Adams County Schools

Country Schools

"May we hope that the near future may develop an understanding and unity of thought, and purpose, that shall make everything pertaining to our schools of the highest order, physical, moral and mental."
(J.M. Higbee, County Superintendent of Schools, 1879)

In 1856, Sophronia Temple, who had just settled near Plainville, wrote that "we have a good district school within one mile of us." Her son Justin was a student that winter but, as she continued, "it is too snowy for [daughters] Nellie and Annie....They have a fine time in summer among the wildflowers. They bound over the bluffs like roebucks."

It was, of course, concern on the part of parents that their children do more than "bound over the bluffs" that led to the creation of the public school system. In Adams County, as elsewhere, it began at the most local of levels. When the population of children grew large enough, neighbors asked their town government to organize a school district. In some places, they didn't wait for the town, but started on their own...

The first school mentioned in early county histories was started by Thomas Rich in Plainville in 1850, but records are sparse. It is not clear where this "academy" was located, how long it lasted, how many scholars attended or whether or not it was a public school or a private venture of the three Rich families who lived in the village and probably had enough children to fill a school all by themselves.

A few years later, settlers in Jackson hired 15-year-old Amelia Seward, set her up in a twelve foot-square smokehouse donated by the Vroman family and told her to teach. Among her qualifications, Seward could list that she "was educated in the common schools of New York and Beaver Dam." She was also reported as being a "close" relative of New York Governor William Seward, who also served as Abraham Lincoln’s secretary of state. Seward’s wages were reported at $1.25 per week when school was in session, plus room and board in the homes of her students. Seward continued to teach until she married William Hyatt and took up farming in New Haven. It was pre-
Teacher and students at the Diamond School, in the 1900s, when the county had over eighty country schools.
County school teachers at a training "Institute" at the county court house, 1902. A high school diploma certified a teacher to begin teaching in a rural school, but additional training at Institutes and at a Normal School was also required.

...sumed in the 1850s and for many years after that a married woman’s first responsibilities were at home, and, like Seward, she would stop teaching after her wedding day.

As settlement progressed in the county so did the establishment of schools. In 1855, the county board minutes record only one school on the east side of the Wisconsin—in Jackson. By 1867, seventeen schools appear in county records. Among them are: Jackson, East Easton, Prairie View, Strong’s Prairie, Pilot Knob, Richfield; Diamond, Buckhorn, Stafford, Hadlock, Chester, Twin Valley, Springville; Friendship, White Creek and Tamarack. Most of these schools started as log buildings, some with dirt floors, and were later replaced by frame buildings on stone footings.

The length of the school year varied and usually started with a three month “winter” term. Additional spring and fall terms were added over the years and in 1885, the state mandated that school be held for at least six months of the year. The winter term, when children were needed less for farm chores, was the most heavily-attended. At planting and harvest time boys in particular were needed on the farm and fewer attended school. Many parents also felt that boys who were destined to be farmers didn’t need much “book learnin’” anyway.

The first Friendship school, located in one room at what is now the north side of Lake Street at West was typical of the pioneer era. In 1858-59, teacher L.M. Higbee was employed there for seven months, with Mary Oliva Hanford assisting when attendance increased during the three winter months. Higbee received $31.50 per month for his efforts and Hanford $13. The discrepancy in pay between female and male teachers was common and lasted until well into the 20th Century. The presumption was that a male needed higher pay because he was or would be supporting a family, while a female was only working for herself until she married and left teaching. Mary Hanford, for example, left Friendship after one term to accept the marriage proposal of Andrew Jackson Turner of Portage. Their son, Frederick Jackson Turner, born in 1861, became the pre-eminent historian of the American west, renowned for his “frontier thesis.”

A lower pay scale did not stop young women from teaching and, in fact, making up the large majority of the teaching corps. In 1881, for example, the county employed 72 teachers, fifty of them female, who were paid anywhere from one-third to two-thirds as much as their male colleagues. Needless to say, these young women were a good deal for the taxpayers. While it held down taxes, the presumption that teaching was only a temporary occupation for the large majority of teachers encouraged a great deal of turnover and inexperience in the class room. It also made
teacher training an important part of the county school program.

