

# Falling student numbers, costs led to rural schools' decline

## Timeline of Education in Clay Co.

By Travis Gulbrandson

travis.gulbrandson@plaintalk.net

The country schools played a major role in the education of children in Clay County for many decades, but by the early 1970s, public school had become an in-town-only institution, thanks in part to falling student numbers and expenses.

Rural education began in the county in the mid-19th century and may have seen its peak in 1898, which saw the organization of no less than 24 small schools there.

However, by 1907 – and into the 1910s – many of these schools began to consolidate with larger districts, Wakonda and Meckling in particular.

Schools that didn't consolidate simply closed. Beginning in 1939 through 1953, Clay County rural schools began to close at the rate of about one per year.

According to "The History of Clay County" by Herbert S. Schell, the state became involved in the process in 1951, when the Legislature passed a measure that provided a survey of school conditions and a formulation of reorganization plans.

However, reorganization remained on a voluntary basis.

By the early 1960s, Schell writes, 10 districts had not been maintaining sessions for several years, while others were reporting fewer than eight pupils, making them difficult to support financially.

In 1966 the Legislature passed a measure that required all common districts not in operation for a period of two years to be

**After 1968, closing the remaining country schools began in earnest, with at least four shutting their doors that year, and a further eight closing in 1969.**

**All of these schools were given the option of remaining open with five or more students in attendance, but most of them opted to join Vermillion, Wakonda, Beresford, Gayville-Volin or Irene.**

Source: "The History of Clay County," by Herbert S. Schell

joined by independent or other districts by March 1, 1968.

The law was supplanted in 1967 with a measure requiring the reorganization of all the territory into 12-grade districts.

The voters had a chance to weigh in on the subject in 1968 when compulsory reorganization became part of a referendum in the November election. While it passed by a slim margin statewide, it passed in Clay County by a margin of 2,213 in favor and 1,666 opposed.

After 1968, closing the remaining country schools began in earnest, with at least four shutting their doors that year, and a further eight closing in 1969.

All of these schools were given the option of remaining open with five or more students in attendance, Schell wrote, but most of them opted to join Vermillion, Wakonda, Beresford, Gayville-Volin or Irene.

Small country schools were not the only

ones being affected by the changing times. Meckling High School saw its last graduating class in 1965, and the entire district joined with Vermillion by the early 1970s.

Some schools fought against the impending change. Burbank and Fairview remained open, and even voted down a proposal to annex to Vermillion in 1970.

Burbank eventually relented, and consolidated with the Vermillion district in 1972, the year Vermillion Middle School was constructed.

Schell reported the Fairview school as the last to be dissolved in the county, although no date is given.

What was perhaps the definitive end of the Clay County rural schools occurred one year earlier, in 1971. This was the abolishment of the office of County Superintendent Elvira E. Bliss. She held her position for 32 years.

# 1965

- The last class graduates from Meckling High School.
- The building on the original Prairie Center School No. 27 site is struck by lightning and burns to the ground. The Saginaw school building is then purchased and moved onto the former building's foundation.
- The end of the school year marked the last classes to be held in the 79-year-old Vermillion High School building on Church Street.

## KNOWLEDGE

"One's mind, once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original dimensions."

Oliver Wendell Holmes

Thank you, Vermillion educators, for helping our students to both dream *and* do.



1000 W. Cherry St., Vermillion, SD  
1-888-624-2058 or 605-624-2058

## Imagination



Perhaps imagination is only intelligence having fun.

— George Scialabba

We are thankful that Vermillion Schools never stop stirring the imaginations of our youth.



1207 Princeton Avenue  
Vermillion

Yesterday,  
Today  
& Tomorrow  
Our Care is  
Here to Stay



VERMILLION MEDICAL CLINIC®  
101 South Plum • Vermillion, SD 57069  
www.vermillionmedicalclinic.com • 605-624-8643

**M-F: 8am to 5pm**

 **M-F: 5pm to 9pm**

So Much Care, So Close to Home: 