And Then There Were None: One-Room Schools in Wayne County

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Education in Wayne County has changed dramatically from its rudimentary beginnings as “subscription” and Sabbath schools to the nearly 150 one-room frame “free” schools, then to consolidated districts. But the most formative early years of Wayne County were shaped by the little schools placed where farming families could send their children by foot or horseback to a few hours of basic education in two or three sessions each year.

One of the few alternatives had been the subscription school system. It required each family to pay and board a teacher who taught until it was the next family’s turn. This “boarding round” method, divided at the teacher’s choosing, reaped uneven results. Those with bigger gardens and prettier daughters might well receive a better education.

The first Sabbath School in Wayne County was in 1824 on John Borah’s land in Jasper Township. These early versions of “free schools” served settlers who were too poor or two scattered to support a teacher. The Sabbath School was essentially a lengthy Sunday School session for all ages. The lessons were reading and spelling and were opened with prayer and song.

By the mid 1800s the free school took hold, based on assessing a toll or tax, but not boarding. Teacher salaries became more uniform. The log schools were gradually replaced by frame buildings. By 1900 the last log school, a skeletal symbol of dozens of first schools in the county, was the old Rider Log cabin northwest of Fairfield. The earliest years had been “better than nothing” experience.

Betsy, daughter of Isaac Harris, the first settler to build a cabin in Wayne County, recalled her first school was taught by George Merritt without a single arithmetic or slate in the room. Studies were from the Testament and a spelling book. John Jones, son of another early settler, remembered a schoolhouse about 300 years from their house as early as 1823. Tom’s Prairie school was built in 1822, George Wilson the first teacher. Schools in the Green Briar area, Tom’s Prairie, and Bear Prairie were started quite early.

The schoolhouse in the Jasper Township Borah settlement began by 1824 in a log hut with a dirt floor and without a chimney, window, or door cover. A log was cut out of the side for light and teaching was offered only in the summer. George Wilson taught two terms there and
also in the second Jasper area school near the “pigeon roost” on the Douglas place in 1825.

No records confirm the earliest school, but there were possibly eight or more in the county before 1830. One report says an 1823 building, located about three miles northeast of Burnt Prairie near the Olive Branch school was the first. Elizabeth Borah taught 16 students between the ages of 6 to 30.

Other early schools include “Old Massilon” school in the 1820s, Watson, a log structure built in the 1850s southwest of Cisne, Carthage, Selby, White Cloud (became the front of the Zenith store), Blue Point, Farmer’s, Enterprise, Frame, Antioch, and Caudle School which stood on the spot of the Brush Creek log school built in 1842. The Morlan log school stood just off Frog Island near Wayne City. Others were Independence, Brush Prairie, Long Prairie and Middleton.

John Lappin, an alumni, remembered the first school in Geff was initially a home near the old B & O/Southwestern depot, then the “warehouse” for a few months, and then in a church because the new building wasn’t ready by winter. The first “real school” was a two-story, four-room building, with one room reserved for the Masonic Lodge.

In the Cisne area, Warren Crippen, whose grandmother taught at the Selby log school, once said that one of the first things settlers did was build the school. It was a community center for religious meetings, literary societies, debates, and spelling matches.

An early history records that before the mid 1800s, teachers were paid a pittance, were poorly prepared, transient. They taught a mix of rudiments in rough log cabins or barns with slab furniture and little equipment. Books were scarce and blackboards were painted planks. Fuel was provided in long poles that teacher and students cut into stove length. Moffit school, organized in 1866, had seats of undressed lumber and an old box stove.

Willow Branch, originally a log house in 1856, had shelves built around the walls for children to stand and do their writing. When the frame building was put up in 1871, the old log school was sold--for 85 cents.

From the beginning, schools were abandoned, improved, and new ones started as the population of the county increased and shifted. Schools often were named for a pioneer settler, patron, or event. Organ, Allison, Bovee, Wagner, Johnson, and Ward school were early settler names. Bear Prairie, near to Merriam, was so called because Haynes Potter killed a large black
bear near the school site. The Pure Gold rural school was originally “Number 9” until its first teacher, Clara Woodward, was handed a bright gilt key to the new building and exclaimed, “it shines like pure gold” and the name stuck.