Attendance was not compulsory until the 1880s, when a state law decreed that all children between the ages of seven and fifteen attend school for at least twelve weeks. However, any person—regardless of race, gender or nationality—between the ages of four and twenty could attend and was counted on the census of potential students. In 1873, for example, the county had 2,607 eligible students, better than one-third of the total population.

In the 1850s and '60s, Ho-Chunk children attended local schools, even though they were supposed to be deported to reservations in the west. The story is told of one Ho-Chunk mother who sent her two boys to school in New Haven, but habitually pecked through the window to make sure they were still there. In the 1890s and 1900s, the children of the Maxsey family, African-Americans living in Dell Prairie, attended the Point Bluff School while the children of the Russian-Jewish immigrant Rosin family went to school at Olin.

Open to all, the country school was the place where the melting pot simmered and transformed a nation of immigrants into Americans. This process was less necessary in Adams County, which had the highest-percentage of native-born white Americans of any Wisconsin county throughout the 1800s, than in other parts of Wisconsin, but still important. It was at a country school, in classes usually conducted by a young woman often still in her teens, where the children of Strong's Prairie Norwegians, Big Flats Danes, New Haven Irish, Lincoln Bohemians and Quincy Germans learned the basics of English grammar, American history and citizenship.

In 1861, the state mandated the position of county superintendent to administer and improve the schools. "The motto is Advance," wrote Superintendent Jesse Higbee in his report to the county board for 1880. Higbee, who served for a decade, and other superintendents, counted the number of students in the county and compared it to the number actually attending—and recorded truancy rates. The Superintendent also reported on the construction and improvement of school buildings, organized summer "institute" training sessions for the education and certification of teachers, then tested teachers and judged their suitability for work. In the 1900s, most of this work was turned over to the Supervising Teachers, such as Maybelle Douglass, who also became the first female Superintendent in 1916. Her successors as Supervising Teacher were Freda Hoeft, Dora Dittburner and Katherine McGowan.
A superintendent could, in extreme cases, withhold state and county aid from local districts that failed, for example, to supply desks for the schools, install a “back house,” or build a fence around the schoolyard to prevent the neighbor’s hogs from sleeping beneath the classroom floorboards. In 1879, Jesse Higbee evaluated the country schools and told the county board that “nearly all are wanting in very essential particulars: proper lighting, good ventilation and comfortable seats. To the want of comfortable seats I attribute one half of the seeming lack of order in the school room, to say nothing about the much more troublesome effects—physical deformities and lasting diseases.” Each local district was authorized to spend up to $75 per year on improvements to their schools, a goal few school boards met.

Superintendents often had to balance between contending interests, as in 1884, when E.C. Morse reported that his efforts to encourage teachers to take training courses to qualify for higher certificates clashed with the reluctance of local school boards to increase the pay of better-qualified teachers. They had to be advocates, too. When the state enacted a school library law empowering towns to divert a small portion of state aids to buy books for school libraries in 1888, Morse reported that he had “respectfully asked [town boards] for their assistance and cooperation. “By 1892, Superintendent George Reynolds enthused that “No money expended for school purposes in the state during the year has done more good...” than that spent on school libraries. In 1893, he recorded that eleven towns had spent $199.55 to purchase 233 books and in '94 stated that “it is hard to understand why some towns are so slow to see the benefit of the library system.”

When John P. Lewis began his first term as superintendent in 1897, he set the goal of seeing a dictionary, globe, United States flag, state flag and a “world flag” in all of the country schools and persuading local districts to provide them. He served his last term in 1911 but did not reveal if he had met his goal. Either way, it illustrates the state of the schools when, by 1897, many years after the pioneering era had ended, some county schools did not have a dictionary or a globe.

