

The History Corner

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Early Legislation to Educate Children

It is no secret that schools have played a vital role in our community. In fact, schools have filled a vital role in the history of nearly every community across this state. To appreciate a little more fully why this is true it may be a good idea to look back in time and try to understand how Minnesota's system of schools actually came into being.

It was 1849 when the territorial legislature passed the first law relating to the education of children living within Minnesota's borders. The law stated that all children 4- 21 should have access to common schools. Lawmakers determined that the money needed to support the operation of these schools would come through funds collected by a general tax levy, supplemented by dedicating a portion of fees collected from the sale of liquor licenses and fines on criminal offenses.

Even with the passage of this legislation progress towards the development of schools during the territorial period was slow. So little progress was in fact made that by the early 1850's only three schools existed in all of Minnesota. It was only after the establishment of statehood in 1858 that the growth of schools began to expand in any significant way. As originally intended school districts were to be formed on the basis of one per township. However, it soon became clear to early pioneers that this plan was unworkable. Families either had a tendency to settle in scattered enclaves spread widely throughout the newly opened areas, or on isolated homestead tracts. To expect them all to attend only one centrally located school miles from their homes was impractical. Schools had a tendency to be built around need. Wherever enough children were present to warrant a schoolhouse, one was usually built. The problem with this situation of course was that it soon led to a proliferation of schools throughout Minnesota. By 1900 over 8,000 districts had been established, a number so unwieldy that the state legislature soon was pressured to enact legislation encouraging districts to merge. These efforts, though well intended, met with little success.

During the 1911 legislative session, as a means to spur on the sluggish pace of consolidation, legislators proposed and then enacted a bill creating financial incentives for schools to merge. The state would pay for 25% of any new construction costs plus payments of up to \$1,500.00 a year in financial aid. In exchange the newly merged school districts must agree to be in session at least eight months each year and agree to supply transportation for any student needing it. Even with the added incentives only 170 districts accepted the plan. By 1915 interest in consolidation had begun to wane as events unfolding in the larger world began to overshadow the problems faced here at home. For the next three decades efforts at school reorganization were placed on hold as the public became preoccupied with the devastating effects of the Great Depression and the tragic realities of two world wars.

It wasn't until 1947 that the issue of school consolidation once again became the focus of legislative efforts. Even though nearly 50 years had passed since the turn of the century the number of school districts that still were in existence throughout the state had dropped only fractionally and still stood at just under 7,700. Feeling that something had to be done to fix a situation that was clearly not about to fix itself, the legislature decided to appoint a state advisory commission to consider the entire issue of school reorganization. Over the next few years the commission's effort did produce some positive results, a handful of districts were convinced to merge and several recommendations for change were

forwarded to the Commissioner of Education for review. But overall the commission could only suggest, not demand change, and the large scale reorganization that was hoped for never materialized. It would take another decade and a half to pass before that would happen. When it finally did come the ramifications of what became known as "forced consolidation" would have a dramatic effect on schools statewide. And for the people of Clover Valley and the surrounding area the changes that were about to be thrust on them in the late 1960's would be very great indeed. That story will be in the next edition of the Township Newsletter.