

The History Corner
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Bonds of Common Purpose

Several years ago I read an article by Toni Haas and Robin Lambert describing what they referred to as the "bonds of common purpose", the intangible things that they felt held small rural communities together. In the article they described what they saw as the quiet renaissance that was occurring in rural America as people began to claim and build on the strengths inherent in their own communities. Specifically they commented on the ways community members of every age worked together to enhance the education of their young by recognizing and recovering the traditional riches that have made their rural communities strong. Haas and Lambert cited one of these "riches" (or bond of common purpose) as the willingness of rural communities to work together cooperatively.

Cooperation has always played a vital role in the peoples of our community. In the earliest times of our community's existence when Paleo Indian families roamed over a barren landscape in search of caribou, cooperation was key to a successful hunt. When Ojibwa families gathered in spring in the maple sugar bush areas that dot the higher ridges of our land, each family member's participation was essential if success at the gathering was to occur. Sap must be collected, shelters constructed, birch bark containers made, and fires continually fed, before anyone could enjoy the sweetness of the maple sugar.

When commercial fishing families began arriving in the later half of the 1800's there were no homes to move into or skiffs awaiting them on shore. The hamlets of fisherman that formed at Stoney Point and French River developed only through hard work, strong will, and the cooperation of families who knew their future lies as much in working together with their neighbors as it did in competing with them.

One of the clearest examples of community cooperation occurred in 1913 with the formation of the Homestead Farmers Cooperative Association. Comprised primarily of farmers living in the settlements of Palmers and Molde (the Clover Valley area of today) the Association's main function was to promote and encourage development of local agriculture. Working together, farmers could buy and sell farm commodities (such as cattle, sheep, milk, and grains), purchase machinery and merchandise, provide needed services such as the construction and development of telephone lines, while at the same time cooperating together to improve community life.

Though those times may seem long ago the need for cooperation is no less important today. For the last year we have found ourselves facing the possibility of losing our last community school, North Shore Elementary. Now, through much effort and hard work, we have the opportunity for a new future. To be able to play an integral part in the design and creation of our own community school is an exciting and rare opportunity, and one that only a few communities find themselves fortunate enough to be in. Yet, it can also be a daunting challenge, requiring significant commitments of time and energy. It is surely a task worth doing, but one that will require commitment and yes, cooperation, from all of us if we are to succeed in reaching our highest expectations.