



Lincoln County Schools, 1881

A.T. Biggs and Lincoln County's One-Room Schools

**by
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Introduction

Education has been a priority to the people of Kansas since settlement began there in the mid-nineteenth century. As settlers arrived in Kansas to live, schooling began for children in the home as soon as people were in habitation long enough to permit it. Dugout shelters, vacant claim shanties, or other structures were also used for schools, usually without the benefit of desks, blackboards, or other furnishings. As more settlers arrived and communities were formed, formal education began to be organized, and one-room schools appeared across the countryside. It soon became apparent that local development of schools and structured governance of education and supervision of teachers were needed to ensure that education needs were being met. This paper examines the development of education in Lincoln County, Kansas, and the quality of its one-room schools as determined by one county superintendent of schools.

Organization of Education in Lincoln County, Kansas

Lincoln County, Kansas is in north central Kansas and started its education system in much the same way as did the other Kansas counties. The first county superintendent in Lincoln County was elected in 1870, the same year that the county was officially organized. The election occurred only five years after the first permanent structure was built in the county. Between 1865 and 1870, a number of settlers came to Lincoln County. Many of the settlers came as a result of the Homestead Act of 1862, and many were veterans of the Civil War (Holman, 1979, p. 51). However, between 1865 and 1870, Lincoln County was both a difficult and dangerous place to live. In addition to the hardships of survival, many Native American groups traveled through the county regularly following the waterways and sought to prevent the settlement of the county. Attacks on the settlers were frequent with much loss of

life and property until four military blockhouses were built at different locations in Lincoln County in 1869 (Holman, 1979, p. 50). The last nomadic group of Native Americans was seen traveling through Lincoln County in 1880 (Barr, 1908, p. 42).

The first known school in Lincoln County was held in a dugout home owned by a man named Martin Hendrickson. It was a “subscription school,” in which a fee or tuition of three dollars per child per month was paid to the teacher, Marion Ivy. Nine pupils attended a school term lasting three of the winter months of 1868-1869. One of the students, Harrison Strange, was killed in an attack by Native Americans just a few months later, in May, 1869. Another student in this subscription school, C.C. Hendrickson, later wrote that: “school in 1869 was conducted along simple lines, we did not need many books; we had no need for fancy learning or fine clothes; our dinner pail was filled with corn bread and buffalo meat” (Barr, 1908, p. 133).

Other early schools were equally primitive. In what was to become District 21, schoolteacher Laura Peate taught in the kitchen of a house owned by a man named Rod Wilmarth. The first school in District 22 was held in a basement with an earth floor and two little windows; Mrs. B. H. Ellsworth was the teacher. Her pupils sat on blocks of firewood that were too large to split and wrote on large sheets of manila paper (Barr, 1908, p. 133).

Job Description of the Lincoln County School Superintendents in the Late 1800’s

The early county superintendents were elected by voters in each county for a two-year term and came from a variety of backgrounds, such as business, ministry, the military, and education. The county superintendent completed many tasks, such as administering and grading teacher exams, granting licenses to teachers, assisting with the hiring of teachers, evaluating teachers, and inspecting school buildings. The superintendents were also in charge of the following functions:

- Organizing the district boundary
- Identifying and recording the district boundary
- Assisting with revenue production for the district
- Serving as a repository of district funds

Serving as arbiter of disputes between districts

Supervising eighth grade examinations

(Samuelson, 2000, p. 30)

Once the need for a school district was recognized, the superintendent oversaw the election of three citizens who would serve as a district board of education. The superintendent would identify the district boundaries and assign a district number in chronological order, based on creation date of the district, not on geographical location. At that time a school district consisted of a single school. It was the obligation of the school board to see to it that the school house was built and provided for (Samuelson, 2000, p. 34).

Alexander Thaddeus Biggs:

Early Lincoln County Superintendent of Schools

Alexander Thaddeus Biggs was the fourth county superintendent of schools and the focus of the remainder of this paper. The county superintendent was the primary education power of that time. Education in the rural counties became what the county superintendent was determined to make it be. The quality of education in the county depended on the superintendent's philosophy, experience, commitment, and knowledge or willingness to learn.

Biggs was a school teacher, cobbler, and veteran of the Civil War who served under both Sheridan and Custer and fought at the Battle of Winchester. He moved to Lincoln County in March, 1873 because of the land that was available to Civil War veterans (Rice, 1980). He located an available claim in the southwestern part of the county and built a cabin (Heaton, 1914).