A few early schools disappeared through name changes. Briar Thicket school became Silver Glen. Dry Fork became New Harmony, Hardscrabble changed to Pleasant Ridge, and “Possum Trot” to Harvard.

The Gray school on Frog Island, Copeland in Brush Creek, Allen near Enterprise, and Richards in Lamard simply ceased. Middleton village had a school in 1854, but the railroad caused the town to wither and the students shifted.

Other schools, such as Golden Gate prospered. Erected in 1895, the school became crowded and additional rooms were needed just two years later. In the Mt. Erie area, by 1883, there were seven frame school houses, fourteen teachers, and nearly 600 students. Male teachers made $35 monthly and female teachers, $25.

In early years, church and schools often shared the same building, as did Bovee and Buckeye. And many schools exist only as numbers on a list, unanchored by unusual events and unheralded by memory. The early schools in Big Mound, Barnhill, Massillon, are recorded by number but little further information.

Fairfield, designated early as the county seat, offered school initially in any vacant, convenient building and both the locations and the teachers are forgotten. The first schoolhouse was “on the opposite side of the street from the old Methodist Episcopal church.” The “new” Methodist church at the time is now the Masonic Hall. This earliest reference is probably one of the corners of E. Delaware and Second. The frame school later burned and big brick one was erected in 1874 on Center Street. In 1884, there were 8 teachers. With additions and improvements, and a few condemnation postponements, it lasted until the new Center Street Grade School was built in 1949.

By 1884, the area was dotted with one-room schools. Jasper Township had seven neat frame schoolhouses, 580 school age children, and sessions stretching to six months. Bedford had 8 schools. Cisne, laid out in 1870, opened its first school with around 60 students. Indian Prairie had 48 pupils in a two-story building. Four Mile Township had eleven buildings, 750 pupils, 21
teachers. Elm River had progressed from a slab-seated log hut where Russell Curry taught the first year to five frame schools, one brick, and one remaining log school with ten teachers serving nearly 300 students.

The Laird School, located at the intersection of Enterprise and Mt. Erie blacktops, has records still existing and likely represent the regular business of scores of other one room schools. Directors are listed as early as 1862, but not until 1869 is the schoolhouse built, for about $850 in work and materials. Ten dollars for wood, and $15 for a stove, and thirty cents for a broom, apparently was enough to start using the building. The entries record major expenses (10 to 12 cords of wood annually, and salaries ranging from $25 to $35 monthly initially). Teachers often stayed for one year or a single term, and moved on. The class size varied from 27 to as many as 57, though rarely did all students attend regularly. Perhaps half would be in school daily.

Male teachers received from $2 or $10 more than female teachers. The three directors handled the hiring, repairs, and evaluation. By 1893, the start-up costs for the school year were routine: wood contracts, new charts, cleaning out well ($1), new tin cup (5 cents), chalk (20 cents), lime (35 cents), paint ($4), patching rope (15 cents), rope (10 cents), bucket ( 15 cents). By 1902, the population required the district split into two. In 1920, they ordered 36 seats from Sears Roebuck. Further modernization came with a coal furnace, and by 1921 Dr. Hancock was paid $10 for vaccinations and a nominal fee was paid into a teachers’ pension fund.

A visit from the County School Commissioner was possible, and became more likely as the structure became more formal. Jacob Love was the first County School Commissioner and by 1900 there had been thirteen. Population distribution was shifting toward the towns as the big Woolen Mills in Fairfield drew workers. It was a shift that would change county education slowly in the next thirty years as consolidation pressures increased.

