



# Our Times

Volume 1 Issue 1

THE PEOPLE, HISTORY, AND CULTURE OF LOGAN COUNTY, ILLINOIS

Fall 1996

## Whatever Happened to the Country Schools?

The tree is trimmed, the children are scrubbed, and the little girls are wearing ribbons in their hair. From the angel in the back row to the little boy with goggles on his forehead, every child is dressed in costume for the Christmas program.

The little boy in the striped shirt (picture below) is a busy farmer today, but he still remembers the preparation that went into those occasions. "We did nothing else for weeks," remembers Jerry Gehlbach—his child's memory an exaggeration that contains a core of truth.

The Christmas program was an important part of life in Logan County's one-room schools. The program gave children an opportunity to perform in public, as encouraged by Superintendent Luckenbill in his bi-monthly *Logan County School Messenger*, which went to all the teachers in the county. But more than that, the country school was the center of the community, a place where neighbors came together for community club meetings, box socials, and other entertainment.

Gehlbach belongs to a unique group of people—children who started first grade

in one-room country schools and graduated eight years later from community consolidated schools. The little boy in the striped shirt ended his grade school career in the brand new Chester-East Lincoln School on Route 121. (See picture on page 3.) ■

### The End of An Era

In 1945, as World War II was ending, 126 different school *districts* still operated in Logan County. By 1948, following an act of the Illinois General Assembly and much local haggling, the county was reorganized into 26 grade and high school districts.

Logan County was late in consolidating, according to former county superintendent of schools Don Splain, "because Mr. Luckenbill insisted that the decision of the people in each district be followed." Many people did not want to give up their schools, which were considered the heart of their communities.

The change in school organization was inevitable, however, and reflected changes in rural life which began decades before the war. As farms became larger, fewer families lived in the country. When, in 1939, the state started reimbursing school districts 75% of the cost of transporting students who lived more than 1½



Christmas program at Fair School in 1948.

(Continued on page 3, Era...)

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The People, History, and Culture of  
Logan County, Illinois

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The mission of *Our Times* is to publish well-researched, interesting articles about the people, history, and culture of Logan County, Illinois.

*Our Times* is published quarterly and is distributed free-of-charge to all Logan County residents who request it.

Copies of *Our Times* may be obtained at Prairie Years Book Store at 121 N. Kickapoo Street in Lincoln. Or call to be placed on the mailing list.

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## Publisher's Notes

I was a town kid. My school was an old brick building in the center of a small Kansas town. I walked to school and walked home for lunch. Contrary to the exaggerations I have impressed upon my children, the walk was a matter of blocks not miles, and I did not ride a big white dog through the winter snows. Nor did I share a pair of bib overalls with my three brothers. We *each* had a pair.

I remember the day the country schools closed. It was in 1953, and my second grade teacher, Mrs. Day, lined the new arrivals against the wall and introduced them to us as "the kids from the country who are your new classmates." They looked scared, and we were very curious about them. Within days, however, they were our friends.

Nancy Gehlbach's research on Logan County's country schools reminds us all of the dramatic changes in rural life in our lifetimes. This is not ancient history. The strong sense of family attachment to schools that were within walking distance, both country and town, remains a source of powerful emotion for many of us today. Good schools continue to draw upon that sense of community, that special attachment to place, even when their students arrive from many miles away.

In this inaugural issue of *Our Times*, an issue that is circulated as thousands of Logan County children and teachers return to school, Nancy sets a high mark for our publication. Already we have many ideas for issues to come. What is the history behind our county's beautiful churches? Remember when Lincoln had three movie theaters and two drive-ins? Before teenagers dreamed of Pentiums and hard drives, did they really talk about "three on the tree," "baby moons," and "reversed shackles"? What the heck is a "shackle" anyway? Maybe you have better ideas for future stories. If so, we hope we hear from you. **SR**

## History in the Making

Much of the information in this issue comes from the kindness of Logan County people who shared their memories. The rest comes from *The History of Logan County, Illinois*, as written in 1878, 1911, and 1982, as well as the "Special Centennial Broadcast" by Clem Garton and *The Namesake Town, a Centennial History of Lincoln*, both published in 1953.

