

The History Corner
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Legislation Addressing School District Reorganization

In the last History Corner I talked about the development of Minnesota's school system and the thorny problem that revolved around the issue of whether or not schools should be forced to consolidate. In this issue I will focus on two specific pieces of legislation addressing school district reorganization, both passed in the 1960's, and how the enactment of those bills affected our local community.

For the first half of the twentieth century state legislators had attempted on numerous occasions to reduce the number of school districts that existed in Minnesota. Throughout those years, even as the number of districts crept past the 8,000 mark, the state legislature had always been reluctant to mandate school mergers, instead preferring to use tactics that "encouraged" districts to consolidate by providing them incentives to do so. But as the decade of the 1960's opened it was becoming clear that this method was not working and without some form of enforcement there was little hope that schools would merge voluntarily.

In 1963 the first piece of legislation mandating school reorganization was introduced. It was known as the Nonoperating School District bill. It required any area or territory not maintaining its own school (districts having no educational facilities of their own) "to be attached to or consolidated with" an adjoining district that did operate either an elementary or secondary program. Four years later a second more comprehensive bill mandating that all operating Minnesota school districts must provide their students full k-12 educational opportunities was passed. Any school district not in compliance by July 1, 1971 would be dissolved.

At the time of the passage of these bills Clover Valley High School was less than 40 years old and North Shore Elementary was nearly new. Both were a part of the St. Louis County Unorganized school system, a large and expansive scattering of semi-independent schools located throughout the county -- just the type of schools the legislature was targeting for change. Because of that it didn't take long for the consolidation issue to become a local topic of conversation. First mention of the newly passed legislation appeared in the Clover Valley Community Council minutes of September 27, 1967. The Council voted immediately to form a committee to look into the matter. Jim Ulland, who at the time had purchased the old Jacobson farm and later would represent our area in the Minnesota House, volunteered to head the committee. Two months later at the November 9th Council meeting he presented his initial findings. At first, according to the minutes of that meeting, it seemed as if most of the evening's discussion focused on possible tax implications of the new legislation and what effects the impending changes may have on teachers. However, over the next few months the question of merger, and the implications of such action (the actual closing of schools), became more clearly the concern of Council members.

In order to get a better feel for how the community viewed the impending merger of its two schools with another district the Council decided to put out a questionnaire to gather local opinion. On April 8, 1968 Ulland reported the results of the survey. Of the 425 questionnaires mailed, a total of 259 were returned with the results showing 41% of area residents favored merging with Duluth, while 59% favored a merger with Two Harbors. The Council continued to gather additional information on the issue including holding several meetings with various representatives of both the Duluth and Lake Superior

School Districts. Issues of how the merger would affect tax levy structure, the possible addition of a Head Start program, expansion of kindergarten classes, and the effect on teacher seniority all played into the discussion. Some of the technical issues seemed to favor a consolidation with Duluth but clearly the overall sentiment of the community continued towards a merger with the schools of Lake County.

Many difficult adjustments would have to be faced for such a move to take place. Countless technical details would need to be worked out and numerous compromises would have to be reached, but as emotionally wrenching as the decision was, the community knew it had to move forward. The people had voiced their preference. The St. Louis County Board as well as the State Board of Education had approved of the plan. Clover Valley High School and North Shore Elementary would become a part of the Lake Superior School District. Our community had spoken. Now it was up to the residents of Lake County to have their say. That story in the next issue.