Biggs was elected to the superintendency in 1876 and alternated between being county superintendent and teacher for the next 30 years. He organized most of the school districts in the county (Rice, 1980). By 1881, he was supervising seventy-six school districts in Lincoln County. In addition, he organized a Normal School for the purpose of training teachers in 1877 that began with twenty-three pupils. By 1892, 155 people were attending the Normal School (Columbian History of Education in Kansas, 1893).

One of the jobs of the county superintendent was to make "surprise" visits to schools. These visits lasted one day, and the purpose of the visit

was to evaluate the teacher and the school facilities. As might be expected, these visits were called “surprise” visits because superintendents would not schedule these visits to schools; they would just show up when school was in session. These unannounced visits were more about trying to keep the teachers focused on housekeeping, recordkeeping, sanitation issues, and discipline; and less about the quality of instruction (Samuelson, 2000, p. 31).

Biggs’ Evaluations of the Lincoln County One-Room Schools

Records of A.T. Biggs’ work indicate that in the 1881-1882 school years, as county superintendent, he made 79 “surprise” school visits (Biggs, 1882). These 79 visits reflect a considerable commitment on Bigg’s part, considering the short school year of this era, and the time it took to travel between individual school buildings spread throughout Lincoln County. Biggs completed a record book that consisted of logs of school visits. The book was printed for that purpose and consisted of evaluation instruments to be filled out on each school district for each visit. His observations and comments regarding his evaluation of the school facility and materials and the instruction were confined to two pages by the evaluation. Each evaluation had four different sections for the superintendent to complete for each visit to a district. The first section consisted of district information, including district number and location; a series of set questions the superintendent would answer to ensure proper records were being kept; the teacher’s name, monthly salary, and grade of certificate (Biggs, 1882).

At that time three grades of certificates existed for teachers. A first grade of certificate was held by a teacher who scored in the lowest acceptable category on the licensure examination and was good for one year. After a year of teaching, a teacher with a first grade of certificate would need to renew his or her license by retaking the exam. The second grade of certificate was held by teachers who had scored in the middle category on the teacher’s exam and was good for two years before it would need to be renewed. The third grade of certificate was awarded to teachers who scored in the highest category on the licensure exam and was good for three years (Samuelson, 2000, p. 60).

The second, third, and fourth sections of the school district evaluation were used to assess the school house, its furnishings, and teaching materials. The second section was called “Condition of the

School House,” and there the superintendent would note the condition of the floor, walls, windows, doors, blackboards, and the quality of the ventilation. The third section of the instrument was labeled “Condition of the Furniture,” and in that part the superintendent would record the condition of the student and teacher desks, recitation seats, stove, clothes hooks, and water service. The fourth section had the heading of “Condition of Apparatus, etc.” and in it the superintendent would record the condition of the maps and charts, text books, copy books, library books, teacher register, and dictionaries. In addition, each of these sections included a place to write suggestions. The final section of the evaluation instrument was called “Remarks”; this was the only place where the superintendent might make a note about the quality of instruction (Biggs, 1882).

Of the 79 evaluations that Biggs did of schools, the two receiving the best evaluations were District 4, Fairview and District 9, Elkhorn. District 4 was in the southeastern part of the county and in the area of the county that was settled first. The teacher there was Emma Bingham, who held first grade of certificate and was paid \$31 per month. The average daily attendance at the school was 21 children. In every category the school was judged to be in “good” condition, with the exception of the floor and the textbooks, which were said to be in “fair” condition. Biggs’ only comment for District 4 fell under the “Condition of School House” section where he wrote “get some curtains for the south windows” (Biggs, 1882).

District 9 was in the northeast part of the county, further away from the towns as they existed at that time. District 9 was taught by a man named P.S. Price, who had the third grade of certificate and who earned \$25 per month. The average daily attendance at the school was 25 children. This school also received “good” ratings on all categories except four of them. The floor was said to be “excellent,” and the stove was called “splendid.” However, Superintendent Biggs found no dictionaries and no library books. Suggestions for District 9 included “provide more blackboard surface,” “move the seats at least 4 inches closer together,” and “hang the door to privy” (Biggs, 1882).