From the late 1860s until the mid-1890s the county had approximately seventy schools. As more settlers arrived in the 1890s, the number of schools rose past the eighty mark. They were all one-room schools, with students from first to eighth grade, except in Friendship, which had two divisions. Class size varied across the county. In 1891, Colburn had 86 students and Richfield had 106 students with four schools in each town. Of the most populous towns, New Haven had 283 students in four schools and Strong’s Prairie had 324 in six schools. In addition to children of “school-age,” enrollment lists also included a few children younger than four years of age in need of day care and a few older than twenty who were
usually immigrants learning English or native born adults overcoming illiteracy.

Country schools were more than institutions of learning. From their earliest days, they were community centers and centers of their communities. Religious congregations met at schools until they built churches of their own. Political meetings and elections, club and lodge gatherings, entertainments and shows, took place at country schools. More importantly, country schools defined communities. Adults and children identified themselves as hailing from Flintville, Gales Corners, Van Driessen, Coonville, or Spring Bluff, because of the school. In the 1910s, when young men in the northern part of Quincy fielded a baseball team they identified themselves as the Hadlocks, after the school located on what is now Highway Z and Dover Drive.

The country school was also important because until well into the 20th Century, it was the last school the majority of rural students would attend. Until the country schools were consolidated into larger districts providing bus service, many rural students could not get to high school. In many cases, the belief that farm people did not need to go beyond grade school persisted. Likewise, until the 1950s people who had not completed high school still had a good chance of finding and keeping a job paying a living wage. Since so many students would not attend high school, the country schools took part in county-wide eighth-grade graduation ceremonies. Held at first on the court house lawn, then moving to the fairgrounds, these ceremonies continued until the country schools were closed.

The country school era peaked in the 1910s. Then a combination of factors—declining rural populations, better means of transportation, and starting in the 1940s, state policy mandating consolidation—brought about the demise of the one-room school. From a peak of eighty-four schools in 1920, the number of country schools declined to sixty-four in 1940. By 1948, there were only twenty one or two-room schools left in the county, plus five state graded schools and one city school system. In 1952, schools in the southern part of the county joined the Wisconsin Dells district, with schools in the eastern part of the county joining Westfield and Tri-County districts, while the northwestern towns merged with Nekoosa.

While the one-room schools were gone, the rural school did not disappear. Multi-graded schools were built at Pineland in Big Flats, Roche-A-Cri in Strong's Prairie, Castle Rock in Quincy, Lincoln in Lincoln, De George in Richfield, and Big Spring in New Haven. They continue the tradition of the county school inaugurated by young Amelia Seward in the Vroman smokehouse in 1853.

The up-to-date Sweet School, Strong's Prairie, 1905. The teacher is Lotty Bloss.
Country Schools, 1920

Adams Town
1. Adams Center, west Highway 13 south of Duck Creek Drive
2. Flatville, between 10th and County M
3. West Side, one-half mile west of County N on County J

Big Flats
4. Big Flats Corners, southwest corner of Big Horn Drive and 13th Avenue
5. Jaborek, north side of Beaver Avenue between 14th and 15 Avenue
6. Murray, southeast corner of 11th Avenue and Buttercup Avenue
7. Niebuell, northeast corner of 9th Avenue and Big Horn Avenue
8. Oak Lawn, southeast corner of 8th Avenue and Brown Deer Court
9. Sutherland, southeast corner of 16th Avenue and Brown Deer Avenue

Colburn
10. Lone Pine, south side of Badger Lane between 1st Avenue and County G
11. Meadow View, northeast corner of 4th Avenue and Chicago Avenue
12. Oakridge, southside of Big Horn Avenue east of 6th Avenue
13. Twist, southwest corner of 1st Avenue and Buttercup Avenue
14. White Pine, Third Avenue south of Big Horn Avenue

Dell Prairie
15. Dell Prairie, County B south of County P
16. Fairview, south side of County K between 8th Avenue and County B
17. Gibson, northwest corner of Gulch Avenue and Highway 23
18. Pine Grove, west side of River Road south of Golden Avenue
19. Plainville, County K off Highway 13

Easton
20. East Easton, northwest corner of 10th Avenue and County A
21. Easton, County A east of Highway 13
22. Conville, west side of 9th Drive south of County E
23. Jackson, northwest corner of Highway 13 and 11th Avenue
24. White Creek, corner of 15th Avenue and County H