By 1903 Fairfield city schools, all housed in an enormous brick building, had an enrollment of 600 with 15 teachers and taught both grade and high school material using a library of over 600 books. Beyond the required courses, special instruction in music, drawing, literary work, and callisthenic exercises was available. The Normal Training Class in junior and senior years of high school could result in a teacher’s certificate.
In the Cisne area, a new district developed by taking part of Antioch, Milner, Carthage, and Bedford districts to form the Cisne School district. The Old Red Buck schoolhouse in the Carthage district was moved to the new town site and it served until a two-story frame building was erected. Then in 1912, a three-room school was built and it served, with additions, until the modern brick high school and consolidated elementary schools were built.

The 1917-1918 Directory shows Superintendent J.B. Galbraith supervising about 184 teaching assignments in 157 districts, most of them one-room schools. Most schools had one teacher. Rinard, Cisne, and Jeffersonville each had three. Wayne City and the Fairfield High School had four teachers. Fairfield Grade School had twelve. County-wide there were about 6,500 enrolled. Teacher salaries had risen to about $379 annually for men and $300 for women. The total of all teaching salaries for the year was just over $68,000.

By the 1920s, the assignments were still steady, but pressures for school improvements were increasing. Some districts suffered from crumbling, poorly equipped buildings. H.E. Whitaker, superintendent, described two schools with “no dictionary of any kind, four windows on a side for light, two old window shades half torn from the rollers, no stove...no painted walls or ceiling, no decorations.” Yet, he argued, “you will find a good energetic teacher laboring with a fine group of boys and girls trying to overcome some of the handicaps and get an education.”

In Barnhill, the Green Briar District’s Report book reveals solid schooling, but inadequate resources. As with dozens others, the Green Briar day was reading, arithmetic, numbers with recitation, history, physiology, civics, language, spelling, grammar, geography, and orthography. Yet the school library, valued at $10, had only fifteen books, and the “out buildings” and the school room were assessed to be in poor condition.

Two years later, there were only thirteen library books, six fewer books than students. By 1931, for $85 a month, Frank Vaughan taught 19 students between the ages of 5 and 14, in a room where “window shades are badly needed.” The next year, Leland Hooper reported 18 students, “poor” buildings, and a school room that needed window lights, shades “badly” and wallpaper.

The periodic inventory at Green Briar assessed the general situation as the Great Depression’s economic strain was felt. Outside were 45 good trees, a well, coal house, and two outhouses (poor). Plus there were nine windows, a good door with lock and key, blackboard,
good floor. Thirty desks (good), one teacher’s desk (fair), one chair, a recitation bench (poor), a bookcase, broom, shovel, heater, poker, wastebasket, and six window shades.

The teaching equipment list included 12 reference books, 1 dictionary, 8 maps, 1 globe, and one record book. Parents were often expected to purchase the textbooks, which were surely passed along within families and neighborhoods.

Newer schools had new heaters, standard lighting, maps, globe, dictionaries, cloak rooms, library room, reference books,” plus the energetic teacher. Eight new buildings had been erected since 1924; 80 districts made building improvements, new textbooks had replaced books that, in some cases, had been used for over twenty years.

But it was perhaps a shift of population and lack of resources that from the beginning meant some schools dwindled or combined. By 1911, over twenty schools had faded from the list, and South Ridge and Little Ark joined them. Through the 1920s and 30s, a few at a time, more one-room districts left the assignment roster.

The development of high schools in Mt. Erie, Fairfield, Cisne, and Wayne City reflected the increasing need for more advanced education as technological changes uprooted the nation. Mt. Erie High School organized in 1914 in the ten-year old school building. It lasted three years, closed, and was voted back in 1920. In spite of depending upon a warehouse in the back of Gibson’s Cafe and Gardner’s Hardware for practice space, the little high school turned out good basketball teams. In 1934, the student population peaked but by its last year, 1951, it had produced 187 graduates.

In 1926 Fairfield’s new high school building symbolized a consolidated future. Cars, tractors, appliances, telephones, radio, rural electrification among other changes meant the one-room school era was passing. The loss of the country schoolhouse, from the beginning a major anchor for community needs, was a threat to the heart of struggling rural area. To others, the schoolhouse was a quaint but obsolete sign of past times. Both camps could find supporting evidence.

