

"Let Us Go a Little Slow"

Rural School Consolidation in Mille Lacs County

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In the midtwentieth century, Minnesota's rural education system based on neighborhood schools—often without plumbing and sometimes without electricity—began peering into the near future of space travel, instant communication, and mass marketing. Momentum for a systemwide overhaul had been building for years, and following World War II the pressure became even greater. But the response of those closest to the schools did not match the accelerating pace of modern times. The editorial pages of Mille Lacs County's *Princeton Union* reflected widespread feeling: "Let us go a little slow in closing our rural schools and remember neither numbers nor size make for perfection. The small schools frequently produce the best scholarship."¹

And slow—whether for the sake of scholarship and community health, the result of inertia or local discord, or because of resistance to change—was the pace for school reorganization in many parts of Minnesota. More than 20 years had passed from the time consolidation plans were proposed in most counties in 1948 until a new administrative structure was in place statewide. In Mille Lacs County, the last eight rural districts came into compliance in 1970, shortly before the deadline requiring that all students reside in a district providing education for grades one through twelve.²

Minnesota's system of public education was not created whole. When enough people in an area saw the need for a school, they petitioned their county board to establish a district. Territorial legislation at first called for a township-based school system, but by the time Minnesota became a state, this had evolved into neighborhood school districts, sometimes encompassing only a few sections. As demand rose for standards in textbooks, teaching credentials, or assistance for districts with low tax capacity, the state legislature would respond, issue by issue. Efforts to reform the public-education system over the years were based on two overarching principles: Article 13 in the Minnesota Constitution that called on the legislature "to establish a general and uniform system of public schools"; and the need to improve the efficiency of this increasingly expensive public endeavor. By July 1947 there were 7,606 school districts in Minnesota, approximately 5,000 of them with ungraded elementary schools. Each district elected its own school board and set its own tax levy. This clearly challenged the goals of uniformity and efficiency.³

LEFT: Grades one through three in Wahkon's substantial brick schoolhouse, 1950, when turmoil surrounding consolidation was at its height

On the other hand, rural school districts were valuable neighborhood focal points, as communities pooled their energies as well as their tax dollars to educate their children. While teachers, buildings, and educational supplies were of uneven, and sometimes poor, quality, many young people received a decent—and in some cases, excellent—education. Marjorie Schmidt, who attended rural school in Mille Lacs County and went on to a long career teaching elementary school in town, explained that "country school had a lot going for it":

I think country kids . . . had a little added head start on the others. . . . The teacher . . . had to have eight reading classes, eight math classes, eight health, eight geography and so on. Well, impossible, unless you make them ten-minute classes. Now, we [students] knew you tune in and you listen during those ten minutes. . . . You'd better get it. So country kids were usually good listeners. And they were independent workers. They had to be. We had the advantages of a lot of times sitting there and listening to the advanced classes.⁴

Even with dedicated community support, by the middle of the twentieth century many rural schools were feeling the pressures of change. Innovations in agriculture encouraged larger farms, and as holdings increased in size, populations thinned. About 65 percent of the roughly 5,000 rural districts with ungraded elementary schools in 1947 had fewer than 20 pupils. At the same time, education was changing, with a growing emphasis on science and technology and the world beyond the neighborhood. Although attendance was mandatory only through age 16, high school was increasingly seen as a necessary step to success.⁵

These changes were affecting Mille Lacs County. Originally settled in the late 1800s by loggers, lumbermill workers, and the businesspeople who served them, its population dramatically increased and then was altered as the forests were depleted and the land was developed into farms. The discovery that some areas were not conducive to agriculture, along with the trend toward larger farms, caused population to level off and even drop in some regions.⁶

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In the fall of 1947, complying with a new state education law, 62 counties across Minnesota established school-survey committees to examine the strengths and weaknesses of their local systems. Both “urban” (grades one through twelve) and rural (one through eight) districts were represented on these committees, which were elected at a meeting of all the county’s school-board officers.⁷

