selected School Districts of Lyon County, Kansas: 1893-1910

SCHOOL YEAR	SCHOOL DISTRICT - Number and Name			
	#4 Duck Creek	#5 Waterloo	#30 Badger Creek	#37 Rosean
1893/94	R. Spiker 1st \$50	L. Robb 2nd \$35	I. Carmine N.D. \$40	R. Walworth 1st \$40
1894/95	A. Blair 2nd \$40	O. Richerd \$31.25	A. Conard 1st \$40	M. Scheel Life \$33.33
1895/96	L. Kerr \$40	A. Wilkinson \$40	M. Salisbury \$40	J. Stewart \$42.50
1896/97	L. Kerr \$40	A. Gardner \$35	D. Sisler \$40	A. Conard \$35
1897/98	W. Burnap 2nd \$40	R. Hubbard Life \$37	E. Sisler Life \$37.50	M. Sallee 2nd \$35
1898/99	J. Broyles 2nd \$40	L. Drinkwater 1st \$40	I. Leich 2nd \$35	U. Wolf 2nd \$40
1899/1900	W. Burnap 1st \$40	L. Drinkwater 1st \$40	L. Caldwell 1st \$40	G. Wolfe 2nd \$40
1900/01	U. Wolf 2nd \$45	E. Sutton 2nd \$40	E. Jones Life \$40	L. Smith Life \$40
1901/02	B. Spiker 2nd	B. Houghton 3rd	E. Sword 2nd	F. Langley 2nd \$40
1902/03	P. Phillips 2nd \$35	A. Botsford State \$40	M. Myers 2nd \$40	M. Pinkham
1903/04	P. Phillips 2nd \$40	M. Wagner 3rd \$40	M. Loomis 2nd \$45	A. Powers 2nd \$40
1904/05	A. Powers 2nd \$45	M. Wagner 2nd \$45	M. Loomis 1st \$52.50	C. Wright 2nd \$45
1905/06	A. Powers 1st \$50	B. Johnson State \$42.50	G. Madison \$45	N. Knause 2nd \$40
1906/07	N. Loy 3rd \$45	N. Welsh 2nd \$45	H. Jones 2nd \$50	E. O'Conner 1st \$47.50
1907/08	N. Loy 3rd \$45	F. Wright 2nd \$45	A. McGahey 2nd \$50	E. O'Conner 1st \$50
1908/09	I. VanGundy	L. Davis	N. Welsh 2nd \$50	F. Lewis
1909/10	S. Wilson	B. Gravette	I. Watson	F. Lewis

Source: Records of County Superintendent of Schools,
Register of Deeds, Lyon County Courthouse,
 Emporia, Kansas.

TABLE I (Continued)

TABLE ILLUSTRATING TEACHER TURNOVER

Teachers, Type of Certification, and Monthly Salary
in Selected School Districts of Lyon County, Kansas: 1893-1910