Jackson
25. Davis Corners, southeast corner 6th Court and County I
26. Graham, north side of County I east of County G
27. Jackson, northeast corner of Fur Drive and 2nd Avenue
28. Little Lake, east side of 5th Lane between Fern Avenue and Fish Avenue
29. Wolf Lake, north side of Fish Court east of County G

Leola
30. Big Roche-A-Cri, northwest corner of 5th Avenue and Aspen Avenue
31. Dormanville, north side of Akron Court east of 3rd Avenue
32. Fairview, south side of County D between 5th and 6th Avenue
33. Pole Bridge, northwest corner of 1st Drive and Aniwa Lane
34. Rothermel, southwest corner of County G and Aspen Drive

Lincoln
35. Buckhorn, west side of County G south of County M
36. Diamond, northwest corner of County G and Dyke Avenue
37. Pilot Knob, southwest corner of Dakota Lane and 3rd Court
38. Spring Bluff, east side of 5th Avenue between Dover and Duck Creek Avenue
39. Star, north side of County M south of Deerborn Drive

Monroe
40. Dawes, under Petenwell Lake between Buttercup and Brown Deer Avenue
41. Hillcrest, west side of 18th Drive, south of Brown Deer Drive
42. Monroe Center, west side of County Z between County C and Bighorn Avenue

New Chester
43. Bless, north side of Edgewood Drive between 1st and 2nd Avenue
44. Brooks Graded School, northwest corner of County G and County A
45. Grand Marsh Graded School, north side of County E, west of 6th Avenue
46. Oak Grove, southwest corner of Elk Avenue and County G
47. Rockhouse, northwest corner of 6th Avenue and Ember Avenue

New Haven
48. Badger Valley, east side of Golden Lane, north of Highway 23
49. Big Spring, north side of Golden Avenue, east of 3rd Avenue
50. Stafford, west side of 1st Lane, north of Gillette Avenue
51. Ward, northwest corner of County P and County G

Preston
52. Cottonville, west side of 13th Drive, south of Cottonville Avenue
53. Fordham, northwest corner of 8th Drive and County J
54. Moundview, southwest corner of 11th Avenue and Czech Avenue
55. Pleasant Meadow, east side of 8th Drive, north of Highway 21
56. Roche-A-Cri, northwest corner of 11th Avenue and Cree Avenue

Quincy
57. Five Oaks, northeast corner of 18th Avenue and Ember Avenue
58. Hadlock, east side of County Z, north of Dover Drive
59. McBride, northeast corner of County Z and Eagle Drive

Richfield
60. Fish, northeast corner of County G and Cottonville Avenue
61. Morgan, northeast corner of 1st Drive and County CC
62. Pleasant View, north side of Cypress Avenue east of 7th Drive
63. Ship Rock, southwest corner of Cypress Avenue and 3rd Avenue

Rome
64. Barnum, under Petenwell Lake between Archer and Aspen Avenue
65. Chester, northwest corner of County Z and Akron Avenue
66. Douglas, west side of 13th Avenue between Archer and Badger Avenue
67. Horton, under Petenwell Lake, between Aniwa Court and Apache Avenue
68. Spring Branch, east side of 9th Avenue north of County D
69. Vondriessen, east side of 9th Drive, south of Apache Avenue

Springville
70. Allen, west side of 8th Avenue south of Fish Avenue
71. Gales Corners, north side of Gales Avenue between 8th Avenue and County B
72. Mars, west side of 10th Avenue north of Fish Avenue
73. Olin, north side of Fur Lane east of Highway 13
74. Point Bluff, north side of Highway 82 east of County Z
75. Townline, southeast corner of Fern Avenue and Highway 13
76. Twin Valley, southeast corner of 11th Court and 11th Drive

Strongs Prairie
77. Arkdale, east side of Highway 21 in Arkdale
78. Holmsville, southeast corner of Highway Z and Czech Avenue
79. Prairie View, west side of 21st Avenue south of Chicago Drive
80. Sullivan, southeast corner of Cypress Avenue and 16th Avenue
81. Sweet, northeast corner of Cumberland Avenue and 20th Avenue
82. Thompson, northeast corner of 18th Avenue and Cottonville Avenue