At that time, Mille Lacs County, with a population of just over 15,000, had 59 school districts: 4 that offered education through twelfth grade and 55 elementary-only, including the “Indian school” in Vineland, near Onamia. School-board members elected a 10-person committee, which produced two reports in 1948 proposing a new structure for public education. Part of the recommendation to consolidate rural schools dealt with less tangible and always disputable questions of quality and curriculum:

Mille Lacs County must keep abreast with the best of schools. Our schools must teach not only “the three R’s” of the days of our forefathers . . . We must offer a health program, physical education, music, art, citizenship, commercial courses, domestic science, manual training, farm shop, agriculture, dramatics, public speaking. Larger areas will provide this program for every child in our county.⁸

In addition, hard numbers revealed undeniable shortcomings in the existing system. The county’s rural school buildings were of uneven quality. The survey committee rated 46 buildings as being in fair or poor condition and only 16 as excellent or good. Many rural schools did not have indoor plumbing, many were still heated with wood, and some did not have electricity. Some districts were already struggling with consolidation. In Opstead, north of Isle, there had once been three school buildings; by 1948, only one was serviceable, and students were being transported to Isle.⁹

As citizens’ expectations of education changed over the years, so, too, had expectations for teachers. In rural areas, demands often outstripped resources. In the earliest years, almost anyone could teach. Later, as state aid became tied to teacher qualifications, instructors were required to be certified through courses of study, first provided by high schools, then by normal schools, colleges, and universities. County school superintendents also ran “teachers’ institutes” to allow rural teachers to update their certification.

In a rural school, a teacher was required to instruct students at four, six, and sometimes eight grade levels, whereas in larger schools in town, teaching was generally confined to one or two grades per room. Isolation and the additional maintenance duties assigned to rural teachers, as well as generally lower pay, made the job uninviting. These factors created a shortage of qualified teachers in rural schools. In Mille Lacs County in 1947–48, some 42 of the 58 rural teachers were teaching on limited certificates (which accepted lower standards), 23 of these being emergency permits.¹⁰

Much of the impetus for educational reform, however, came from a desire to lower costs by improving efficiency. Taxpayers, of course, were concerned about the financial impact of any recommended changes. The Mille Lacs County survey committee’s reports contained careful computations based on student numbers and tax valuations, projected costs, and available state aid for the consolidated districts they proposed to create. In every case the numbers showed a reduction from the amounts residents of rural school districts were currently paying.¹¹

Transportation of students, particularly the youngest ones, was another issue of great concern to rural parents. In its hearings across the county, the school-survey committee often learned that “Mothers were fearful lest the younger pupils would be required to ride far on the bus.”





School building in Milo Township, Mille Lacs County, about 1940

Parents felt safer keeping children in the neighborhood and also feared the abysmal state of some Mille Lacs County rural roads, especially during spring thaws and winter storms. But by the late 1940s school buses were already traveling some rural routes, carrying high schoolers as well as a few younger students from the scattered districts that had already dissolved and joined the schools in town. In fact, Clarence E. Paulson, the committee chairman from the Princeton school district, reported, “As the schools at the four corners of the [Princeton] area are closed . . . in the event of consolidation no pupil would have to be transported any further distance [than students are traveling] at present.”¹² This, however, did not ease parents’ opposition to long bus rides, a concern that remains to this day.

Perhaps the most pressing problem facing Mille Lacs County schools in 1948, however, was the need for larger facilities in the high-school districts. By then, a dozen Mille Lacs County school districts had already closed and were sending their pupils to town. As the school-survey committee noted, “Urban schools receiving nonresident pupils are gradually reaching the saturation point and do not feel justified in taxing themselves to provide additional facilities for such nonresident pupils so reorganization is becoming urgent.”¹³

Poor timing exacerbated the problem. Facing both dwindling tax revenue and diminished student populations, rural districts would typically decide at their summer annual meetings—or even later—whether to close their seventh and eighth grades or even the whole school and send all students to another district. Thus, the num-

