Chapter Eight

GOOD SCHOOLS: THE CONSTANT GOAL

One of the first urgent problems, second only to survival, facing pioneer families moving into Green County from other areas concerned the need for schools in which their children could continue or start their education.

Wisconsin was barely getting under way with its territorial organization steps and the only previous provisional law on schooling during the Territory of Michigan days had been largely inoperative in the new frontier land.

Hence, most of the first actions taken in Green County and Monroe for providing schools were carried out by the pioneer families themselves. Parents paid fees on an agreed basis, makeshift schoolhouses were occupied or built, and teachers hired.

Records agree that the first school in Green County was established in Section 36, Cadiz Township, in January, 1837, with Ralph Hildebrand as teacher. The trustees included Andrew Clarno, William Bowen, Bennett Nowlin and William Boyls. The schoolroom was located in a small log structure designed for a smokehouse.

The first schoolhouse actually built for that purpose was erected that same year on Clarno's land in Section 30, Clarno Township. The second, in 1838, was a log schoolhouse in New Mexico (on the east side of 16th Avenue just south of the railroad bridge). Miss Lucy Goddard of Illinois was hired to teach at the latter school, with New Mexico (Monroe) townspeople and Clarno settlers contributing funds and some 20 pupils.

Gradually, as the county was organizing under territorial law, there
were 10 districts functioning by 1840, including the one in New Mexico, all still largely funded by private family subscriptions. However, in 1841, new territorial laws provided for separate county school commissioners. Elias Jones, William Green and E.T. Gardner were the first to serve in Green County. By 1844, the county had made its first levy for schooling of two and a half mills per dollar on property. That figure is believed to have been higher than the tax in most Wisconsin counties.

That same year of 1844, saw the first one-room schoolhouse built in the area of Monroe, across from the Methodist Church property on 11th Street. How long that schoolhouse functioned is not known today but one of its highlights was acting as the site for the meeting at which the town's new Methodist Church Society was organized.

Referring back to the first school organizing steps under the new county status in 1839, it is worth noting that the number of families remained the basis for district establishment, rather than geographic boundaries. There was a district for each ten families, with settlements such as Monroe setting up their districts on this same ratio.

In 1847, the year before statehood provided a uniform plan for free public education, there were 25 districts in Green County with 1,323 pupils. Unfortunately, there also were 17 districts in which no schooling was available for their 504 children.

Men usually were employed to teach in these pioneer district schools, principally because a firm hand was needed, physically, to enforce discipline among older pupils.

After statehood in 1848, the new constitution called for a department of public instruction, and in the following years, township governments were initiated with town superintendents of schools. The latter plan was devised, it is supposed, to bring order out of educational chaos. By 1861, it was
recognized that better and more uniform schooling could be assured with a county superintendent in charge. The first man to hold that post was William C. Green of York Township, who served as assemblyman for Green County in 1850.

After that wise action to supply over-all county supervision of schools, education was on a better organized and more beneficial basis for the youngsters. Supt. Green insisted on examinations for teachers and conducted regular inspection visits to district schools in rural areas.

There never was any question that settlers, in both the county and Monroe, wanted the best possible schooling for their own children, as well as for all young people in their districts. There were, however, many problems prior to 1861 in trying to realize that objective under somewhat confusing legislation calling for free public schools in Wisconsin.

Even after the county superintendent plan was launched in 1861, many villages and smaller communities functioned under special state charters which exempted them from county control.

Monroe, for example, was issued a special general school charter in 1856 designed to permit it to organize a union school district. Local electors, the "Sentinel" reported, approved such a union school plan November 8, 1856, and voted to buy land and provide $10,000 for a new consolidated schoolhouse.

For reasons not clear today, it appears no steps ever were taken toward implementing the charter with a union district plan until the annual meeting in July, 1866, which the first Union School District No. 1 was formed. Edwin E. Bryant was named school board president and there were 11 teachers on the staff, all women.