One fascinating source was the *Logan County School Messenger*, a newsletter for Logan County teachers begun by County Superintendent D.F. Nickols in 1913, and continued by superintendents E.H. Luckenbill and Donald Splain. Regional Superintendent George Janet and his executive secretary Sandy Blaine kindly made those issues available.

**H**istory fairly leaps from the pages of the newsletter. For example, in 1918, an epidemic of Spanish influenza struck the United States. The county spelling and arithmetic contests and teachers' exams were postponed on the advice of the Board of Health, and the county schools lost 3 to 6 weeks of school. Mr. Luckenbill reported in the *Messenger* that a plan had been worked out to distribute the work over two years.

Also in 1918, with World War I on everyone's minds, the *Messenger* reported that the name of the German Hill School had been changed to American Hill. "The action of the directors was very commendable," the *Messenger* editorialized.

Children today are told to clean their plates because children are starving in Africa. In 1919, according to the *Messenger*, Logan County was given a quota of \$9,000 to raise for the starving children of Armenia, Syria, and Persia.

Each *Messenger* included a letter to teachers from state superintendent F.G. Blair. In 1922, he reported that thousands of teachers had left the profession during the war as other wages went up and theirs stayed the

same. Mr. Blair believed increased salaries would bring "young men and women of marked native ability and thorough training" into teaching.

Natural disasters were reported in the *Messenger* as well. In 1927, a tornado struck Logan County. No one was hurt at Cornland, where the students and teacher took refuge in the basement. Oakland school, however, had no basement. It was blown away, and several pupils were injured. At Chestnut, the entire second story was blown away; and two pupils were killed. In his newsletter, Mr. Luckenbill stressed the importance of a basement for every rural school. (When Walnut Grove was remodeled in 1931, not only was a basement dug, but a storm cave was added as well.)

During the depression, school boards that couldn't afford to make capital improvements were encouraged to spend their money on maintenance. The dates of rural electrification can be deduced from the articles with instructions on how to put electric lights in the schools.

In December of 1941, teachers were urged not to buy new encyclopedias and maps "until the international situation becomes more settled." Once the "unsettled situation" had exploded into a world war, the paper was full of articles about victory gardens and sugar rationing.

As a source of information and inspiration, the *Messenger* was an essential publication for the teachers of Logan County. As a first-person account of history, it still makes fascinating reading today. ■

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(Continued from page 1, *Era...*)

miles from school, up to \$15 per year, children could attend schools that were beyond walking distance.

But several country schools operated well into the 1950s, and many Logan County residents remember them fondly. And of course the centrality of the local school to community life remains strong in the county today. ■

# Our First Schools

Before the days of the automobile, country schools were situated within walking distance of farms. Their organization also owed something to the way Congress had sought to help finance free public education.

In 1785, Congress passed a land ordinance which set aside the sixteenth section of each township in the Northwest territories for education.

In his 1911 *History of Logan County*, Judge Lawrence B. Springer wrote that the oldest known document in Logan County was a petition for the sale of school lands in township seventeen, dated August 18, 1834.

In fact, according to Springer, prior to the year 1855, free schools in Illinois existed only in those townships where school lands had been sold. The system of free schools based on general taxation gained impetus in Illinois in 1855, when the office of State Superintendent of Public Instruction was created.

(Later, of course, schools were also financed by real estate taxes, as they are today.)

The first schools in Logan County had been private subscription schools, or "pay schools," with

itinerant teachers. The first school house built in Logan County was built at Lake Fork, near the home of John Turner. A log structure, with window glass inserted where one log had been removed, this building was a far cry from later country schools.

The main textbooks at this school were Webster's Spelling Book and the Testament. To be able to spell every word in Webster's was considered quite a feat, and the tradition of spelling bees continues to this day.

When Logan County was formed on February 15, 1839, it had a population of 2,333, out of which 150 were students and 238 were people over the age of 21 who could not read or write. The area included just seven primary and common schools. By 1857, each township in Logan County had a public school. In 1860, Logan County had 90 school houses, about 100 teachers, and 6,260 pupils.