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Country Schools, 1920

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High Schools

Wisconsin passed its first law to aid cities, villages and towns fund high schools in 1875. Many communities responded by starting high schools over the next few years but it was not until 1887 that Adams county's first high school district was formed. With about 300 people, Friendship was the largest village in Adams County, but it was not incorporated until 1907 and not eligible for high school aid. Therefore, the first high school in Adams County was organized by the people of Friendship and their neighbors in the towns of Adams and Preston.

On February 24, 1887 a special meeting was held at the school house in Friendship for the purpose of organizing a "Free High School." After the resolution was made and a brief discussion held, the fifteen voters in attendance voted unanimously by ballot to organize Joint High School District Number One of the Towns of Adams and Preston.

A three-year course of study was established, including arithmetic, grammar and geography in the first term of the first year and proceeding to plane geometry, physics and the theory and art of teaching in the final term. The art of teaching was
important since completion of high school work qualified the graduate to teach in a country school. Many parents and students considered high school as teacher training and many young women took advantage of the opportunity to begin a teaching career in one of the county's sixty-nine rural schools.

High school classes began in March, with part of the two-division school in Friendship set aside for the high school. H. M. Older was hired to teach and serve as high school principal for $50 per month. Marie Holm was hired as primary teacher for $25 per month. Students were not very numerous in these early years and nearly all of them were young women ready to start work as teachers after graduation. The class of 1894 consisted of Barbara A. Hodan, Alice J.S. Hodan and Nessie McGowan. The graduation ceremony was nonetheless impressive, with music and recitations from the "pupils of the primary school", the Hodan girls delivering recitations and McGowan giving the valedictory address.

The arrival of the railroad in 1911 strained the entire county school system. New multi-grade schools were required at Brooks and Grand Marsh. The inadequacies of the old Friendship school,
April of 1912, petitioners from what became the village of Adams asked the Joint School Board to hold a special meeting of the voters to discuss building a school “at the south end of the district.” In May Friendship people also presented a petition calling for a special meeting at which the voters would decide whether or not to build a school.

They would also select a site, name a building committee, and authorize up to $10,000 in bonds to pay for it. The minutes of the meeting, held at the court house on May 22, 1912, report that, “due to the fact that the persons who presented the [south end] petition are not present and that no one is prepared to designate a site upon which to erect a building at the south end of the District and to present any plans for its erection that we proceed to consider the next point.”

The next point considered was the petition of the Friendship people who were present and who thereby voted to build the new school on Fifth and Raymond Street in Friendship. The question can be raised as to is why “no one” from the “south end of the District”—the very people who had called for the meeting to begin with—was present when their petition came up for discussion. The answer, for which there is no written record, but plenty of hearsay, is that the “south end” people were present at the start of the meeting. However, the court house lights failed and the meeting was adjourned, so they went home. Then the lights went on again and the Friendship people reconvened the meeting and voted in favor of their petition to build a new school on Fifth and Raymond Street. This story has been told many times over the years so there must be a measure of truth in it, but how much? For example, the meeting was held in May 1912. George Polivka did not install the hydro generators that brought electric power to Friendship until 1914, and the court house itself was not connected to the electric lines until 1917, so what kind of lights went out in the court house on the meeting night in 1912?
Be that as it may, the fact is that, for whatever reason, the “south end” people were absent and the Friendship people took advantage of it. The lack of attention to their needs only spurred the “south end” people to incorporate a village and build their own grade school. They probably would have built their own high school too, if they had not already been outmaneuvered by the Friendship people into paying for the Raymond Street school. The high school became a cause of hard feelings between the two communities that lasted for years. It also kept the Adams people vigilant in the mid-1920s when it became apparent that the Friendship High School was inadequate and that a new school must be built somewhere in the two communities.