Here, in chronological order, are items gleaned from the "Sentinel" relating to Monroe's struggles with getting schools on a sound, functioning basis:
May 23, 1855—Editors of the "Sentinel" deplore the lack of an estimated $6,000 needed for a new common school building. They report that not a single room "suitable" for school purposes "is available in the town." The editors concede the existence of several "select" (probably private subscription or fee) schools but cite the need for a "proper common school." Citizens are urged to seek consolidation of facilities into an improved public system. In the same item, the "Sentinel" points to interest concentrated in building new churches before any real groundwork for education has been laid.

June 6, 1855—"Sentinel" editors continue their appeals for consolidation of schools. They report 377 pupils in town with a public tax budget of only $346. They suggest a $2.25 per pupil tuition fee to cover costs of adequate teaching.

In connection with these discussions stirred by the "Sentinel," it should be explained that the only school for classical or higher education after 1847 was the Seminary, established through the 40-acre land gift made in 1839 by William Russell. Stockholders had contributed $2,000 to build the Seminary on the later North School site at 9th Street and 15th Avenue. H.C. Burchard was principal in its early years. In August, 1852, the Seminary was the site of the county's first teachers institute which lasted several weeks.

When the first moves were made in the early 1850s for a union school setup, the Seminary stock was purchased through taxes and the fledgling school system took it over. That tenuous merger, however, worked to the disadvantage of the Seminary operation and did not improve the common school program. In 1854, electors instructed the superintendent (unnamed) to divide the Monroe system into three districts. John Bloom and J.B. Bachman then bought the Seminary and restored its operation to the original program.

From the above, it can be deduced that moves actually had been under
way toward some plan for a common school system but were derailed by the veto
to set up three districts. By the way, the Seminary's owners after 1854 op-
erated it as the "Monroe Institute" with 20-week annual courses, ranging from
arithmetic and advanced mathematics through Latin, German, music, painting
and embroidery. "Boarding facilities" also were available.

The Institute also furnished the town with a bit of excitement in 1855
when, the "Sentinel" reported on March 30, the floor of the old Seminary Hall
collapsed during special exercises for students attended by a large crowd.
The editors reported 150 jumped out of the first-floor windows "although
danger was slight." No one was hurt seriously and students completed their
program April 4 at the Courthouse.

Other school items:

Oct. 17, 1855--The "Sentinel" reports J. B. Bachman had taken over as
principal of the Monroe Institute, with Joseph Peters as his assistant. The
staff included at least two other instructors.

Jan. 30, 1856--State Senator George E. Dexter of Monroe pushes a bill
through the Legislature to permit Monroe District No. 8 (north side of town)
to borrow funds to build a new school.

May 7, 1856--The "Sentinel" reports the first term of Monroe High School
(no location given) is starting with Prof. V. Scheer as principal. Tuitions
are: Primary (?) $3.60, High School $6 and Classical $10.

May 14, 1856--The new Green County Education Association, formed May 9,
elects Judge John A. Bingham as president, James Bintliff, secretary, and
E.T. Gardner, treasurer. A.C. Barry, state superintendent of public instruc-
tion, comes to Monroe to address the group.

May 21, 1856--James Bintliff is selected to serve as Monroe's school
superintendent. (Judge Bingham and Bintliff were two of the most active
eyearly town leaders in promoting better education. Bingham visited classes
regularly, often wearing his old-fashioned shawl, and frequently took over the teaching himself. Bintliff, born and educated in England, appreciated the unique opportunity afforded all Wisconsin young people with free public schooling. He, too, often taught classes himself and checked into qualification of teachers.)

Nov. 12, 1856--Monroe electors, at a meeting November 8, approved a union school plan (previously noted in the wake of state action granting Monroe a unique special charter earlier in the year). The electors voted $2,000 to buy a site from Wadsworth Foster and $10,000 for a schoolhouse. (No record has been found of such a site purchase, nor of any action toward building a school.)

May 11, 1857--School District No. 6 (mid-town) holds its organization meeting, naming Francis Emerson as chairman and T. K. Lindley, secretary. Electors ask the superintendent (Bintliff?) to set up the district immediately.