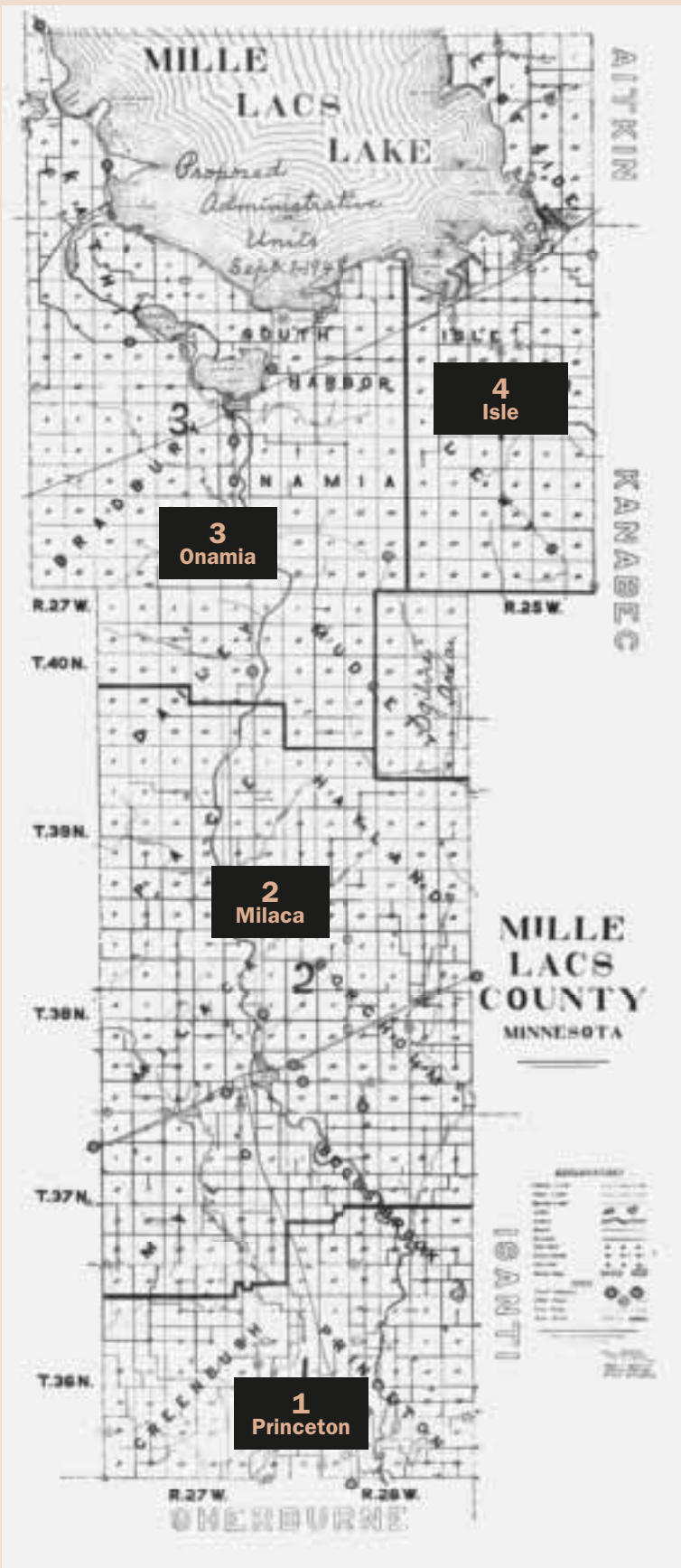
LEFT: Mille Lacs County farm, about 1920

ber of pupils a district would be serving was often unknown until the school year began. In town, crowding in the elementary grades limited options for handling increasing numbers in the high schools. Harry Wilkes, who had gone to the Wahkon school for eight years before starting high school in Onamia, remembered his first day there in 1938: “Sixty-nine freshmen showed up. And they didn’t even have a place to sit down or enough books or anything else. It was sure confusion that day when we were supposed to report to a certain room and there was only about half enough chairs, and people standing around all over wondering what they’re doing.”¹⁴

No district was obliged by law to take another’s grade-school pupils, but the Mille Lacs County high-school districts did so as long as there was room. Tuition was paid by the students’ home districts, but bonding for remodeling or building projects fell entirely on the taxpayers of the high-school districts, where tax capacity was often too small to build adequate facilities for the additional pupils.