The city of Lincoln formed its own school district in 1865, Atlanta in 1869, and Mt. Pulaski in 1877. Most children, however, continued to be educated in village and country schools until major school consolidation in the 1940's. ■



Seventh and eighth grade classes at the new Chester-East Lincoln School in 1954.

# A Teacher's Story

*Her first chore was to check the basement and the outhouses for tramps.*

"I never taught a girl, and I never had more than nine students in my schoolroom," confesses Iola Garton Gehlbach, who taught at Hatton School from 1935 to 1938.

Nor was that school size unusual. By 1934, 35.6% of the one-room schools in Logan County had an average daily attendance of 10 or less.

In fact, back in 1926, a list of advantages of rural schools, printed in the *Logan County School Messenger*, included "of such size to enable the teacher to give individual attention and instruction." So nine students could keep a teacher busy, when there were so many different grades to attend to. Still, Iola considered herself lucky. Other teachers had more students; and her father, Clem Garton, had taught as many as 50.

"I really think teachers like myself who had gone to country schools had an advantage," says Iola. "They knew how things were done."

A typical school day started when Iola arrived at 8:30 a.m. Her first chore was to check the basement and the outhouses for tramps. Once reassured, she stoked the furnace, swept the porch, and prepared for ten minutes of opening exercises.

The pledge, Bible reading, and one chapter from a book got the day off to a good start. Sometimes opening exercises included singing, as well. By 1940, some schools were sharing music teachers who came once a week to each school.

Reading was the first subject of the day and often took place next to the furnace in the basement until the schoolroom warmed up. Hatton was a brand-new

school, so it was quite comfortable. The old schools had been heated with potbellied stoves; the late Gus Gosda, Iola's former Sunday School classmate, used to tell his wife how cold Blue Grass School had been in the winter.

The children took turns coming up to the recitation bench by classes, to read their lessons and work on the blackboard. "The wonderful thing about the country school," says another former country-school teacher, Catherine Morehead Milleville, "was that each class heard the lessons of the one above it. The little ones came in not knowing much; but by the end of first grade, they knew a lot of the second-grade work. Only in eighth grade did they have to study a lot."

After recess and arithmetic, it was time for lunch: a sandwich on homemade bread, fruit, and a cookie or cake, brought in a little dinner bucket with a lid. Sometimes the children drank water from the pump in the schoolyard; other times, Iola would heat milk on the furnace for hot chocolate. In 1945, mothers at Bowles school sent prepared food every day for the teacher and older girls to warm up.

Afternoons were spent on language. Students learned at least one stanza of a poem and wrote one composition every week. The day

ended with spelling and orthography.

Spelling was important enough that a county-wide spelling bee was held at the high school. In 1928, the county superintendent's office had offered buttons for 500 perfect spelling lessons, in addition to the certificates for 300 perfect lessons.

Orthography was the study of words: their prefixes or suffixes, construction, dictionary definitions, and use in a sentence. Orthography was included on the 8th-grade test, and Iola claims she uses it to this day.

Art, Palmer method writing, and other subjects filled in the rest of the time. Time also was devoted to rehearsing programs: one for community club every month and a special one for Christmas. Catherine Milleville was well-known for her programs, and she often involved her students' families in their preparation. One year Mrs. Maxheimer made the costumes, and the Ruwe baby played the part of "Happy New Year."

Iola didn't teach physical education, but the children played games outside at recess and noon. In the winter, the boys played tag or hopscotch in the basement. Marbles were also a big winter pastime, as was reading during the noon hour.

Iola's husband Albert remembers his recess as a child a little bit differently. The boys spent their time clearing Jake Wilmert's pasture of ground squirrels by catching them with nooses or drowning them out. Fall was the season to fight bumblebees with paddles or wood shingles. "We weren't mean," he states. "We just thought we were cleaning up the place."

Sometimes older boys were a handful, especially if they were bigger than the teacher. Catherine Milleville once disciplined a student, only to find a snake between the screen door and the front door the next morning. Although she screamed when she saw it and waited for the bus driver to kill it, she was calm in front of the students.

