

## Timeline of Education in Clay Co.

### 1911

- Church Street School is rebuilt.
- Additions made to Austin and Jolley elementaries.

### 1919

- Some area schoolhouses begin consolidating with the Wakonda School Dist. and the Meckling Independent School Dist. This continues until the late 1950s.

### 1920

- Meckling High School is established.

### 1921

- Additions to Church Street School.

### 1935

- Greenfield School No. 18 - located near the Prairie Center Township - is destroyed by fire. A new schoolhouse is built the following year.

### 1939-53

- At least 16 of the area country schools close permanently.

# Crude country schools dot landscape with influx of settlers

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By December 1866, public school districts had replaced the private schools in what was to become Clay County. The official records for that year indicate five organized districts with an enrollment of 200 for the entire county – 110 males and 90 females. Out of a total expenditure of \$580, the amount of \$500 was raised by subscription.

The old log building, the first permanent schoolhouse in Dakota Territory, was replaced in 1873 by a two-story building on Court Street in Vermillion on land donated by Nelson Miner. The new structure had two rooms on each floor and formed the base for various additions and alterations in later years.

Some of the teachers of that era have names with a familiar ring yet today: Amos Shaw and Sarah Baker, John L. Jolley and Rachel Ross who later was married to H.J. Austin.

While the new school was being built above the bluff during the winter of 1872-73, classes were held in two rented second-floor rooms in what was called the Lyon Block.

In 1862, the territorial legislature passed laws that created the first public school districts in the region. Under the procedure provided by the statute, the county superintendent laid out the boundaries of a district and then ordered an election so that voters may select school officials, including a director, treasurer, and a clerk. Described as the "New England" type of district school government, it became established by law in Dakota Territory.

These first school districts began with practically no public support at first. According to Herbert Schell, no school tax had been levied and no school monies of any kind had been collected in the counties. Also, no attempt had been made to collect the dollar poll tax authorized by law in 1863, and peace officers of the various counties had failed to collect fines which would have gone into the education fund.

In 1866, the Clay County Commission arbitrarily carved the county into five school districts. It was a move that settlers near Vermillion found unacceptable. Franklin Taylor, the newly appointed superintendent, redefined the boundaries of what would become the first district.

Soon, a few small school buildings – the first "country schools" in this region of Dakota Territory, began to dot the landscape.

Taylor's action resulted in the creation of School No. 1, located in Vermillion Township a mile north of town. The school was in operation during 1867. A community along Clay Creek in Spirit Mound Township became the second district. A site for the school building was selected along the bluff road approximately in the center of the district.

District No. 3 was formed in Norway Township. The site for the first building was a short distance east of Bergen Church. Superintendent Taylor called the citizens of the community together for an organizational meeting on Feb. 20, 1866. Ole Bottolfson was elected director, and settlers immediately began to make arrangements for a school, unwilling to wait until school funds would become available.

An 18-by-24-foot building was constructed, and local historians claim that the result of this effort by local citizens was the second permanent schoolhouse in the territory. The original building was washed away by a flood in 1881, and was replaced by a new structure at the same location. A more modern structure was built in later years nearby.

Another district organized during the later 1860s served the Gunderson Bend community. When South Bend District No. 7 was organized, a young homesteader was selected from the neighborhood as its first teacher.

The history of the Gunderson school is unique because of its four different locations. After the flood of 1881, several hundred acres of farmland were cut away by the Missouri River, including at least half a dozen farms. Three of the earlier sites for the school have disappeared.

By 1867, according to a report filed by Superintendent M.S. Burr, there were seven organized and four unorganized districts in the

county. Enrollment was 205 children between the ages of 5 and 21, with 105 not in attendance. The total amount raised for school purposes was \$600, and \$346 went toward teacher salaries. Three women and one man were employed as teachers.

The work of organizing new school districts continued as the tide of immigration moved into the central and northern portions of the county. A lack of financial support remained the major drawback. Conditions worsened as grasshoppers attacked crops in the mid-1870s, forcing some homesteaders to live in poverty. In a few districts, teachers' salaries were cut and in others schools were temporarily closed.

According to school records available for 1874, only 32 out of 48 organized school districts were in operation. About a third of the approximate 1,500 children of school age were not attending classes. Two years later, 45 schools were in operation with an attendance of approximately 1,100 out of a school population of 1,700.

The formation of districts in the central and northern townships parallels the history of the earlier schools. The Star Corner School began in a farmhouse in 1873. The school building was constructed a few years later, equipped with homemade seats and desks.

Eventually, it became Wakonda School No. 28.

Mount Pleasant, also in Star Township, began as a "subscription" school in a private home. The Komstad School in Glenwood saw its beginnings in early 1874 with a two-month term in a private home. It received its own building in 1878.

The first school in Dalesburg began in the spring of 1873 in a 14 by 16 foot shanty. Occasionally, private homes were rented until the districts could afford school buildings.

The early buildings were crude in comparison to the country schools that would eventually spring up throughout the county in the 20th century. They were usually log structures, enclosed with tar paper and drop siding. Often the floor boards were not even nailed fast and were spaced unevenly. The flimsy structures gave poor protection from South Dakota's winters and were a major reason for school absences during the winter season.

Fortunately, these shacks soon became too small as more and more families settled in the area, or too dilapidated to be of further use. They were replaced with larger, better-equipped buildings.

The original law of 1862 required a term of three months in order for districts to qualify for

school funds, but the sessions did not need to be continuous. There was usually a six-week session in late autumn and early winter with a second term of about the same length in the spring and early summer. The fall session would close before the onset of severe winter weather.

The terms varied from area to area within the county. In the northern townships during the late 1870s, many districts only held summer terms that lasted three months. Some districts, especially in the older settlements, maintained a longer winter term from about Nov. 20 to the end of March for the benefit of older pupils. These communities usually held a summer term for young students not yet old enough to herd cattle on the unfenced prairie or perform farm and house chores.

At times, the vacation period between terms was lengthened to enable older pupils to help with pressing farm work. The first attendance law went into effect in 1883, requiring all school children between 10 and 14 years old to attend at least 12 weeks of school. Two years later, the law was amended to require six months of schooling.

By the end of the century, most districts maintained a school year of eight months. A few, however, were still having shorter terms. The independent school district in Vermillion was required by law to maintain a nine-month term.

During the 1880s and 1890s, more modern buildings began to replace the older, crudely built and poorly furnished structures. The schools were also becoming better equipped with maps and globes and small libraries. The schools became better organized and the first commencement exercises were implemented, marking the completion of eighth grade in the country schools. The majority of pupils, however, continued to drop out without receiving a diploma or taking part in commencement.

Vermillion became an independent district in 1877. G.E. Culver, its first principal, received an initial salary of \$800 for the school year; the other two teachers received \$35 per month. The Vermillion school system staged its formal commencement on May 25, 1888, when E.E. Collins served as principal.

The graduating class was made up of seven girls and four boys. The school building began as a simple frame structure in 1873, but received a brick exterior in 1882. Facilities were also expanded to provide instruction through eighth grade, and ninth grade work became available in 1888.

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