SCHOOL YEAR	SCHOOL DISTRICT - Number and Name			
	#42 Wheeler	#65 Maxon	#73 Dry Creek	#76 Ireland
1893/94	W. Miller N.D. \$40	B. Gordon 2nd \$35	G. Roberts \$40	L. Geraghty 2nd \$37.50
1894/95	N. Clark 3rd \$35	B. Steele 2nd \$33	M. Stine	A. Gaughan
1895/96	E. Thomas	G. See \$37.50	G. Rhodes \$40	A. Gaughan
1896/97	E. Thomas \$40	E. Sutton \$40	G. Rhodes	A. Gaughan \$40
1897/98	W. McKinley 2nd \$35	L. Brown Life \$35	J. Brewer 2nd \$40	C. Burke 1st \$40
1898/99	L. Plumb Life \$35	L. Brown	G. Gasche Temp. \$40	C. Durin 3rd \$40
1899/1900	E. Thomson 1st \$40	E. Curt 1st \$42	L. Batch 2nd \$40	J. Duggan
1900/01	C. Aldrich 2nd \$40	M. Cook 3rd \$40	E. Curt 2nd \$35	J. Duggan 2nd \$40
1901/02	A. Sayre 2nd	J. Blair 3rd	W. Hammond 1st	J. Duggan 2nd
1902/03	E. O'Conner 2nd \$38	E. Sutton 2nd \$40	J. Duggan	A. Gaughan
1903/04	E. O'Conner 2nd \$37.50	E. Stoner 2nd \$45	J. Duggan 2nd \$40	A. Gaughan 2nd \$40
1904/05	I. Gordon 1st \$45	M. McDermott 2nd \$50	R. Marsh State \$35	A. Gaughan 1st \$45
1905/06	I. Grimsley 2nd \$40	B. Ison 2nd \$42.50	B. Tucker 3rd \$40	A. Gaughan 1st \$45
1906/07	C. Rector 1st \$47.50	B. Ison 2nd \$50	H. Brock 1st \$45	A. Gaughan 2nd \$45
1907/08	B. Brown 2nd \$42.50	B. Hormel 1st \$50	S. Smith 2nd \$40	K. Duggan 2nd \$40
1908/09	N. Snoddy	B. Brown	N. Johnson	M. Begbie
1909/10	N. Snoddy	M. Charlesworth	E. Rector	M. Begbie

Source: Records of County Superintendent of Schools,
Register of Deeds, Lyon County Courthouse
Emporia, Kansas.

a sabbatical to attend college full-time, as did Roy Chambers.¹⁵

A different teacher every year did not lend stability to the one-room country school, and when the professional educators suggested that it would be cheaper to combine the little units into one larger, consolidated, graded unit, the farmer-school board member thought it was an efficient idea. The teacher also thought it was a good plan, as it would alleviate isolation and would afford the teaching of one single class of students, all of whom were approximately the same age and a achievement level. It would also yield a higher salary. Evidence of the teacher movement to consolidated schools is demonstrated in the Nebraska survey of 1914-15 in which only 43 percent of teachers responded that they would like to remain in the rural one-room school. (Of interest, in modern times, western Nebraska has the largest number of one-room schools still in operation; and the responders to the survey of 1914-15 were mostly from the eastern districts of Nebraska.)¹⁶

Teaching was an acceptable profession for single women up the post-World War II era, when acceptable employment was expanded to include many other fields. Just as the population had grown and simultaneously shifted from mostly rural to mostly urban, so there were major changes in the employment picture for women after World War II. Working during the war in munitions factories had liberated single women for jobs other than teaching. Predictably a teacher shortage developed in the 1950s. Professional educators alleviated the problem by hiring married women who taught classes if they had college, and worked as teacher aides if not college-trained. The main goal of these teachers was to pay off a house-mortgage or put some money aside for their children's college. They were a different kind of teacher.¹⁷

Despite the difficulties of the one-room country school experience, a high quality of learning transpired. The students who learned in the one-room school had a great advantage over their city cousins. Many retired teachers testified to the quality of education given there. For instance, Ruth Rice remembered that of her high school graduating class in the 1920s, all but one of the honor students were from rural, one-room schools.¹⁸

A comparative study of one-room, ungraded rural schools versus consolidated, graded schools done in the 1920s agreed that the quality of learning in the rural setting was excellent. In fact, language and writing scores of rural students surpassed those of consolidated students; and reading comprehension and arithmetic were equal scores for both types of schools. Considering the one-room students were slightly younger (1/8 year) than the consolidated students, these scores were remarkable. Although at the time of publication of the study, the author, J. M. Foote, claimed it proved the value of city or consolidated schooling. Another study in the 1920s by C. W. Odell, Professor at University of Illinois, found that one-room school students worked at a more accelerated pace than their consolidated counterparts.¹⁹

As professional educators entered teaching in the late 1800s, the normal schools for teachers became the sought-after solution for teacher training. Soon a system of standardization caused one-room rural teachers to feel inferior. Their quest for higher education, higher salary, and easier work was the end result. After the rural teachers moved to the consolidated schools, and gradually succumbed to the standards applied by the professional educators, they taught only to the norm. They lost some of their concern for the whole student, individual

acceleration and the student's ability to communicate. The consolidated, graded school was the answer for the professional well-trained teacher.