School bus discharging high-schoolers, rural Hennepin County, about 1940





Township map of Mille Lacs County showing the four administrative districts proposed in September 1948

After assessing the existing system and its problems, the Mille Lacs County School Survey Committee proposed to consolidate the county's 59 school districts into four administrative ones based on the four existing high-school districts: Princeton (total projected enrollment, 1,416), Milaca (1,717), Onamia (920), and Isle (496). Since districts had evolved with boundaries unrelated to township and county lines, each of these existing high-school districts included students from adjoining counties. The proposed administrative districts also crossed county lines; enacting them would require complementary action by survey committees and boards in the students' home county. Meanwhile, the Mille Lacs committee encouraged the continued use of good rural buildings and the employment of all qualified rural teachers in the new districts.¹⁵

The proposed restructuring was an attempt to create a systemwide, integrated solution. The larger districts, with broader tax bases, would provide both stable funding and more predictable student enrollments. As efforts to reorganize moved from proposal to action, however, they soon took on the ad hoc nature that had always marked public education.

Following state guidelines, the school-survey committee called meetings in each district to explain its proposal before voting could occur. The first election was held in the proposed Onamia district in August 1950, almost two years after the committee filed its reports. Reorganization was defeated soundly and, judging from the records available, quietly.¹⁶ By the time the proposal failed in Onamia, controversy had erupted in neighboring Isle.

The survey committee thought that reorganization would pass easily in the Isle area, since only four of the nine districts in Mille Lacs, Aitkin, and Kanabec counties to be included in the new district were still open. Though rural schools in the area were having difficulties, the promoters of reorganization faced several obstacles. Isle superintendent John Palm told the committee about one sticking point when he acknowledged the importance to its community of the school building in nearby Wahkon. The facility, which had housed grades one through twelve from 1912 through 1937, was a substantial brick building in good repair, now serving grades one through eight. Palm and the committee sought to reassure the Wahkon community that the school would remain open, since it "could be used to very good advantage as a grade building" to relieve pressure on the high school in Isle.¹⁷



Finishing construction of Wahkon's substantial new school, about 1911. From 1912 to 1937 the facility housed grades one through twelve, including a flourishing cornet band (below).

In addition to fearing the loss of local schools, rural people were concerned about losing representation in a larger district. A committee advisory to the survey group, which was set up to bring rural districts' concerns to the table, wanted school-board districts established *within* the Isle district to assure that outlying areas would be represented.¹⁸ This issue kept returning to the discussion, although citizens were told that the state legislation did not permit such sub-districts. Instead, rural voters would be represented by supporting local candidates in the districtwide elections. Skepticism continued in the rural community that their voices would be heard.

But perhaps the greatest barrier, and the one most

difficult to remove, was the longstanding and none-too-friendly rivalry between the towns of Isle and Wahkon. Wahkon had been a bustling center that had provided high school long before Isle, and over the years disagreements had flared between the two towns. As discussion of school reorganization continued, old, unresolved issues resurfaced, and the pages of the *Mille Lacs Messenger*, published in Isle, became a forum for the disagreement in early 1950.

In the same issue with a page-one headline, "Reorganization Becomes a 'Hot' Potato," a letter to the editor gave some background to the controversy. Barbara Stalker was a rural Wahkon resident who, along with her husband, Wahkon school-board member Frank W. Stalker, was active in school affairs. Her letter challenged reorganization point by point, arguing that the Wahkon school served students and community as well as, if not better than, the Isle school could. Isle was simply "trying to 'gobble' up" adjoining districts. Stalker also revealed some reasons for the ill will between the communities: "This redistricting idea is far from new. Do you know that about twelve years ago, districts 33 and 18 were illegally consolidated, and it took a court hearing at Milaca to restore our district? Also do you know that the equipment the Isle district took from the Wahkon school still hasn't been paid for?"¹⁹

The flurry of meetings in the Isle area continued through the spring of 1950. Reorganization opponents in Wahkon tried several strategies to avoid absorption by



Isle. Harry Wilkes, who had recently joined the Cove district school board, remembered one meeting:

They were going to try to . . . leave Isle sitting there, and get . . . all of the rural areas [to] go with them, and have the high school at Wahkon. . . . We went to their meeting, but we told them right out, there was . . . no use of planning on us going that way. If we consolidate, we're sticking with Onamia, because [Wahkon] didn't have the assets . . . to do anything.²⁰

The Wahkon opposition group also sought to have the Department of Education withdraw the town from the Isle district reorganization plan. But reorganization guidelines required that any changes to a proposal come only through the school-survey committee. The Wahkon petitioners could not remove the district from the plan. They could only vote it up or down.²¹

Facing such opposition, the push for school reorganization apparently ran out of steam by the summer of 1950. The issue disappeared from the newspaper, and survey committee records show no more planning for an election in Isle. The unsuccessful election in Onamia came and went in August, with very little comment in the newspapers or survey-committee records. School affairs resurfaced when the *Messenger* in January and February 1951 published a series of articles by Isle Superintendent Palm. These articles did not directly address consolidation but outlined the need for more building space in Isle, citing the growth of the student population and the closing of rural schools. In February the *Messenger's* editor weighed in regarding the large nonresident enrollment: "If the outlying districts wish to continue and participate in this service, they should also be willing to share the expense."²²

On March 20 the Isle school board held a special meeting to address the need to expand its tax base and provide adequate funding for building. The outcome was a resolution that stated, "No non-resident pupils can be accommodated in [Isle's] school this coming school year, 1951-52."²³

Isle was forcing the hand of the rural districts, and it did not take long for them to respond. Petitions for dissolution from three districts were filed and subsequently approved by the Mille Lacs County board on May 7. That same day, three more districts filed petitions—including Wahkon District 33.²⁴

A hearing was held for these three petitions on June 29, 1951. The *Messenger's* front-page headline declared



After serving grades four through six in the consolidated Isle district for many years, the Wahkon school was converted to an apartment building, shown here in 2001.

"Consolidation of School Districts Completed." Reorganization opponents in Wahkon had hired an attorney and had disputed the validity of the petition for dissolution, arguing that some signatures were not valid. After lengthy deliberations, the county board determined that the petition was valid.²⁵

However, the dissolution of the Wahkon district was not yet complete. Opponents filed an appeal that was decided in favor of the county board on August 5, 1952, then appealed that decision to the Minnesota Supreme Court. The Supreme Court upheld the decision of the district court on June 12, 1953, and the rancorous reorganization of the Isle district was finally over.

Starting that fall, grades four, five, and six from across the district were transported to the brick school in Wahkon. Buildings in rural Central, Lakeside, and Eastwood were also used for grade schools, taking pressure off of the buildings in Isle. In November Frank Stalker, outgoing clerk of Wahkon District 33, gave the *Messenger* a final report on district finances and on the building and voiced support for Isle's new school superintendent.²⁶ What had been called Administrative District Four in the final report of the Mille Lacs County School Survey Committee was finally a reality.

At the south end of the county, Princeton was also having trouble providing facilities. Increasing numbers of pupils were enrolling from rural districts in Sherburne and Isanti counties as well as Mille Lacs. The

RIGHT: Princeton's bustling Main Street, about 1940

school-survey committee's final report had revealed that since 1944 Princeton had gone from serving students from three closed rural schools to serving students from 14, with three additional districts sending seventh and eighth graders to town. More than 50 percent of enrollment at Princeton was from "rural areas."²⁷

Public meetings on reorganization had been held, and occasional articles appeared in the *Princeton Union* regarding school reorganization, but there had been no rush to action in the Princeton area as things got hot in Isle. As time went on and the number of students continued to increase, however, the need for facilities became more acute. Faced with this need—and with the deadline for reorganization elections set for April 1, 1953—the school-survey committee held meetings in October 1952 to prepare for an election the following March.²⁸

While the other benefits of reorganization were promoted, the facilities issue was the focus of the election campaign. A brochure sent to voters assured them: "The Princeton Board has long considered the Princeton school a truly Community School. It is only within the last year or two, when building space was no longer available, that any students were refused admission."²⁹ To answer the question "Will reorganization mean additional building in Princeton?" the brochure stated:

Whether reorganization is voted or not, some additional building in Princeton is in the offing. . . . The present school building is not entirely adequate for . . . [Princeton] and the 17 closed school districts that are transporting to Princeton. If reorganization is not approved at

this election, then the question may resolve itself as to whether to build . . . or whether to exclude pupils sufficiently to make present facilities do. Should a building program be developed, it is only common sense that those who are to be accommodated should also bear their representative portion of the costs.

