Consolidation Comes to Ashland County, Ohio

Louise E. Fleming
Ashland University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/mwer
How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/mwer/vol8/iss4/6

This Featured Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mid-Western Educational Researcher by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@BGSU.
Consolidation Comes to Ashland County, Ohio

Louise E. Fleming, Ashland University

Abstract

This study looks at the education and community of one-room schools in rural Ohio in the early 20th century. It focuses on three individuals, all of whom were students in one-room schools and two of whom taught in them. It ends with the consolidation of the one-room schools in Ashland County. Consolidating small schools was much touted by educators at the time, but it raises questions today about what the rural community lost and what it gained.

The one-room schoolhouse served midwestern rural community life in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Fuller, 1982, p. 235). In many ways the school grew up as an extension of the community. Farmers sculpted the school as an arm of their beliefs and lifestyle. Additionally, in the one-room schoolhouse, the community together witnessed exhibitions such as recitations, orations, songs, readings, seasonal performances, and spell-downs. School picnics and eighth-grade graduations also took place in this community center (Fuller, 1982, p. 212).

During this time period, however, consolidation—forming a school district out of several small schools—was beginning to reduce the number of one-room schoolhouses (Fuller, 1982, p. 2). In most areas local farmers opposed consolidation. Although advocated by educators who promised better and larger facilities, libraries, and a principal for each building (Fuller, 1982, p. 231), consolidation also meant loss of direct community control over education. It meant taking the children out of the immediate community, relinquishing their education and even their transportation to another, larger community which, in the opinion of many educators, could not be trusted.

Was consolidation a loss or a gain to Ashland County? To explore this question, we will consider the experiences of individuals who were students or teachers in a one-room school. In this study we meet three individuals from Ashland and Medina Counties, Ohio. All three studied in one-room schools; two later taught in one-room schools. Two related their experiences directly, and one is remembered in college catalogues, in newspaper reports, and by family members.

Jenny May Kohler, who preferred to be called May, grew up in Mifflin Township in Richland County, Ohio. She was the daughter of farmers, Jacob and Alice Kohler, and the sister of Lyman, Mabel, and Mildred. The Kohler family lived close to the border of another Mifflin Township, in neighboring Ashland County, and because Ashland County’s Hiller School was the closest school to the Kohlers, the children were allowed to cross the county line to attend school. They attended St. Michael’s Lutheran Church in the village of Mifflin, also in Ashland County.

Hiller School was originally named Pleasant Valley, then Houghenbough’s, and finally Hiller’s, depending on who owned the farm adjacent to it. Other schools in Mifflin Township of Ashland County were Stony Point, renamed West Point when it was rebuilt and moved after a fire destroyed it; Mifflin Grammar School, a two-room building in the village of Mifflin; and Buckeye Hall. (Kopp & Sloan, 1944, pp. 46, 52, 89).

The adjoining Ashland County township, Milton Township, had schools which included Pifer’s, Wharton’s, Paradise Hill, Anderson’s, Albert’s, Nelson’s, Bum’s, and Roland’s (where May eventually taught). Albert’s School was built in 1826 and was rebuilt as a “beautiful” red brick building. Nelson’s was also red brick, rebuilt in 1891. The Baptists Tunkers in the community used Bum’s School as a church. In 1914 the School Board of Pifer’s School was closed for hiring a female teacher. Apparently the boys, who often attended school until age 20, were notoriously hard to handle, even for male teachers (Kopp & Sloan, 1944, pp. 149, 161, 166, 189).

May’s family struggled financially, as did many other farm families, but they managed to send her to the Ashland College Normal program in the village of Ashland, Ohio in the years 1906-07 and 1907-08. In the 1907-08 catalog May was listed as an undergraduate in the normal program and a participant in penmanship (Ashland College, 1906, p. 78; 1907, pp. 57, 60). The complete normal program lasted three years.
but May did not graduate from it. Apparently two years was enough, however, to obtain a teaching license. May is included in the April 4, 1908 list of teachers who passed the teacher-licensing exam ("Ideals," 1908; "Licensed," 1908).