In May of 1928, voters in Adams, Friendship and nearby areas signed a petition calling for the organization of the “Joint High School District of Adams and Friendship.” The petition also stated that “a joint free high school” would be built “within the limits of” the subdivision “known as Oak Crest,” that is, east of Main Street, north of State and south of “Brevoort Boulevard” within the city limits of Adams. Brevoort was originally plotted as a “boulevard” with a one-hundred foot wide right-of-way allowing space for a broad tree-lined parkway. Had a “boulevard” actually been created it would have been a pleasant spot for a school. Be that as it may, the Brevoort location was about as close to the center of Adams-Friendship as any place else and obviously chosen to please as many people as possible.

The atmosphere was less heated and more above board than in 1912 at a meeting held at the Opera House in Adams in July 1928. Citizens voted 75-1 in favor of borrowing $65,000 to build a high school on the southeast corner of Brevoort and Main. A month later this vote was rescinded when Theodore Werner offered to sell a plot of land stretching three hundred feet north of Brevoort on Main and running east for two blocks for $500, about $1000 less than land south of Brevoort.

In September, the district board, which consisted of John Purves, Frank Richards, and Henry Ueber, hired an architect and builder. They also hired Edward Shea as principal and Dorothy Crane as assistant principal, and drew up a curriculum for what was now known as the Adams-Friendship Joint District High School. It was a “free-union” district and free was the operative word, since students from the city of Adams, town of Adams, parts of Preston, as well as Friendship, could now attend tuition-free. For the 1928-29 school year, while the new school was under construction, classes were held at the Friendship high school building. The first graduation exercise of the joint A-F district high took place in June, 1929 with a graduation class of twenty: Marie Albee, George Burda, Walter Cummings, Lucille Duncan, Evelyn Fuller, Helen Ginter, Anne Harwood, Howard Johnson, Gertrude Keete, Harold Keefe, Kenneth Kingsley, Evan Lewis, Frank Neff, Russel Odekirk, Eileen Shea, Walter Smith, Charles Tuttle, Arleigh Van Wie, Hesper Van Wie, Ramona Webster. The following September classes started in the new school building located on what was then the northern edge of the developed part of Adams, across the marsh from Friendship.
School Consolidation

The closing of one-room schools and the "integration" of their students into larger multi-grade facilities was one of the most important changes to occur in rural areas throughout the country. In Adams County, the process had been underway since the 1920s and by 1941 the number of rural schools had fallen from over 80 to 47. By 1947, the number of one-room schools had fallen to 21.

Schools in the southern and northern towns merged with relatively little friction into neighboring districts at Wisconsin Dells and Nekoosa. Parents in the Brooks and Grand Marsh areas supported the expansion of their schools and those in the Arkdale and White Creek areas accepted the construction of the multi-graded Roche-A-Cri and Castle Rock schools.

The east-central part of the county posed a greater problem. The school-age population was small and spread over a wide area. Busing to Friendship, Coloma or Westfield was unacceptable. In response, school officials built small, two-division schools in the towns of Lincoln and Richfield.

In 1953, after local landowner James De George offered to donate $1,000, the Richfield school was named in honor of his son, Dominick, who had recently died in an auto accident. Eight years later, the Pineland School was built in Big Flats.

The ability of Lincoln, De George, and, to a lesser degree, Pineland, to meet the needs of their students was discussed for decades. When a fire destroyed De George in 1978, it was not replaced. Lincoln was closed in the early 1990s, but Pineland was enlarged as part of the major improvement that began in 1996.

Serving about two-thirds of what is still a lightly-peopled county, the Adams-Friendship district is, in terms of territory, one of the largest in the state.
Previous Page, Top: The Davis Corners school and the Model T Supervising Teacher Katherine McGowan used for visits from the 1920s until the 1950s. Middle: The multi-grade Grand Marsh, new in 1914. Bottom: The entrance to the De George School, with the memorial to Dominick DeGeorge at the base of the flagpole. Above: The country school eighth grade class of 1930, with graduation ceremonies held at the Fairgrounds. The ceremony was important since many of the students would not be able to attend high school. Left: The Lincoln School, shortly before it closed. Below: The Adams-Friendship High School, which opened its doors to students in January, 1998.