The *Princeton Union* believed that reorganization would be approved. Letters to the editor were few and mostly supportive. But again, school consolidation in Mille Lacs County suffered defeat at the polls. On March 10, 1953, the "urban" district of Princeton voted in favor by a large margin—317 to 89—but the combined vote of the rural districts defeated it 660 to 431.³⁰

In response, the school-survey committee and reorganization proponents regrouped and tried again. It was determined that "too much territory had been included in the reorganization recommendations," and the committee adjusted its proposal. Six districts were eliminated from the new plan, and though no date was set, it was clear that the district was headed for another election.³¹

Rural residents, concerned about losing control of their children's education and of their taxes, felt they were being railroaded. An open letter from the school boards of four rural districts (all in Mille Lacs County), published on the editorial page of the *Princeton Union*, stated:

We feel that having voted down the re-organization of school at the election held in March, we should be left out of any election for at least two years.

We feel that the farmers of this territory are carrying





Princeton's spacious high school, about 1930; by the 1950s, crowding forced administrators to turn away pupils.

all of the tax load they can carry at present until farm prices level off.

We would like the people of Princeton and District 1 to know that all farmers in District 2, 3, 4 and 5 pay a school tax fund of 34.31 mills that goes to high schools only, besides the state aid per pupil tax, which we feel is paying our way. We do not ask anyone to educate our children for us.

If we are to be forced into another vote on reorganization . . . the majority of the farmers in this territory are not going to support Princeton with any more trade than we have to.³²

Nevertheless, an election was taking shape. The *Princeton Union* reported on October 29 that the plan was to include the 17 districts in Mille Lacs, Isanti, and Sherburne counties that were already closed and sending students to Princeton, as well as any other districts that were interested in consolidating. The need from the Princeton district's perspective was clear. A building program to accommodate students from these districts would require \$550,000, but the district at its current size and valuation could only levy up to \$400,000. The added valuation from the 17 closed districts would enable a levy ceiling of \$650,000, more than sufficient for the proposed building program.³³

School-survey committee and Princeton school-board member C. E. Paulson explained at a November public meeting that, since this latest plan did not include all districts in the area, it was not a reorganization as specified in the survey committee's report. It would not provide the universal curriculum and efficiencies for all area schools, but it would provide a solution for those districts that sought the benefits of consolidation.³⁴

The vote was set for December 18. A December 10 editorial in the *Princeton Union* found it "inconceivable that the proposition be voted down."³⁵ And, indeed, on December 24, 1953, the page-one headline announced: "Rural Schools Approve Consolidation by Vote 327 to 58." Rural districts that had not participated would continue to join the Princeton district, as their independence became unsustainable, through the mid-1960s, but for the most part, the Princeton district was now in place.

Though preparatory meetings had been held in early 1953 in the Milaca area, the last of the four proposed consolidated districts, a reorganization election never materialized. Though Milaca, too, experienced overcrowded facilities as a result of closed rural schools, it did not seem to be facing as urgent a need as Isle or Princeton. From time to time, Milaca's school board and superintendent discussed with rural board members the benefits of consolidation and Milaca's facilities needs. School crowding was addressed periodically with smaller building and renovation projects.³⁶ Leonard M. Paulson, a Milaca board of education member who had served on the school-survey committee, remembered the more easygoing approach of this district:

The relationship with the rural school boards and the urban school board was very good. We . . . kept the . . . communication, I think, on a good level. . . . I think some high school districts, the boards there, informed the common school district boards that . . . if you want to belong to a school with a high school and you want to join us, you do it now . . . or you forget it, build your own high school. . . . We did not take that tack here in Milaca. Our tack was . . . if and when you're ready to join us . . . you let us know and we'll take you. . . . So, immediately the fight was not with the rural district and us, it was amongst the people in the rural district. When are you ready?³⁷