Aug. 15, 1857--New School District No. 6 elects Francis Emerson as board president, J. S. Bloom, treasurer, and C. M. Perry, clerk. The three-month term is to begin when a teacher is hired and a classroom acquired. The board studies a plan to seek use of the "brick school" (no location or explanation given in item). Mordecai Kelly, S.P. Condee and T.K. Lindley are named to report on securing a new site and building a large school.

March 1, 1858--District No. 8 electors vote to purchase the Seminary property. (Classes for District No. 8 had been held in a small brick building in the 800-block of 14th Avenue, now a private home.)

May 26, 1858--District No. 8 classes will start Monday (May 31) in the completely renovated old Seminary building which had been "painted inside and out." The "two" Misses Richards and Miss Criswold are the teachers.

In 1859, District No. 13 built a four-room, two-story 32 x 32 schoolhouse on the northeast corner of what is now the South School grounds on 13th
CITY'S SOCIAL CENTER, TRAVELER'S HAVEN - A massive, fortress styled structure, Ludlow Hotel was Monroe's community life headquarters for many decades. Located at the southeast corner of 9th Street and 16th Avenue (McLellan - J. C. Penney Store sites), the hotel was built in 1884 by Arabut Ludlow, banker and leading business figure, at the behest of his friend, Norman Churchill. It not only served the traveling public, but was the center for many banquet and other social events until it was razed in 1955.
Avenue. It was hailed as a good building with fine facilities for the classes, which were in charge of E.E. Woodman.

Joseph T. Dodge's 1861 street map of Monroe shows three schoolhouses in the village. District No. 8's school, in the old Seminary, was located at the northwest corner of 9th Street and 15th Avenue. Another schoolhouse, shown at the northeast corner of 14th Avenue and 15th Street, probably was for District No. 6, although not indicated as such on the map. District No. 13's school, of course, was at the southwest corner of 21st Street and 13th Avenue.

There also was a German schoolhouse shown at the northwest corner of 13th Avenue and 19th Street, probably in the structure erected for the German Catholic (St. Mary's) Church organized a year earlier.

In July, 1866, the first real action toward a consolidated school system was taken when electors of local districts joined in forming the first actual Union School District No. 1. Three years earlier, what came to be called "Center" School had been built by District No. 6 on the site of the now demolished Lincoln School. It probably was the recognized advantage of this large common school that brought about the 1866 merger steps.

Edwin Eustace Bryant, who became union district board president, did not remain in that post very long. He soon left Monroe to become secretary to Gov. Lucius Fairchild, state adjutant general and, eventually, law school dean of the University of Wisconsin, for which he had served in the 1860s as a regent.

A standard high school curriculum, under state requirements, did not get under way here until the 1870s. Prior to that, the academy or seminary courses apparently prepared students for college.

Among early principals of the Monroe school system was Joseph Dodge, civil engineer who brought the railroad here. Dodge served from July, 1862,
to July, 1863. His contribution, which was outstanding, probably resulted from his Vermont academy and university training.

Other principals (later called superintendents) who made great contributions included: Prof. W.D. Parker, later president of River Falls Normal School; E.E. Woodman, held in high respect as a teacher; Prof. R.W. Burton, rugged disciplinarian, and Prof. B.M. Reynolds, New Englander who was strict with pupils, exacting in his demands on teachers and generally recognized as having unified the Monroe school system.

Prof. Nathan Crook Twining, who came here in 1873 from Waterloo, Wis., to head the schools, credited Prof. Reynolds with having prepared the way for Twining's work in organizing an improved curriculum and more complete academic program. In 1884, two years before Twining left Monroe, he was responsible for 1,200 pupils in the growing system.

Joseph Dodge's half brother, Adam Clarke Dodge, also performed meritorious service for the town's school system. He served 27 years on the Board of Education, 23 of them as president, during the period of the greatest late 19th Century improvement in facilities and academies.

Among the women teachers who deserve special pages in Monroe's school history was Miss Emma Van Wagenen, or "Miss Van" as she was known to generations of pupils. Miss Van Wagenen began her teaching career in 1870 at the age of 19 in a Jordan Township school. She joined the Monroe system in 1871 and was a main figure in building the city's "grammar" grade program.