School was dismissed at 4:00 (3:30 in the winter). The teacher had to finish her work and tend to the furnace before going home. ■



*Iola Garton Gehlbach, county eighth-grade graduation.*

# A Student's Story

*Leona was in awe of the older students, some of whom came to school on horseback.*

Leona Apel was born October 25, 1907. When she was a little girl, her teacher, Leigh Wright, rode part way to his school on the interurban, getting off at the Fogarty elevator. The rest of his route brought him past Leona's house, so the teacher and student walked that mile and a half together to school at Corwine.

Leona was in awe of the older students, some of whom came to school on horseback. The "big girls" brought their handwork; at recess and lunchtime, they taught the little girl how to tat, knit, and crochet.

A highlight of Leona's school years occurred when the teacher took all the 7th and 8th graders to see "Evangeline" at the Bennis Theater in Lincoln. Like many children of her time, Leona and her classmates had studied the Longfellow poem at school.

Like every other student in the county and village schools, Leona was taught in accordance with the Logan County supplement to the state course of study. Creation of the supplement was one of many reforms initiated by county Superintendent of Schools D.F. Nichols, who served from 1905 through 1916. Outlines of work, monthly assignments, and exams for all months except April were mailed to the teachers. County-wide exams were given to grades 7, 8, 9, and 10.

The same general system was in effect until the major consolidations in the 40s, which helps explain how such tiny educational units could produce students who could come together to do high school work.

The county superintendent visited all the schools at least once a year. "We kids were kind of scared when he came," says Leona. "The teachers wanted us to be perfect."

Many graduates of Lincoln country schools remember those visits, first by D.F. Nichols and later by E.H. Luckenbill. Former County Superintendent Donald Splain says, "Mr. Luckenbill liked to play games with the kids. He had been a teacher, and he liked to take over the class. Even though he was a Democrat in a Republican county, he served for 43 years.

Every kid in the county knew him."

Leona went to Broadwell School to write her 7th and 8th-grade exams. Her 8th-grade graduation, in 1921, was held at the Lincoln Chautauqua Auditorium, with streetcar service provided to the Chautauqua grounds. The speaker was the Reverend L.H. Hooe, pastor of the Christian Church.

Before 1920, when the community school laws became effective, students had taken their first 10 grades in the county and village schools. After passing the 10th-grade exam, they could continue their education in high school. The county graduation, therefore, was for 10th graders.

In 1920, high school districts were established. Students who graduated from 8th grade were to attend four-year high schools. If their district did not have a four-year high school, they could attend one in another district; their tuition was paid by their home "non-high school" district.

Not everyone went from eighth grade to high school after 1920. Marguerite Berger, who graduated from Lincoln High School with Leona, had taken her 9th and 10th grades at

Rothschild country school. She entered Lincoln High School as a junior. "I came from the farm, and it was very strange to me," she says.

At any rate, Leona's graduation in 1921 was the first for 8th-graders only. Female graduates made a pretty picture in their white skirts and white middie blouses with red neckties, tied 4-in-hand or with a sailor knot. A red hair ribbon was optional.

When the time came for Leona to go to Lincoln High School, she boarded in town with an older lady named Kate Roos during the week. How she got to town on Monday depended greatly on the weather. In the fall, her father or brother would take her to the interurban. When winter came, her father drove her to school in the car. But if the weather was really icy and bad, he would have to hitch up the storm buggy.

Not all country students boarded in town, of course. Some kids drove to high school or caught a ride with a neighbor, but there were no school buses.

In those days, high school graduates who had taken the teacher's course in high school could write for the teacher's exam once they were 18 years old. Unfortunately, after Leona passed her exam, she became ill and never did teach school. She has held other jobs over her lifetime, won numerous awards at the county fair (including a stove in the 1966 Bake-Off, and best of show for her wheat bread just this year) and lives on Decatur Street in Lincoln. ■

*... the teacher and student walked the last mile and a half together to school.*



*Leona Apel.*

# Walnut Grove

*We now have an authentic one-room schoolhouse to show our children.*

When Lon Simpson bought the Walnut Grove schoolhouse from Harold Stoll, he had to promise he would not remodel it. Because of Simpson's careful restoration, we now have an authentic one-room schoolhouse to show our children.