What both the farmer-school board member and the teacher neglected to study was the loss of autonomy that accompanied the move from one-room school to consolidated school. The farmer was no longer absolute authority in the ways of the classroom and the school building. In consolidated schools the teacher was deprived of the freedom of establishing classroom structure, but then had less responsibility. They both lost control when consolidation occurred.

There were peculiar conditions in the rural one-room school which aided the learning process. The students heard their teacher read every morning from some book of adventure or humor; they had a teacher who played in games at recess; they listened to recitations of the older students and participated with all the students from grades one through eight at recess games and in classroom studies. The rural children were taught reading, comprehension, and communication by teachers and fellow-students who were skilled in those fields. Teachers tasks were difficult, but most remained very enthusiastic about school.

The much maligned, autonomous, creative and under-educated one-room school teacher was teaching communication skills in those isolated country schools. The student was expected to think and reason his way through problems and to communicate his conclusions effectively. The farmer-school board member fostered this learning environment. All this ended with the closing of the rural one-room schools.

Yet studies of the past fifty years have shown that a teaching model of one-on-one, such as teacher-to-pupil, or pupil-to-pupil, produces greater learning. These studies have also demonstrated that groups

learn better than individuals, and group learning certainly was part of the learning situation in the one-room country schools. What has been the consequence of the century and one-half push to graded, consolidated schools?

Notes to Chapter Four

1. Fairchild, Sixteenth Biennial Report, p. 89; "Another Landmark Fades Away," Emporia (Kansas) Gazette, 22 August 1947.
2. Quoted from Frances Jones oral interview taken by Joanne McBane (Flint Hills Oral History Project).
3. Muilenburg interview; Fuller, Old Country School, p. 156.
4. Allen B. Lemmon, Kansas School Laws, 1877, issued by Kansas State Superintendent of Public Instruction (Topeka: George W. Martin, Kansas Publishing House, 1877), 52.
5. Adel F. Throckmorton, 1958-60 Education in Kansas, A Progress Report, issued by Kansas State Superintendent of Public Instruction (Topeka: State Printing Office, 1960), 13.
6. Fairchild, Sixteenth Biennial Report, p. 219; Records of The County Superintendent of Schools, Lyon County Courthouse.
7. W. D. Ross, Twenty-First Biennial Report, issued by Kansas State Superintendent of Public Instruction (Topeka: Kansas State Printing Office, 1918), 8; John M. Foote, "A Comparative Study of Instruction, Consolidated and One Teacher Schools," Journal of Rural Education, 2 (April 1923): 530, 532.
8. Fuller, Old Country School, p. 80.
9. Roy Chambers oral interview taken by Tom Isern (collection at Greenwood County Historical Museum).
10. Vernon Grundy oral interview taken by Tom Isern (collection at Greenwood County Historical Museum).
11. Nancy Lalouette, "High School Consolidation in Chase County, Kansas," December 3, 1986 (manuscript, Tom Isern, Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas), 1, 2.

12. Poppewell, Teacher in Missouri, pp. 139, 157.
13. Records of The County Superintendent of Schools, Lyon County Courthouse; Souvenir Record from Wabaunsee County, Kansas, Snokoma School, District 24, 1869-1947, Silent Workers Club, May 18, 1975.
14. Records of The County Superintendent of Schools, Lyon County Courthouse; Rural Teacher of Nebraska, pp. 53, 56.
15. Mabel Carney, "Preparation of Rural Teachers," School And Society, XVIII (1 September 1923): 251; Bruce interview; Chambers interview.
16. Rural Teacher of Nebraska, p. 44.
17. Poppewell, Teacher in Missouri, p. 152.
18. Emrick, "Country Schools Defended."
19. Foote, "A Comparative Study of Instruction," pp. 337, 348; C. W. Odell, "Educational Research and Statistics," School And Society, XIX (3 May 1924): 531.