Determining when they were ready was not an easy task for many rural school boards, even though they struggled for years to keep going. For example, in North Hayland District 46, there were no crises or sudden setbacks but increasing difficulty with the day-to-day business of educating the district's dwindling numbers of children. Established in 1916, the district had one school-house with electricity, a wood- or coal-fired stove, and, by the early 1940s, a hot-lunch program. By June 1948 district residents were discussing its problems. They voted

to keep the school open but difficulties continued. The next year, they decided that it was cheaper to close the school and transport students to South Hayland District 25. This solution worked for two years, until transportation became too expensive. Now, the most economical option would be for students to ride the Milaca high-school bus to South Hayland, but this would delay their afternoon pickup until nearly five P.M. The North Hayland board finally decided, at the end of August 1951, to reopen the local school, and they hired a neighborhood woman to teach. By 1955 the board was exploring the cost of sending students to school in Milaca, which it—along with four other rural districts—finally did in 1958. At this time, there were six North Hayland students in grades one through eight.³⁸

Throughout this period, it was difficult to recruit and keep officers on the school board. Albert Stark was appointed clerk in 1953 and served until the district was dissolved. During his tenure, officers and district residents wrestled with diminishing resources and increasing demands, and they felt they were getting little assistance in their search for solutions. Remembering a county superintendent of schools who, he believed, opposed consolidation “because then she’d lose her job,” Stark explained, “Everything like the school supplies, they was going up. And we had to have wood for the schoolhouse, coal, and other expenses, light bill . . . it all counted up.” Though he was a primary actor in North Hayland’s eventual dissolution, he concluded, “I still think that kids was better off out in the country than they are coming to town.”³⁹

Grades five through eight in the two-room South Hayland School, 1950, when students from North Hayland also attended



After its failed election, Onamia, like Milaca, dealt with ongoing facility problems without mounting a major campaign to consolidate. Here, too, rural districts joined piecemeal, right up to the 1971 deadline. Harry Wilkes, who served on the Cove and, subsequently, Onamia school boards, credited Onamia superintendent E. R. Ireland for the relatively smooth, though prolonged, transition to one larger district: “He could see the handwriting on the wall that consolidation was coming, but he didn’t push it. He just tried to help everybody. . . . Of course, we had a faction of old timers in the [Cove] district that had the attitude that “He’s trying to get us.”⁴⁰

Cove, a small town on the south shore of Lake Mille Lacs, had a six-room schoolhouse. It had discontinued its high school and sent those students to Onamia in the late 1920s or early 1930s. By the 1950s the Cove district was experiencing the same financial and size constraints facing many rural districts. Wilkes cited the trend of sending pupils to junior-high school in town as one that moved the district toward consolidation.

They wanted to maintain their own school, but . . . it was just the coming thing, you might say, for the seventh and eighth graders to go into the junior high, because they . . . like the athletic teams and the . . . library. . . . It was harder for them to adjust when they didn’t go in until they were freshmen. . . . And so we discontinued [seventh and eighth grades] and then we had a big building to maintain, you know, and two school buses. . . . We went a year without the seventh and eighth graders, and then we could see we were running out of money.

Two other rural districts, along with Cove, joined the Onamia district in 1958. The attrition of rural districts continued into the 1960s, helped along by 1963 legislation requiring that districts with closed schools either reopen them or dissolve by 1965. Then, in 1967, one of the guiding principles of the 20-year reorganization effort was made into law. After July 1, 1971, “All areas of the state . . . shall . . . be included in an independent or special school district maintaining . . . grades one through twelve.”⁴¹

One of the last tasks set before the Mille Lacs County school superintendent, a task that was completed by the county auditor after the office of superintendent was abolished in 1970, was an election on the further consolidation of two of the four reorganized dis-

tricts: Isle and Onamia. The boards of these neighboring districts were concerned that they had neither the tax base nor student population to be sustainable, but they did not want to act on the contentious issue without popular support. Two bond issues to build a new school in Onamia had failed, and officials preferred to resolve the question of merging before attempting another bond issue. And so they asked the county superintendent to draw up a plan and submit it to voters. An election was held on January 16, 1971, with the Onamia area voting for consolidation and the Isle area soundly defeating it.⁴²

