

Rural Schools



This archive photo shows the Grove or Box School, which was located east of Yankton. It was built in 1922 and served as one of the Yankton area's many rural schools for years until it was gutted by fire in 1966. (From the book "Yankton: The Way it Was!" by Bob Karolevitz)

A Country Education

Rural Schools Were An Essential Backbone Of Educating Kids During The Frontier Days

BY LORETTA SORENSEN
P&D Correspondent

Schools in Yankton and the surrounding region have long been a topic of conversation, dating back as far as 1915 when George W. Kingsbury penned "History of Dakota Territory: South Dakota Its History and Its People."

Kingsbury, native of Lee, New York, came to Dakota Territory (DT) in 1862 and began publishing the *Weekly Dakotian*, which had been established in 1861. By 1875, Kingsbury developed the *Daily Press and Dakotian*.

The author of many works, Kingsbury also served as a member of the Territorial Council from 1863 through 1866 and was a member of the State Senate in 1895.

Kingsbury's historic account of the development of education in Dakota Territory includes his comment about the strong wave of educational development found in DT in the 1880s.

"It is no exaggeration to claim that there was no portion of the United States where greater activity could be found in meeting the demands for common schools than existed in Dakota during the (1880s)," Kingsbury wrote. "Administration of the work was performed with (best of) systems, with great promptness and satisfaction to the hundreds of thousands of people directly interested."

It was from 1870 to 1880 that the "Dakota Boom" brought rapid development of counties, 44 of them organized by 1884. Within those counties were 1,644 school districts; 1,042 "frame" school houses; 12 stone school houses; 26 built with bricks and 56 with logs.

Kingsbury credited General H. H. Beadle with the remarkable organization and establishment of the successful schools.

"He (Beadle) was generally acknowledged to have given to the position its widest sphere of value and

usefulness, supplemented by an ability of the highest order and years of painstaking study and investigation of the common school subject which included every phase of the best systems then known and practiced in the United States," Kingsbury reported. "His term of office had been extended through six or seven of the most important years of the history of the Territory, beginning just before the marvelous increase of immigration in 1879, and extending through a period in which the Territory grew in population from 50,000 to 75,000 each year."

During Beadle's term as territorial superintendent of public instruction, more than half of Dakota Territory was settled and occupied by "a permanent white population."

"... 59 new counties were organized, school districts and schools established in an orderly and satisfactory manner, while no neglect occurred to the educational interests in the more than 30 counties that organized prior to the coming of Mr. Beadle..." Kingsbury wrote.

Among the many statistics Kingsbury integrated into his historic account, he include "a most remarkable statement" which appeared in the then annual report of the national commissioner of education for 1884, 1885, "giving some statistical information of great value to the reputation of the Territory of Dakota."

"The Commissioner found that Dakota led 22 of the states in the amount it expended for educational purposes," Kingsbury noted. "He found also that Dakota had a schoolhouse for every 151 people within its borders. In the proportion of schoolhouses to people, Dakota surpassed the states of Kansas, New Hampshire, Minnesota, South Carolina, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Colorado, Connecticut, New York, North Carolina, New Jersey, Arkansas and Texas."

In the portion of DT known as South Dakota, there was one schoolhouse for every 132 people; one for every 202 people in the North Dakota portion.

"By this showing, it was concluded that the proposed

State of South Dakota surpassed probably every state in America in its common school facilities," Kingsbury wrote. "In the value of permanent school property, Dakota outranked 15 states. In the number of teachers employed fourteen states. These were the official figures of unquestioned authenticity, and were considered of great value at the time as a factor in promoting the statehood movement."

Prior to 1883, common schools in DT were governed under the school district system, which gave each district a corporate organization authorized to establish and maintain one school. The administrators were empowered with levying and collecting taxes for school support.

"Superintendent Beadle was an advocate for a more advanced system," Kingsbury wrote. "... known as the 'township system,' which displaced the 'district system,' enlarged the area of territory to be governed by one set of officers for school purposes, and also made it uniform by making each civil township a school township, with authority ... to establish and provide for maintenance within said school township of as many common schools as might be required for accommodation and convenience of inhabitants ..."

DT legislators, unfamiliar with Beadle's township concept, balked at the idea. However, Beadle composed the law to authorize townships, including a complete "code for the education system of the territory." Within a year of the law's approval, the majority of DT counties adopted the township system.

"At this time in Dakota Territory over 12,000 school districts (existed)," Kingsbury recorded. "... (B)ased on the steady influx of immigrants, that this number would double within a very few years. The additional cost of maintaining the independent district system was a strong factor in promoting passage of the township law."

Kingsbury also noted the importance of 1883-1884 in development of schools in North and South Dakota.

"We see that 1883-84 were the years in which all our leading educational institutions of the territorial era were founded," he noted.

"Beadle is best remembered for his labors in behalf of educational matters," Kingsbury went on. "He was not ostentatious in his public duties, and did not appear to realize he was doing any more or carrying more than his share of the citizen's responsibilities. But the record shows he was on the firing line in most every necessary and commendable work."

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Memories Of A One-Room School

BY LORETTA SORENSEN
P&D Correspondent

Though our numbers are now dwindling, I am among the Baby Boomer group that spent the first years of our education in a one-room school. For me, it was first grade through seventh.

Because my family moved often the first few years of my life, I attended five different rural schools. Jefferson, the school I began attending in fourth grade, stands out in my mind.

It was located about 10 miles north of Mitchell, just a mile or so east of Highway 37. There were quite a few students (it seemed to me) since one of the families there had 12 children.

It's easy to picture the school: one-room, square, many windows to the west. America's flag rippled atop a tall steel flag pole. The steel-railed concrete step led up to the wooden door that opened into a foyer where coats and lunch pails were deposited each morning.

While heating resources were the last thing on my 9-year-old mind, it seems the school was heated with coal. Details of the basement stand out clearly in my mind, since I often waited there for my turn to speak during public oration contests held at the school. Concrete floor and walls kept it cool and it was al-

ways wonderfully clean. Wooden steps provided transition to and from the main floor.

Thoughts of time spent in that school always lead me to a certain Christmas when all of us students and our teacher, Mrs. Warner, were preparing for a special Christmas program. Construction paper decorations lined the wooden walls and covered some of the chalkboard hanging on the east side of the room.

A makeshift "curtain" of white sheets draped over a taut wire hanger created a "theater" area with steel folding chairs for seats and a cluttered back stage for students waiting to present their part of the program.

Memories hint that rehearsals must have gone on for days, but common sense says otherwise. It just seemed so to a young mind.

What I recall most vividly about that year's program was my plea to be part of some kind of short play for the program. The idea germinated from observation of older students putting on skits. Mrs. Warner hesitated. Would I follow through with a plan or freeze up at curtain time?




COURTESY PHOTO

Author Loretta Sorensen, pictured at age 9 and a student at one of the five one-room schools she attended in her youth.

God bless her! She gave me a chance! I recall props that included a large plastic bowl and a big wooden spoon to stir some imaginary dough. Donned in a makeshift apron (most likely a white tea towel wrapped around my waist), I proudly delivered my well-memorized short, humorous oration. After all these years I recall the content had something to do with neighborhood gossip, including a charming lesson on the consequences of indulging in it.

That treasured memory has conveyed many things to me over the years. It tells me I've always had an active imagination. It also speaks volumes about the camaraderie and community bonds found in those one-room education facilities. It tells me teachers are still the same — they strive to give students every opportunity to succeed.

It also reminds me that nothing about life ever remains exactly the same. I need to cherish my life as it is now, tuck away each golden moment, and look to them for lifelong laughter, joy and wisdom.




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