At her retirement in 1916, after 45 years in the local schools. "Miss Van" was principal of Churchill School, respected as a disciplinarian but beloved by more than two generations of her "alumni."

Born in Wiota January 8, 1851, Miss Van Wagenen was the daughter of the Garrett Van Wagenens who moved to Monroe in 1858. At the time of her death April 26, 1921, she was secretary of Monroe Women's Club and had been president
of that organization. Her brother, Dr. Henry G. Van Wagenen, was an optician and jewelry store operator.

Another veteran of Monroe's school system, remembered with affection by generations of her former pupils, was Miss Grace Byers, daughter of Dr. Fred W. and Olive DeHaven Byers. She began teaching kindergarten in 1896 at South School at the earnest urging of Mrs. Henry Ludlow, School Board member who initiated the kindergarten program. Mrs. Ludlow persuaded Grace Byers to take special college training for this work, in Wisconsin and Michigan, courses which Miss Byers supplemented later with summer sessions at Boulder, Colorado.

It was upon the insistence of Miss Byers that the School Board finally started installing electric lights in schools in 1910. She also was active in promoting other innovations, especially in educational programs. After retirement, Grace Byers remained a keen observer of community affairs, especially in cultural areas. When death came in November, 1964, she was mourned by a host of her "children" and good friends.

After Center School burned in January, 1871, electors decided at their March 16 meeting to build a new three-story structure on the same site. The upper floor was to be for high school purposes. The building was to cost $15,000 but before the brick structure was finished in 1872 that estimate had been exceeded substantially.

Still more room was needed for the growing school population 10 years later. So, electors voted June 12, 1882, to build a new school at the old Seminary site. Again, the cost for this North School was placed at $15,000 but this time the contractor, Jacob Steinman, seems to have stayed within that limit. Finished in 1884, the school was named for Norman Churchill in view of his long service to education and community affairs.

Next to be constructed was East School in 1891, which continues today
(1976) as a center for pupils in the early grade levels.

In 1896, South School was built in the 2100-block of 13th Avenue, site of the early District No. 13 schoolhouse. It, too, remains a busy elementary grade unit of the Monroe district system.

By the turn of the century, it was obvious that expanded facilities were needed for Monroe's high school. Electors voted to acquire land in the block to the north of Center School and a new building was constructed in 1905-06. More and more students were staying on until graduation, some of them going on to colleges. The new building provided improved high school facilities to meet the needs of those students.

Expanding needs, however, were not limited to the high school level. East, South and North Schools were channeling more and more pupils into the upper grades and by 1915 it again was clearly apparent that old Center School could not handle them. Plans were worked out with Claude & Starck, Architects, of Madison for a replacement building after Center School (then called the "old high school") was razed. This building, named "Lincoln" at the behest of Janet Jennings, author, patriot and devoted admirer of the martyred president, was erected in 1916-17.

A handsome example of the Louis Sullivan architectural styling era, the building served the city well until it was ravaged by fire September 5, 1973. It stood afterward for more than two years, in sadly dilapidated condition, until a wrecking crew dealt the final death blow, bringing down the walls and clearing the site this past winter.

In recent years, some critics of Monroe school facilities have zeroed in on the ages of East and South Schools as indicating disinterest by the school board and townspeople in building more modern structures. Anyone familiar with the previous and the following accounts of Monroe's struggles to meet the educational needs of the district's young people cannot accept
that contention as justified to any major degree.

Down through the years, as the reader will note, there have been many building projects, some undertaken during stringent economic times and under difficult circumstances. The legion of school board members, dedicated citizens and the host of teachers, past and present, all have remained loyal to that original objective of providing good schooling for Monroe district's students, and will continue to do so. The timing may not satisfy the more impatient but, as in the past, ever better facilities will continue to be prevalent.

It is true there were no building programs immediately following the First World War, simply because there was no real need. The depression years of the 1930s also inhibited consideration of major borrowings for newer schools. However, with the assistance of federal funds in 1938-39, an attractive modern addition to the Senior High School, complete with auditorium, gymnasium and clock tower, enhanced the Monroe scene, as well as the district's facilities.