Family members remember that May taught at both Hiller School, in Mifflin Township, and Roland School, in Milton Township, and that she stayed with at least two families other than her own (All family information came from B. Smalley, personal communication, July 21, 1994; J. Conn & E. Cook, personal communication, September 4, 1994). May had to give her earnings to her father who promised to save them for her, but when she got married, he did not have the money. He did pay back at least part of the sum in the ensuing years.

For seven years May dated Chester Conn, a resident and teacher in Mifflin village, whom she had met at her Mifflin church. While May taught at Roland School, she lived with George and Sue Ohl who owned the farm across from the school; Sue Old was Chester Conn’s aunt. Across the street, John and Anna Ohl had purchased their farm from the Rollands and donated a parcel of land to build Roland School. Their son, Ray Ohl, now deceased, remembered having had May as a teacher (R. Ohl, personal communication, April, 1994). Another family May stayed with was that of Charlie and Florence Aby.

One township news column ("North Milton," 1909) reported that "Misses May Kohler and Florence Brubaker took dinner with Mrs. Jay Latter of Ashland." May and Chester both attended a five-day Teacher’s Institute, held in Savannah, Ashland County, Ohio, in August 1908 for which they each received a certificate of attendance ("Teachers Institute," 1908). Chester and May were married in 1914 when May was 25. The couple moved to Akron, Ohio so that Chester could find work and make enough money to support a family. By the next year May had her first child. She did not seek a teaching job in Akron.

Details of May’s life as a teacher are difficult to piece together. Ashland city schools have school board minutes for the time period, but few records exist for the one-room schools. When the rural one-room schools consolidated with Ashland schools in 1939, most of the one-room schools’ records were destroyed. Although news about Ashland village schools appears in the newspaper regularly during the time period from 1908 to 1914, news about one-room schools in the surrounding townships rarely does. The schools played such an integral role within the rural community that, except for an occasional spelling bee, they were not considered newsworthy. Additionally, while the rural one-room schools were integral to their rural communities, they were outside the activity of the village of Ashland, where the paper was published.

Clarence Brubaker began attending Roland School in 1915. That year new reading texts replaced McGuffey’s readers. During Clarence’s time at Roland School, the students were paid $1.00 a week to bring in coal and start the fire on cold mornings, while the teacher swept and cleaned the schoolroom. Clarence’s first teacher was Rhea Urban, followed by Rhea Workman. The teacher taught about 17 students in grades 1-8. Clarence spoke favorably about his time at Roland School, and mentioned that he was able to finish two grades in one year, second grade by Christmas of 1916 and third grade by the end of the 1916-17 school year. This individualized pace allowed him to pass the high school exam a year early and, then, to attend Ashland High School. He drove a horse and buggy until he was in his third year of high school when he had a car to drive (C. Brubaker, personal communication, April, 1994).

Dorothy Rice was both student and teacher in a one-room school. She attended school in Chatham in Medina County, Ohio, north of Ashland County. Eight grades shared the school, and the teacher, Sam Ort, read the Bible daily to his students. He also kept the fire going and the school clean. Dorothy has happy memories of school, particularly recess, when Orr played games, especially baseball, with the children. She began school at age 5, walking one and a half miles with her 10 year old sister. In the winter their father took them on a sled. Dorothy finished her schoolwork a year early and, then, after passing the eighth grade graduation exam, entered Lodi High School, also in Medina County. The exam, the Boxwell-Pattison Examination, tested the children in history (including civil government), physiology, grammar, reading, arithmetic, geography, writing (handwriting), and oratory (grammar, punctuation, and spelling) (Fuller, 1982, p. 213). Dorothy stayed with a family in Lodi, working for her room and board.

In 1915 she graduated and attended a one-year normal program in nearby Medina, Ohio, taught by the Medina County superintendent, and then a two-year normal program at Kent State in Kent, Ohio. In 1918-1919 she taught grades 1-4 at the Poe School in Poe, Ohio, now Montville, in Medina County. Grades 5-7 were taught in the Grange Building. She then moved to Spencer, Ohio in Medina County, near Chatham, where she had grown up, and taught second grade (D.R. Fuller, personal communication, August 17, 1994).