Located on Route 10, east of Lincoln, the Walnut Grove school houses a tea room and gift shop. Squint your eyes to shut out the note cards, quilts, and bittersweet; and you can imagine yourself back in the country school. Here are the brackets for the kerosene lamps (the building was electrified in 1939). Over your head are the original tin ceilings, and under your feet the original floorboards, ink stains and all.

The blackboard is located on the front wall, so that light comes from the group of windows on the left. (Because of concern about eyestrain, the Sanitation Law of 1915 even stipulated that windows in the front of older classrooms should be boarded up.)

One new item in the school is a stove made by the Amish from antique castings, which sits where the old stove would have been.

The very first school at Walnut Grove had been moved by William Yocum in 1874 to a grove of walnut trees seven miles east of Mt. Pulaski. Yocum was paid forty dollars and used a team of horses to pull the building over the frozen ground. In 1902, a new building was built at that location. Remodeled in 1931, it's that schoolhouse that Lon Simpson fell in love with on his commute from Lincoln to Decatur.



*Walnut Grove School.*

Once Simpson had bought the schoolhouse, he had plenty of problems moving it to rural Lincoln. Cilco wanted at least \$10,000 to move the 17 sets of power lines between the two locations. Simpson's solution was to cut off the schoolhouse roof, move the building, and reinstall the roof at the present location. During the moving process, a Cilco employee had to go ahead with a pole to hold up the power lines where they sagged.

Moving the schoolhouse, covering the roofless building with a tarp, getting up in the middle of the night to throw ice off the tarp, salvaging the stairs, and finishing the restoration—it was all worth while to see the building as it stands today.

Once the school was restored, Simpson could concentrate on his career as a cabinetmaker. Nancy Simpson runs the Walnut Grove School, which is open Tuesdays through Saturdays from 10:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. The tea room is open from 10:00 to 3:00, with lunch served from 11:00 to 2:00. ■

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*... Walnut Grove  
school houses a  
tea room and gift  
shop.*

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## Book Review

*America's Country Schools*  
by Andrew Gulliford

This book is a delight for anyone who ever attended a country school, taught at a country school, or even just heard their parents or grandparents talk about their days in one. It's filled with pictures from the early log cabin schools down through the standard schoolhouses of the 20th century, and it covers the lives of the students and teachers who studied there.

Andrew Gulliford is associate professor of history and director of the Public History and Historic Preservation Program at Middle Tennessee State University. Don't let all those titles throw you. Yes, this book is carefully researched; but it is also written in a wonderfully interesting manner, full of anecdotes and information about everything from the 4 R's to outhouses. At just \$19.95, it makes a great gift for someone—maybe yourself.

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This book is available at:  
Prairie Years / 121 N. Kickapoo Street / Lincoln, IL

# The More Things Change . . .

In Logan County Superintendent Luckenbill's letter to his teachers, the *Logan County School Messenger*, many topics are touched on that are still discussed in education today. For example:

- **Unit districts, 1914:** "Few of the books used in the Lincoln schools are like those adopted throughout the county."
- **Homework, 1920:** "If the study period is at all possible, school men are urging that all school work be done at school, under the supervision of the teacher."
- **Phonics versus sight reading, 1925:** Included in a list of causes that produce unsatisfactory results in reading, "#4. Neglect of phonics."
- **Separation of church and state, 1926:** Sixth graders in Mt. Pulaski are keeping a record of their attendance at Sunday School, because they feel Sunday School lessons will help with their study of ancient times.
- **Individualized instruction, 1927:** The instructor should include a period of study where he can help those who need it. Those who are able to do more should be assigned more. "Thus, the work of the school is adapted to the various capabilities of the people."
- **Corporal punishment, 1928:** The teacher should have the courage to administer it effectively, but in a way not to mark the child or cause injury. A light, smooth paddle with no rough edges should be used. "Empty threats become a joke to lively, mischievous boys who know when they do what is not exactly right and who really expect punishment."

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## Langston Hughes Reading on September 15th

Langston Hughes, an internationally known poet and author, wrote his first poem at Central School in Lincoln in 1916.

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*Hatton School, Logan County, Illinois, in September 1936. See story on page 4*

We are interested in your reaction to the first issue of *Our Times*. Maybe you also have ideas for future stories. Write and let us know. We'd love to hear from you.

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