CHAPTER 5: WHAT HAPPENED TO LEARNING?

"The American public school system founded a century and a half ago was a bold and magnificent dream, the most democratic and charitable achievement of any people in recorded history . . . Today public education is in trouble. Millions of parents are enrolling their children in private schools." These words were written in 1981 by Frank Poppewell as an introduction to a history of his teaching career, which spanned forty-seven years.¹

In 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in Education reported:

Our nation is at risk . . . If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. We have even squandered the gains in student achievement made in the wake of the Sputnik challenge. Moreover, we have dismantled essential support systems which helped make those gains possible. We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament . . . Our society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling. . .²

Other authors also wrote of the crisis in education, dating back to Leslie Hart, author and educator, in 1969, when he denounced the "classroom disaster." He laid blame on the organization of schools through classroom and grades, which he said was "slightly less modern than the covered wagon."³

Thomas Jefferson's dream was a literate nation that could exercise well the responsibility of governing. To accomplish that dream many professional educators, led by Horace Mann and others, organized, consolidated, and standardized the public school system in the United States through the last one hundred and fifty years. This has achieved illiteracy among the people; demoralization among the teachers; and

humiliation among the students. All unwittingly accomplished in the name of education. The major contributors to the failure of education have been competition, threat, and rote learning, used within the standardized and graded system that the professional educators evolved in their campaign for efficient, consolidated schools.

According to Jonathan Kozol, teacher and author, a study of literacy in 1984 showed the United States ranked 49 among the 158 member nations of the United Nations; fully one-third of the adult American population was illiterate or functionally illiterate. Kozol's definition of functional literacy--mastery through the 8th grade level--has been accepted by several experts in the field of adult literacy; although he has been labeled an extremist and alarmist by others. He also reported that in 1984 the United States government spent 100 million dollars, an amount equalling \$1.65 per illiterate, to help them become literate. From the early 1970s through the mid-1980s the number of illiterate and functionally illiterate had grown three times greater.⁴

In 1983 Barbara Bush, wife of Vice President George Bush, wrote: "The United States today is confronted with an extremely serious national problem--illiteracy." Mrs. Bush, who worked for several years in the area of educating for reading, advocates volunteerism and corporate involvement in reading programs.⁵

Because of the great concern with illiteracy, there have been organizations that have tried to alleviate the problem. One such organization is Altrusa Interational, which published figures that indicated in 1974, "The United Nations found the percentage of functional illiterates in the United States population to be triple that of the Soviet Union." It was also noted that for the functional illiterate

the most devastating impact is the inability to participate and have some control in his life. Another program that was designed to make the nation literate is the Laubach-National Issues Forum program. This program entails a holistic approach to the potential reader, involving him in discussions of interest, creating greater communications skills, along with imparting reading ability.⁶

Kozol refuted both these programs on the basis of the programs' self-acknowledged "cream off" of the 2% to 4% of illiterates that are salvageable or reachable. He suggested that these programs would not even touch the illiteracy problem. Some other people in the field of literacy agreed with Kozol. For example, Lynette Hayes, Vice President of Atlanta Literacy Action, wrote in 1984 about traditional literacy programs that usually only had a 20% success rate.⁷

Why was the nation "at risk"? Sixty million Americans were in the category of functional illiterate or illiterate. "What [that] does imply is that all 60 million are substantially excluded from the democratic process," was Kozol's interpretation of the finding of the National Committee on Excellence in Education. It would seem the nation had ignored Jefferson's injunction.⁸

Illiteracy was not the only legacy of the century-and-one-half-old public education dream. Many teachers' lives were made into nightmares. In modern times teachers' work days are not spent in instruction and individual attention to students, but are consumed by tasks such as counting milk tickets, marching children from class to class, maintaining discipline, and seldom communicating individually with any of their students. This has led in some large cities to teachers even being physically attacked by their students.⁹

