The Story of Our
Wisconsin County Normal School System

Wisconsin County Superintendents of schools a half century ago were experiencing difficulty in securing trained teachers for the rural schools of their counties. This in spite of the fact that Wisconsin had a State University and five State Normal Schools. Those charged with the responsibility of rural education in that day were concerned over the increased emphasis the State Normal Schools seemed to be placing on the training of secondary or high school teachers and their apparent neglect and indifference toward the training of the teachers for the rural schools.

The acts of the legislature of 1848 and 1849 gave the University the first responsibility for the training of teachers for the district schools. The University regents in 1849 acted to establish a training department, but soon allowed it to become in active because of insufficient funds. In 1856 the regents established a normal department for the training of teachers, at the University which was also discontinued after a few years due to the legislature's refusal to make appropriations for its support.

Considerable thought and energy was directed toward the establishment of State Normal Schools between 1856 and 1866. The Normal School law was passed in 1866 and declared their purpose to be:

"The exclusive purpose of each Normal School shall be instruction and training of persons, both male and female, in the theory and art of teaching and in all the various branches that pertain to a good common education; also to give instruction in agriculture, chemistry, in the arts of husbandry, the mechanic arts, the fundamental laws of the United States and of this state, and in what regards the rights and duties of citizens."

As the number of high schools began to increase, there was a tendency on the part of the State Normal Schools to expand their training in the high school field, and shape their elementary courses toward meeting the increasing demands of the cities for graded school teachers without enlarging or improving their facilities to anywhere near meet the demands for teachers in the country schools. This made them vulnerable to the charges of rural educators of that day, that they were neglecting the elementary teacher training field for which they were primarily established. The rural people grew concerned over their inability to secure trained teachers for their schools. Many of their schools were being taught by teachers with little or no training beyond an eighth grade education and not much older than many of the rural school pupils.

County superintendents held summer institutes of two or three weeks in length allowing those who had com-
Typical County Normal building — suited to particular needs
pleted the eighth grade to attend. Following the institutes the superintendents held examinations for the purpose of qualifying teachers. In this manner many an eighth grade graduate became legally qualified to teach in rural schools—professionally they were without training.

In 1892, C. F. Patzer, County Superintendent of schools of Manitowoc County, read a paper before the Wisconsin Teachers Association outlining a plan for the establishment of schools, to be known as county training schools, and designed for the specific purpose of training teachers for the rural schools. There was no thought in mind that these institutions would infringe upon the teacher training covered by the State Normal Schools, but rather that they would train teachers specifically for the rural schools, a field for which the State Normal Schools never had trained a sufficient number of teachers. The city demand for teachers lured and is still luring many prospective students of rural teaching at the State Normal Schools into courses that prepared them for city grades. In this manner the services of many good prospective teachers are forever lost to the rural schools.

Patzer gave as the sole purpose of the establishment of such schools as being the training of competent teachers for country schools. “Although State Normal Schools were created for the purpose of furnishing trained teachers for the state, they have not performed this function as far as country schools are concerned. The State Normal cannot expect to furnish more than one-fourth the number of teachers necessary to fill the vacancies of the ungraded schools. These training schools may not be ideal and they will not cure all the ills of the district schools, but they will at least be a long step in advance of the experimental measures applied for so many years which have proved abortive.”—C. E. Patzer, Wisconsin Journal of Education. March, 1893, pages 63-66.

In 1893 he presented his plan to the Manitowoc County Board. This Board approved his plan by a 24 to 6 vote. It is reported that the objections were not so much opposed to the plan because of its merits as they were because they thought they had no legal right to appropriate money for that purpose. To bring about this legality, a bill was prepared for introduction into the next legislature to authorize their establishment.

The dearth of teachers trained for rural teaching was a condition that existed quite generally over Wisconsin, for many others outside Manitowoc County were giving consideration to it. J. F. Lamont of Marathon County conceived a similar plan without knowledge of what was being done in Manitowoc County. The Marathon County Board passed a resolution and voted a $3,000 appropriation to establish a school for the training of rural teachers. Here also the legal status of their action was questioned and the establishment delayed.

The legislature of 1899 passed an act granting the statutory authority for the establishment of two such schools, pledging to pay half the sum actually
encouraged very many intelligent farm youths to go very far away from home or expend very much capital to prepare themselves for rural teaching.

The County Normal Schools, being located in, or relatively near to their home communities, and in places where living accommodations can be obtained at moderate costs have induced many an intelligent rural young man or woman of limited financial circumstances to attend and take up rural teaching. The great majority of the students attending these schools where dormitories are not provided, obtain rooms and reduce their attendance expenses by carrying on light housekeeping activities in lieu of boarding and rooming. Because so many attending these institutions live by this method, light housekeeping does not have the social stigma attached to it as when carried on at institutions where the majority of the students pay for their board and rooms.

Play practice — a popular type of learning activity
The County Normal Schools are often referred to as "the colleges of the common man's children." They are thus spoken of because the great majority of the students who attend these schools are able to do so on a limited financial basis. Were these schools not accessible the great majority of those attending would not enter rural teaching or avail themselves of education on a college level, as has been indicated on numerous surveys that have been made. Thus it can be seen that the schools are really serving a two-fold purpose; initiating a college education for the common man's children, and training and providing teachers for the rural schools. Thousands of rural boys and girls in Wisconsin are today receiving their common school education under the guidance of better educated and more skilled teachers, because the County Normal Schools have carried teacher training and education on a college level out into the areas nearer to the homes of prospective students.