Dorothy opened each day with the Pledge of Allegiance, followed by reading. Other subjects she taught were spelling, arithmetic, phonics, history, art, music, and penmanship. The children were brought to school on a "kid wagon" pulled by two horses. Everyone, including Dorothy, brought lunch, and they all shared a common water bucket. Dorothy and the children often played games outside after lunch. A female janitor built a fire in the stove in the morning and kept the schoolroom clean. Dorothy, however, washed her own boards. She remembers hosting spelling bees, which the parents attended, in the evening. The class members drew names to exchange Christmas gifts, and in the spring they took them outside for flower collection and identification (D.R. Fuller, personal communication, August 17, 1994).

In Ashland County, the reign of the rural one-room schools ended in 1939. Joining other school districts across the nation, the Ashland County school board proposed to
consolidate the rural one-room schools into two districts and to consolidate the nearby schools into Ashland city schools. The recommendation "brought violent protest from members of district boards" as an open meeting at the county courthouse. The community representatives expressed resentment over sending their children to another community and having their money leave their local area. Jay Roberts, Milton Township board president was in a quandary. Three of their one-room schoolhouses had been condemned by the state department of education and were to close at the end of the term. The Board's long-range options were to build their own elementary schools or to send township children to schools outside the township. Apparently a temporary option, which Roberts preferred, was to repair the decaying buildings, but the state only had promised that option for a year ("Delegations," 1939).

Despite Roberts' intentions, consolidation was the less expensive route to take. Two days later Roberts declared that he was "heartily in favor" of sending Milton Township children to Ashland city schools ("Roberts," 1939). A week and a half later, Milton Township school district was transferred to the Ashland city school district ("Transfer," 1939). A delegation from the Roland school attendance area in Milton Township petitioned to have their pupils join with a county district instead of the Ashland city district ("Delegations," 1939). They feared the city students would corrupt their children. As a result, the Roland school attendance area was divided. One side of Township Road #1706 went to a county district; the other side went to the city of Ashland (J. Muehr, personal communication, April, 1994).

Like other farmers across the Midwest, Ashland County rural residents resisted consolidation. With consolidation they lost part of the nature of their community. The schools had offered a cohesiveness that otherwise was lacking. Because of the large distance between farms, lack of easy transportation or telephones, and a lifestyle that required hard work day after day, little socializing was done on a daily basis. People visited in town on Saturdays while they purchased groceries and other necessities, and on Sundays when they attended church. Children attended the schools daily during the term, and parents maintained involvement with the schools by serving on school boards, attending spelling bees, and providing transportation for their children when necessary. Most of the schools were within walking distance, and most of the schools reflected the culture of the community in which they were located.

Teachers in those one-room township schools were also responsive to individual needs, allowing students to complete two years' curriculum in one, for example, as in the case of both Clarence and Dorothy. In many ways the school was like an extension of home. Teachers played with the children at recess, they lived or boarded in the community; they knew the children's parents, brothers, sisters, aunts, and uncles. Children at school were not strangers to the teacher, to each other, or to each other's families. Children, teachers, and parents shared, inside and outside the school, in the same community, a community whose cohesiveness the one-room school perpetuated.

Rural Ohioans were proud of their one-room schools. With consolidation, children traveled beyond their known worlds. Whatever the alleged educational and administrative gains of consolidation, parents were no longer as much a part of the school culture, nor was the school as much a part of the parents' culture. In the name of progress one-room schools were abandoned, and with them, a form of community life as it had been known and fostered in rural Ohio.

References


Delegations protest school changes proposed by co. board. (1939, May 22), The Ashland Times-Gazette.


"Ideals" the subject of virile address before Ashland College graduates. (1908, June 17), The Ashland Press.


Licensed to teach. (1908, April 22), The Ashland Times-Gazette.


Roberts favors sending pupils to city schools. (1939, May 24), The Ashland Times-Gazette.

Teachers' Institute. (1908, September 2), The Ashland Times-Gazette.

Transfer Milton Township district to city schools. (1939, June 3), The Ashland Times-Gazette.