The 1940s were the dividing decade. Before it, the one-room school was still the staple of the county. After it, as consolidation modernized and expanded districts, the one-room schools did not have the financial or population base to compete. Lakeside, Forest Grove, Moffit, Golden Gate, Miller, Pleasant View, Oakwood, Allison, Southridge, North Oakland, Park
were dissolved or transferred pupils.

By 1949, Little Mound, Hall, Sims, New Liberty, Boyd, Lakeside, Forest Grove, Barnes, Gum Corner, Vest, Hartford, North Lily, Pleasant Valley, Fairview, White Oak, Heidinger, Conway, Wabash, Scottville, Chandler, Bloomfield, Walnut Branch were consolidated. In the next five years Jordan, Union, Enterprise, Hickory Flat, Lone Star, Tennessee, Woodside, Dennis, Banker, Wilson, Moutry, Farmer, Vandaveer, Mt. Erie Public, Lincoln, Walker, Brown, and Miller Creek were gone.

A few persisted. Willow Branch may have held school into 1954, and, perhaps, Johnson School a year longer. The buildings were generally sold. Wesley Feller remarked about Johnson school, the neighborhood “hated to see it torn down. They wanted to keep it as the Johnson School.” So 42 persons each gave $10 to buy it and create the Johnson Community Center. The building went for $200, its piano for one dollar. Other schools became sheds, were remodeled into stores or homes, moved, or torn down.

New Hope’s $65,000 building was a “model...in Southern Illinois” of the new generation of schoolhouses. Modern in construction, safe in fire or storm, spacious, well-lighted, and arranged for future expansion, the 1949 inauguration of the four classrooms with only two grades in each heralded new conveniences including indoor restrooms and a cafeteria operated by the Parent-Teacher-Association. It began with one bus and quickly purchased a second. The plan was that each bus would make two trips, neither longer than 12 miles so children wouldn’t ride too long.

Superintendents favored consolidated districts. Citizens were divided. The May 22, 1949 New Hope proposal had carried by only a handful of votes. The residents feared community life, which centered around their schools, would change.

In 1951 there were 130 one-room districts. By May, 1957, only Mills School was still open, and it would soon join Orchardville. The white frame schools sat idle as the big yellow school buses, consolidation’s symbol, plied the country roads.

Perhaps no other document so precisely charts the changes as does Virgil Anderson’s “Record of My Pupils” a class book in which he meticulously recorded his 32-year Wayne County teaching career that began in 1923 at Lakeside school. Some 745 grade school students and 198 junior high pupils were under his direction at Oak Grove, New Harmony, Willis,
Pleasant Ridge, Eureka, Lebanon, and Fairview. As the first 7th & 8th grade teacher at consolidated New Hope district, and then at Boyleston, Virgil Anderson symbolized a transitional generation of teachers who began in the little frame schoolhouses and retired from consolidated classrooms.

For a time, alumni from Johnson School in Elm River, and a few others kept the memories alive with annual homecoming picnics. Gradually, many of the teachers and students themselves were gone, as were most of the buildings. Names and sites that were familiar have now faded. Few residents know where the schools were. Most of the school buildings exist only in memory or as one more name on a list.

One unusual exception is the Olive Branch school. In 1965 the peeling white frame building was saved and moved north along the Burnt Prairie road to Fairfield. The slow process even required elevating the building above the south Fourth Street bridge railings. Placed in a permanent home in Leo French Park, refurbished, and painted red, it is the only surviving schoolhouse in original condition including student desks. Its preservation grows in importance as time erases the histories of other one-room schoolhouses and even the youngest alumni are over fifty and scattered throughout the country.

Julia Rider, whose family was one of the first to settle in southern Wayne County, in 1959 penned a poem to the old Rider log cabin school, at one time the only one surviving log school, now long gone. She wrote, “Set on a sloping hillside/And weather-stained and grey/Stands the old log cabin school house/fast falling to decay./Nothing stands very near it/Except a clump of trees/Like some old deserted homestead/Forgotten in the breeze.”

Few could imagine then, that her eulogy would so quickly apply to the scores of one-room frame schools in Wayne County as well.

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