If every institution of higher learning in Wisconsin were to inscribe itself within a circle with a twenty-five mile radius and count their students in attendance from within that circle, most institutions would find far more students attending from within the area of that circle, than they would find attending from the much greater area added when a second concentric circle is drawn with a fifty mile radius. Stated in another manner, more students per square mile attend a school from the immediate area about a school than from the remote area. It has been proven that twenty-five or thirty County Normal Schools strategically distributed over the state encourage more students to enter rural teacher training than fewer schools centrally located.

It is not an uncommon occurrence to learn that high school as well as college teachers discourage high school students and graduates from entering rural teacher training because of some of the undesirable aspects already mentioned in this article. In colleges training teachers for both elementary grades and rural school, it is easily conceivable that the natural tendency of the trainers would be to encourage the stronger academic students with better personalities to enter the training for the elementary grades, where placement competition is keener, and likewise encourage the weaker students of less pleasing personality to train for rural teaching. While such guidance may be of particular worth to the students receiving training, it certainly is not contributive to the general welfare of the thousands of rural boys and girls who are compelled by law to attend schools taught by these teachers with lesser qualifications. The County Normal Schools, functioning with the one and only purpose in mind, that of training rural teachers, have no opportunity for such shifting. They train and place their best trained people first, in the rural schools served by board members who are alert in seeking well trained teachers.

Sociologists point to the fact that institutions lag behind social progress, the larger the institution the less susceptible to change and therefore the greater the amount of the lag. County Normal Schools being small institutions
Students enjoying informal fun under wholesome conditions
near to the source of their prospective students as well as the field of service of their graduates, are very alert to criticisms and find it a much easier task to make the adjustments needed to keep abreast of social progress. The students benefit from the greater amount of individual attention while attending, and from the inservice training after graduation that these schools are able to give because of size and location. A much greater opportunity is also given the student to do student teaching while in training. Living in the same building day in and day out in constant contact with children of the ages they will be teaching after graduation, provides a phase of training that has no substitute. In addition to the opportunities to do student teaching in their demonstration schools, the County Normal Schools offer further opportunities for trips to the rural schools that fringe their campuses for observation and teaching in the typical rural situations.

The County Normal Schools offer specific training in the teaching of rural schools. Some educators have expressed the opinion that this special training is not necessary for rural teachers, that rural and grade teachers could just as well be trained alike and in the same classes. Specific training is so obviously necessary that it hardly seems worth the time to attempt to refute this argument. Most County Superintendents and supervising teachers as a result of their actual experiences will bear testimony in behalf of the need for specific training. The great majority of the students attending the County Normal Schools are born and reared in rural communities thus they understand rural conditions and think in terms of rural welfare. In such an environment close to the rural community, with the most of their associates thinking in terms of rural conditions it is much simpler to train and return them to the schools as rural minded teachers.

Statistics could also be cited on the teacher shortage, the decreased number of cadets in teacher training, the number of successful rural teachers that the village and city schools employ to place in positions they find it difficult to fill, and the numbers trained by the different types of institutions. Lack of time and space prevents such a citation and discussion here but if it were made it would only increasingly emphasize that the need for the County Normal Schools and other elementary teacher training institutions is today as great if not greater than it ever was.

The County Normal Schools have in most instances enjoyed the hearty support and co-operation of the State Legislature. Still almost continuously, but with increased vigor biennially with the meeting of each session, forces are at work attempting to decrease the number of teacher training institutions in Wisconsin. These forces operate not for the purpose of improving education but almost wholly for the purpose of reducing the taxes of vested interests. To disguise their efforts they enlist the support of different groups at different times by changing their proposed plans. At one time they may stress the reduction of the State Normal Schools (now called State Teachers
Student teachers directing playground activity

Informal Teas are part of the planned social program
Colleges) and at another time they may place their emphasis on the closing of County Normal Schools. That their prime purpose is not the improvement of education for the youth of the state may be noted in the fallacy of some of their supporting arguments. In the legislative sessions during the depression years, when there were sufficient teachers, they advocated reducing the number of teacher training institutions because of what they termed an over supply of teachers. During the past legislative session (1943) they again advocated closing teacher training institutions because there were too few cadet teachers in training and in spite of the fact that the schools of Wisconsin are now employing some 3,000 teachers not fully prepared to meet the teacher standards of Wisconsin and teaching on emergency permits only.

Another technique they use to support their attacks, which is definitely indicative of their true purpose, rather than their declared purpose the welfare of education, is that of comparing per capita costs of institutions and colleges. This is a vicious and extremely unfair method of attempting to measure the worth or efficiency of educational institutions. There are too many tangent and unconsidered factors about education to make per capita cost a reliable measure for comparing. The County Normal Normal Schools generally offer much county, school, and community service to their surrounding areas without charge. When per capita cost comparisons are made, items of this nature go unconsidered. Emergency conditions often also make per capita costs completely without meaning. The reliability of per capita cost comparisons would be somewhat increased if they were figured over longer periods of time than the customary one year. Even then, most of the intangible factors would be left out of consideration. In spite of all that can be said about the unfairness of this method of comparison, the County Normal Schools with their many additional services to their communities can, except in emergency times, generally make a favorable showing even on the per capita cost basis.

One might raise these questions—Are not the results of institutions more important than the per capita costs? If they are doing a good job and producing worthwhile results, is not that a factor as well as the per capita cost? Should the public not be willing to pay the expenses of schools producing good results regardless of their cost as long as they are legitimate and fairly within reason? The public is much more concerned over the winning of the war at present, than they are over how much it is going to cost per capita or how much cheaper per capita it could be prosecuted. A well educated populace is just as vital to the welfare of the nation as winning the war.

Most of the special emergency permit teachers are married women of middle age or beyond. Many of them have husbands in the service. Many of them plan to teach only for the duration. If rural children are to have an education in the future it would seem that the state of Wisconsin will have need for all the elementary and rural training agencies she can keep in operation.