The underlying problem that surfaces constantly is class size. "So far as I can learn, no educator has come forward to claim that twenty-five or thirty is a grouping desirable for basic educational purposes." Leslie Hart wrote and believed those words in 1969. Yet in 1908 the Kansas State Superintendent of Public Instruction wrote: "The fatal weakness in these [one-room] schools lies in their size. It is impossible that schools so small as many of these are should do the best work. With but a handful of pupils no teacher can secure the best results. The pupils themselves miss the incentive and inspiration that comes with numbers." Earlier in the same report the recommendation was made that 35 seemed like a good average attendance, still using just one teacher.¹⁰

Overcrowded classrooms are a problem to these modern teachers. They cannot expect to individualize any instruction with classes that contain 35 pupils, all one grade, and all one age. For instance, in 1964 a newly graduated teacher was assigned a fourth grade classroom with 42 children. She had no aide, and to her credit finished her contract through spring term and then left teaching.¹¹

Modern teachers in consolidated, graded schools do not enjoy the autonomy of their predecessors in the one-room schools. Teachers in consolidated schools are constantly supervised by a principal, some of whom are over-zealous. One example was a teacher who rearranged her students' desks, thinking to make the classroom more appealing. The principal came in and scolded her in front of the children and said that he was to approve anything that was changed within his building.¹²

The students fared worse than the teachers under the standardized and graded system called public education. (The teacher could leave

the system if dissatisfied; by law the child had to attend for a given number of years.) For example, Hart wrote about the necessity in the class-and-grade system of eliciting conformity from each of the individuals within that class. The term "civilising" is applied, he said, but compliance is what is demanded; he compared the school system to a penitentiary. "If we really intended to teach children practical democracy or the art of getting along with others, putting them into a highly regimented, autocratic situation would seem an odd way to go about it."¹³

On the academic level of learning, Hart further criticized the standardized, graded system. "A recent research project on the "Head Start" preschool experience for deprived children showed that the substantial gains many made through this program vanished soon after they entered regular school. Throughout school, a child who shows enthusiasm for any academic interest becomes somewhat remarkable. Most enthusiasms lie outside the classroom. The classroom school was never designed to arouse or permit individual interests. The basic idea was what we would now call thought-control. If children are to be handled constantly as groups, they must perforce be told what to think, when to begin thinking it, and when to stop."¹⁴

Children experienced humiliation and defeat in the system of standardization and consolidation that was established. Herbert Kohl, author and teacher, wrote: "Many student teachers I have known . . . [were] becoming teachers to negate the wounds they received when they were in school. They want to counter the racism, the sexual put-down, all the other humiliations they experienced with new, freer ways of teaching and learning."¹⁵

Another author, John Goodlad, rebuked public education: "The schools we know are geared to adult expectations for childhood education that have been frozen into the grades and persist in spite of the repeated failure of some children to meet them."¹⁶

Taking into account the illiteracy rate, and the burnout that teachers experienced, and the failure of whole groups of children before they reached fourth grade, it would seem appropriate to question the standardization and consolidation of schools; to review the class-and-grade system; and to reconsider the use of competition and threat in the learning process. Especially this is so in view of the statistics from past years that showed a higher rate of literacy from those states that had the greatest number of one-room schools.

In 1950 General Lewis Hershey, Director of Selective Service, released findings of the army rejection rates from the Department of Labor. The statistics for Kansas rural army inductees showed that they had achieved 8.9 grades of school, and that there was just 5 percent functional illiteracy. Nebraska's inductees had a 4.9 percent functional illiteracy rate. Some other states which never had comparable numbers of one-room schools, such as New York and Pennsylvania, had 9.5 percent and 9.4 percent functional illiteracy rates respectively. These findings were born out by the studies of historian, Wayne Fuller.¹⁷

In the one-room school the children learned by hearing other children recite, and by tutoring from other students, and they were in a classroom with many ages and levels of achievement other than their own, so competition was minimal. Herbert Kohl described an experimental high school operating during the 1930s that allowed students to teach other students, permitted interdisciplinary pursuits, and brought in

volunteers to work with students. These were all things that were usual occurrences in the one-room school. Interestingly, Kohl noted that the follow-up twenty years later on these students (who were called "guinea pigs") was similar in outcome to the Nebraska community during the 1890s that turned out such successful individuals.¹⁸

Children in the one-room school were never lectured to by the teacher. Instead they listened to the recitations and selected that which they could use and turned to other endeavors when disinterested. When in recitation with the teacher or working with another student on lessons, they had the individual attention and interaction needed for learning. And they read and understood what they read.