Again, turbulent times during World War II years postponed expansion of grade facilities which obviously were overburdened as the 1950s started. The Board of Education in 1950, however, took steps to cope with that situation by careful planning of additions to East and South Schools, as well as a modernization project for North School. Electors voted overwhelmingly to approve the proposed bond issue and the projects were carried out in 1951-52.

Incidentally, in order to obtain legal approval and a favorable rating for that bond issue, it became necessary for Monroe to part company with its 1856 general school charter, unique in the state, and to organize itself into Joint Common School District No. 1.

Monroe's High School became increasingly crowded in the mid-1950s as students came from an ever-widening area and the postwar "baby boom" indicated
further crowding to be faced during the decade ahead. Another factor looming on the horizon was the inevitable expansion of the Monroe district's area under the State's new law requiring every rural area to be in a high school district.

So, another major proposal, this time for an entirely new Senior High School building, was launched in 1957. Electors again gave approval by a wide margin to the district's biggest borrowing in its history. The new high school, built on a large tract at the south edge of the city (in Judge Andrick's old New Mexico), was completed in the winter of 1958-59.

When the additions of more territory to the Monroe district became effective by the July, 1962, the State's deadline, the School Board was ready again. The new High School had been planned in 1957 by the Board and architects to permit a future west wing, running to the south. This wing was completed in 1963, just in time for the combined "bulge" impact.

The bond issue proposal at that time included plans for razing the old high school structure, built in 1905-06, and replacing it with a modern addition to the 1939 building, providing up-to-date expanded facilities for the Junior High School. This section was completed in 1964.

The Board of Education and the electors then turned their attention after 1964 to the rising grade school enrollment due to the district's increased territory. The Board and its Citizens Advisory Committee came forward in 1966 with a proposal for a new grade center on the north side of Monroe. Property along the north side of 8 1/2 Street had been purchased some years previously as the board anticipated the problem faced in 1966. Electors again approved this proposal and the building, located at the east end of 8 1/4 Street, was completed in 1967.

Even before the new Northside School was ready for operation, many parents were urging the Board to transfer all pupils from old North School to
other facilities. Finally, after considerable pressure and study, the Board agreed and its action sealed the fate of Churchill School, as it had been known for decades. The venerable building was razed and today a gasoline station graces the 9th Street front portion of this site used for schooling purposes since 1847.

Meanwhile, across the street from the Churchill site to the east, another monument to an early citizen leader in education—Arabut Ludlow Memorial Library—stands today as a reminder of Monroe's constant striving for improved schooling.

The library building was a gift to the school district, for use by the whole community, from Henry, Edwin and Willis Ludlow in memory of their pioneer father. Their gift offer was made in March, 1904, and the building constructed in 1905 on lots used many years for county offices. The library was finished several months before the first senior high school was ready for students.

Ludlow Memorial Library, designed by Claude & Starck from plans the firm used in the Whitewater library project, has continued to operate over the years for the benefit of all who live in the school district, young and old, under direction of the Board of Education, a situation again unique in Wisconsin.

Although related only indirectly to the Monroe school system, the former Green County Teachers College functioned here many years to supply certificated graduates from its two-year course. Started at Brodhead in 1909, with Charles H. Dietz as principal, the normal school was moved here in 1910 to quarters supplied by the Monroe School Board.

The City of Monroe later donated the block between 9th and 10th Streets and 11th and 12th Avenues as the site for a new normal school building. The structure erected on this former city cemetery location was completed in the
early 1920s and served as the Teachers College until that system was phased out several years ago. Since then, the building has been used for special education classes, as well as for various state and county agency offices.

The local school system's record book, of course, never will be closed so long as there is a Monroe. Past history, however, marked as it has been by a steady progression of bright pages, offers sound assurance that boards and electors will continue to move steadily on the course toward that most important objective of the town's earliest settlers—the best of educational opportunities during every today for its citizens of all the tomorrows.