Eight districts received evaluations that were mixed, meaning that some of the characteristics were deemed “good,” while a number of others were less than good. A representative example of the mixed evaluations was the one written on District 13, Vesper. Vesper was

approximately seven miles east of the town called Lincoln and in the western part of the county. The town of Lincoln was the county seat. The teacher at District 13 was a Mr. M.J. Randall who was teaching with a first grade of certificate and making \$30 per month. The average attendance at Vesper was 31 children. In the portion of the evaluation called "Condition of the School House," the superintendent wrote that the condition of the floor was "fair," the walls were "bad," the windows and doors were "broken," the blackboards were "good," and the quality of the ventilation was called "fair." In the portion of the evaluation labeled "Condition of the Furniture," the condition of the student desks were "fair" and teacher desks were "good," recitation seats were "fair" and the stove was "good." There were no clothes hooks in the school, nor was any water available at the site of the school house. The "Condition of Apparatus, etc." portion identified the condition of the maps and charts as being "bad," text books were "fair," copy books and teachers register were "good." There were no library books or dictionaries at District 13. Biggs wrote one thing in the "Remarks" section: "Fix the steps in front of the house even if you have to sell the lightning rods and trust to the Lord for protection" (Biggs, 1882).

The remaining 69 evaluations indicated less than adequate districts, according to the Superintendent Biggs. A district could receive a poor overall rating by either having a school house, furnishings, and materials that were in poor condition, or by having a facility not adequately supplied, or both. An example of a district in which the facility was in poor condition and that was inadequately supplied was District 27, South Ireland. Located six miles southwest of the town of Lincoln, District 27 had an average attendance of fifteen students and was taught by a man named Francis Downey. Downey had a third grade of certificate but received a salary of only \$17 dollars per month (Biggs, 1882).

According to the evaluation of District 27, the condition of the floor was "good," the walls were "rough," the windows and doors were "good," and the quality of the ventilation was said to be "too good." There were no blackboards, teacher and student desks, recitation seats, stove, clothes hooks, water, maps or charts, copy books, library books, or dictionaries. The teachers register was called "good" and the text books were called "fair." Biggs had the following to say in the "Suggestions" sections: "Plaster the walls and paint up on the outside. Get a blackboard. Get your desks home at once and make use of them.

When you put in the seats, don't get them too far apart" (Biggs, 1882).

Of all the 79 evaluations, in only two districts did Biggs comment on what the teachers were doing or not doing. Everything else he wrote concerned the facility, equipment, and supplies. One teacher receiving a comment taught at District 19, Pottersburg, approximately twelve miles northwest of the town of Lincoln. She was Carrie Matson, earning \$25 dollars per month and teaching with a second grade of certificate. Matson was probably the youngest teacher that ever taught in Lincoln County. Teachers were scarce, and Carrie who was thirteen but looked any age from eighteen to twenty-five, was granted a certificate and taught successfully at Rocky Point. At Pottersburg her success was repeated but it leaked out that she was under age and the superintendent "got the roast that was coming to him." A quarter century of successful work justified the judgment of the examining board, as she finished her career as a professor of Latin at the University of Kansas (Lincoln County Kansas Biographies, 2000). About Matson's class, though, Biggs, wrote "Too much speaking. Too much talking back." However, the average attendance there was shown to be 40 children, recognized by today's standards as too large of a class to teach effectively.

The other teacher receiving comment was an N. Coover, who taught at District 6 in the town of Lincoln. Coover taught with a first grade of certificate and earned \$26 per month. Coover's class was also too large by modern standards; the average attendance was 50 children. Biggs wrote this to Coover: "Take up a conviction and incorporate it with your life. The teacher should have convictions. He is dealing with forming minds" (Biggs, 1882). This is, of course, a responsibility that all teachers have that will not change with the times.

Conclusion

Biggs was widely acknowledged as the driving force in the development and improvement of the one-room schools in the early days of Lincoln County. According to Barr (1908), in 1882, Lincoln County was found by Kansas state officials to have the best developed education system as it related to population numbers and "the salaries of women more nearly approximated that of men than in any other county" (p. 102). Arthur Stanley, one of the original pioneer settlers of Lincoln County, said this about Biggs in his 1915 Old Settlers Reunion Address: "Lincoln County...has had good strong men at the

head of its school system, but she has never had but one A.T. Biggs and many a decade will come and go before we shall behold his like again.” (Stanley, 1915, p. 1).

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