Modern research on the human mind and how it functions best has shown that: "The brain does not usually learn in the sense of accepting or recording information from teachers. The brain is not a passive consumer of information. Instead it actively constructs its own interpretations of information and draws inferences from it." Hart quoted educational psychologist, Merlin C. Wittrock, on the error of present class-and-grade system.¹⁹

At the present time, comprehension seems to be a problem for the illiterate person. According to Kozol, many illiterates can call the words, but get no meaning from the whole sentence or paragraph. Comprehension was high among the one-room schoolchildren compared with the consolidated schoolchildren in the 1924 survey; the reason was that the one-room children participated in the whole process. They were not just lectured to by a teacher.²⁰

Another modern researcher in learning, Dr. Benjamin Bloom, suggested that individual tutoring was the best way to teach and have learning

occur; but as this is impossible in the present class-and-grade system, he has suggested that small groups of learners working together cause the greatest learning. This followed by individual tutoring when necessary. This is his theory of "mastery learning". In the one-room school the teacher tutored each child individually in recitation; then the child was helped further by another student or students.²¹

In consolidated, graded schools, students are tested at frequent intervals. These tests serve to rank and qualify each student compared with the other twenty-five to thirty in that class. In the one-room school, children had to pass one quite difficult eighth grade exam before they could go on to high school. They were able to do so because the previous eight years of their schooling had not involved testing done on each grade level; and they had not been constantly compared with twenty-five to thirty other children in their grade.

Testing can be stressful. For example, Robert J. Sternberg, a researcher in IQ testing in recent years, related an incident when he was in sixth grade. He always "stunk" on IQ tests, and so when testing time came, he was sent down to fifth grade to take the test. He recalled: "When you are in elementary school, one year makes a big difference. It's one thing to take a test with sixth graders, but if you're taking it with a bunch of babies, you don't have to worry." He did well on the test, and by seventh grade was experimenting with mental testing and has continued through all his schooling at Yale and Stanford to study this field. He claims that no present tests yield a true profile of the intelligence level of the individual being tested.²²

The teacher of the one-room school knew from day-to-day and recitation-to-recitation what her students knew, and then at the end

of each week the fun of playing games with the academics was for everybody. These games were competitive without comparisons within an age group. But no student had to go down to take a test "with a bunch of babies" to do well.

Alfie Kohn stated that competition is often a cause of anxiety. He wrote: "Even if the tangible stakes--grades--are not always high when people compete, the psychological stakes invariably are. The possibility of losing makes for an emotional state that interferes with performance." One of the worse aspects of competition is that it generally "does not promote excellence because trying to do well and trying to beat others simply are two different things," according to Kohn. The Kansas Superintendent of Public Instruction in 1908 call it, "Incentive and inspiration that comes with numbers".²³

Leslie Hart wrote in 1969 that the one-room schools, which the professional educators closed over the years, came closer to accomplishing what they set out to do than any other institution in the history of American public education. He wrote that the teachers in those schools educated by grouping the children for educational purposes, not for administrative purposes. And those schools were an example of school being not dull and dreary, but rather enthusiastic and filled with interaction. Hart claimed that a "natural" pattern was followed in those schools, wherein the older students helped the younger and thereby learned something about themselves and were rewarded and motivated.²⁴

Today a few states still have one-room schools in operation (see Table II). In fact, new one-room schools were built in Wyoming as recently as 1980 and 1985. One school is called "Hanging Woman

TABLE II

One-Room Schools Operating in 1987

(Public and Private)

