

# Rural School memories include the YCL

By Travis Gulbrandson  
travis.gulbrandson@plaintalk.net

When Fern Kaufman and Donna Gross unveiled their photography project documenting Clay County's remaining rural schools, they were approached by many former attendees.

Many of these people spoke of former teachers and classmates, but most of them remembered one activity in particular: The Young Citizens League (YCL).

"That was a really big deal in country schools," Gross said.

With its motto, "Help Uncle Sam," YCL's goal was to improve citizenship and character education in elementary school students.

According to information from the Education Resources Information Center, the national organization was introduced in South Dakota in the early 20th century by Michael M. Guhin, and was developed by E.C. Giffen.

It peaked in 1930, with 75,000 members in 4,000 chapters across the country.

Some records remain of the group's activities in Clay County, and are located in the Austin Whittemore House.

"We found names of people who were now 60, 70 years old who had kept the minutes of the meeting, and who were responsible for the different actions taken," Gross said.

YCL groups consisted of several committees, including Information and Programs, Health and Sanitation, Physical Training and Patriotic Aid. These committees oversaw various activities, including beautifying school grounds, building up of school libraries and the purchase of musical instruments.

Although YCL was officially placed on the state budget by 1926-1927, most of its funds were raised locally at box socials.

"Every week, students would have a business meeting, and they would make decisions with their teacher about an upcoming party," Gross said. "Who's going to decorate?"



The 19th annual state YCL convention was held in Pierre on May 3-4, 1948. Delegates from all rural schools in South Dakota gathered for a photo on the state capitol steps with Gov. George T. Mickelson and Lt. Gov. Sig Anderson. Delegates included Carol Danielson, a student at Lincoln #12 rural school, and Marion Kryger, who attended Norway #3 rural school. They were accompanied by teacher Julia M. Simonsen. This photo appears in the CD compilation "Clay County Rural Schools Scrapbook," provided by the Clay County Historical Society.

Who's going to be responsible for the food? Who's going to send the invitations to the parents?"

Annual student speech and essay contests also were held, with trips to county and state conventions offered to the winners.

"They had a national YCL song, and they would march to the song," Gross said. "Any of those folks that came out of the woodwork that had been in country schools would talk about YCL and what a big deal it was, and how much fun it was. They really seemed to learn from what they did. They seemed to learn certain areas of responsibility."

Amid the sharing of memories concerning YCL, teachers and students, Gross and Kaufman noticed something.

"Curiously, nobody talked about the classes, but that's probably typical," Gross laughed.

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