States Responding to Survey	Number of One-Room Schools
Colorado	14
Iowa	no response
Kansas	1
Minnesota	no response
Montana	no response
Nebraska	286
New Mexico	no response
North Dakota	no response
South Dakota	94
Texas	3
Wyoming	33

School" and the other is called "Finding Fence Creek School". They have both been built to educate the children of ranchers and of their employees in areas where isolation would otherwise prevent education. Nebraska's sandhill area has many one-room schools educating the children. It is also an isolated area, although there are some students who come from town to attend a one-room school.²⁵

Mark Kindley, author of an article on one-room schools for Smithsonian, states that Alaska, California, Vermont and Washington also still have one-room, ungraded schools operating. Oregon's Department of Education reported 17 operating in 1987; a one-room school on the eastern end of Long Island, New York has operated continuously since 1776; and "Mrs. Ruby" has taught a one-room school on Pawley's Island, South Carolina since 1938.²⁶

According to Kindley, scholastic standing remains high for the ungraded, one-room students in modern times:

The students do well. Nebraska with the greatest number of one-room schools, ranks fourth on standardized achievement tests compared with other states.²⁷

Even today the one-room schools are being closed at a fast pace. For instance, between the time of Kindley's article and the survey summarized in Table II, Nebraska lost 64 rural one-room schools. Ironically, Kindley observed that since most of the one-room schools are closed, educators are realizing something was lost with their closing.²⁸

Jonathan P. Sher, former Assistant Dean of Education at North Carolina State University, remarked in 1985 that "Much education policy is about making educational systems more convenient for

administrators and policy makers." He further suggested that a "conspiracy" would be needed to retain those one-room schools still in operation. His remarks were made more potent by the closure of 64 such schools in just 2 years (as noted above for Nebraska).²⁹

Perhaps Hart explained more than he realized when he wrote in 1969 that one-fourth of the population in the United States was engaged in public education. So the consolidation and standardization campaign of the professional educators turned the public education system into a giant industry.³⁰

The 1950s were a time of paradox for education: writers decried the decline of scholarship in the schools; government officials called for reform of the educational system after Sputnik was launched by the Russians; and at the same time the greatest numbers of one-room schools were closed.³¹

The education needs of a democracy were described by Thomas Jefferson. Much later, in the 1950s, Arthur Bestor, professor at the University of Illinois, described the function of public schooling for the nation:

Democratic education differs from aristocratic education only in the number of persons with whom it deals, not in the values it seeks to impart. To convert the education of the common man into something other than systematic intellectual training is to rob him of his birthright; it is to vulgarize the culture under the guise of democratizing it. By training all in the ability to think, the schools distribute intellectual power widely among the people. This and this alone is their distinctive way of contributing to social progress.³²

Educational historian, Lawrence Cremin, further contended that American schools had abandoned scholarship, and that the professional educators had been directing this movement away from scholarship.³³

How are children to be educated? John Holt, author and educator, wrote: "Man is by nature a learning animal . . . What we need to do, and all we need to do, is bring as much of the world as we can into the school and the classroom; give children as much help and guidance as they need and ask for; listen respectfully when they feel like talking . . . We can trust them to do the rest." Kohl wrote that children need interaction with older and younger people in the learning process, and that would "provide an enormously potent background of intuitive learnings . . ."34

Other cultures have educated their young in a much gentler, less competitive and humiliating manner than the present public education system. For instance, in 1930, Chief Plenty-Coups of the Crow Nation reflected on his childhood:

My people were wise . . . Our teachers were willing and thorough . . . All were quick to praise excellence without speaking a word that might break the spirit of a boy who might be less capable than others. The boy who failed at any lesson got only more lessons, more care, until he was as far as he could go.³⁵

The early pioneers, and present-day isolated families seek the same kind of whole education for their young. In the one-room school children were taught by teachers and fellow-students who believed in the "natural" ability to learn.

Notes to Chapter Five

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19. Hart, "Three-Brain Concept," p. 504.
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21. Chance, "Master of Mastery," pp. 43-46; Hart, "Three-Brain Concept," pp. 504-506.
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