Mille Lacs County school reorganization had indeed gone “a little slow.” From 1947 to 1971, public education moved from the fabled Little Red Schoolhouse toward the modern era at an uneven pace.⁴³ Ambivalence over the losses and gains of “educational progress” continues to color the memories of those who experienced

the final years of rural schools. As Ellen Gilder, a mother who served on the school board of Whitney Brook District 43 when it joined Milaca in 1970, acknowledged, pupils in the consolidated schools were offered “a window into the world because there’s more things available because of monetary issues. . . . But I guess I’m old fashioned enough to feel like the country school was truly ideal. . . . Community, more community.”⁴⁴

As school districts achieved the structure that would carry them into the twenty-first century, new high schools were constructed, programs were expanded—and the debates over who would make the decisions and who would pay for them continued. Citizens, politicians, and educators still wrestle with what it means to provide each child with access to “a general and uniform system of public schools” that meets the needs of society and the community, now and in the future. Solutions continue to be adjusted with each legislative session, as we all try to come to agreement on what is public education. □

Notes

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1. *Princeton Union*, Mar. 6, 1952, p. 4.
2. State of Minnesota, *Session Laws*, 1967, p. 1722. The state-mandated deadline was July 1, 1971.
3. Minnesota Constitution, Article XIII, sec. 1; Minnesota Dept. of Education, “Facts About Optional School District Reorganization in Minnesota,” State Advisory Commission on Reorganization Publications, XXXII-B-6 Revised (1949), and “Reorganization of Districts to Meet Educational Needs of Today,” XXXII-B-77 Revised (Sept. 1962), in unindexed County Superintendent Consolidation Records, Mille Lacs Co. Courthouse, Milaca.

On the public-school system and early controversies over uniformity, see William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, rev. ed. (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1969), 4: 135–89. Raymond A. Kent, *A Study of State Aid to Public Schools in Minnesota*, Bulletin of the University of Minne-

sota, *Studies in the Social Sciences*, no. 11 (Apr. 1918) argued for the overhaul of the system because of inefficiency, low standards, and obsolescence; Fred Engelhardt, *Minnesota Public Schools* (Minneapolis: Educational Test Bureau, Inc., 1934) suggested wholesale reorganization for improved efficiency.

4. Marjorie Schmidt, interview by author, tape recording, Jan. 23, 2001, Milaca Area Historical Society, Milaca. (All interviews cited are recorded and archived in this society.) Schmidt attended Garfield District 8 and taught in Milaca from the late 1940s until her retirement in 1983.

5. “Optional School District Reorganization,” 4; Folwell, *Minnesota*, 4: 163.

6. Some marginal lands had been abandoned in the 1930s and 1940s. Large acreages in the northern half of the county became state forest and a state wildlife refuge in the late 1940s after being tax forfeit. See *Mille Lacs County Times* (Milaca), Nov. 3, 1949, p. 1, Nov. 10, 1949, p. 12, on the establishment of the refuge. North Mudgett District 19 cited the loss of taxable land to this refuge among its reasons for dissolution in 1953; unindexed County Superintendent Consolidation Records, Mille Lacs Co. Courthouse.

7. Minnesota, *Session Laws*, 1947, p. 649–57; *Mille Lacs County Times*, Oct. 23, 1947, p. 1; Mille Lacs County Superintendent of Schools, Miscellaneous Records, Mille Lacs Co. School Survey Committee, Minnesota State Archives, Minnesota His-

torical Society, St. Paul (hereinafter, School Records). The Department of Education wrote detailed guidelines for this process, which included developing proposals and constituent voting to approve any plan. Four of Minnesota’s 87 counties had already reorganized, and the department hoped that the remaining 21 would join the effort in 1949; “Optional School District Reorganization,” 2.

Eighty-two of the Mille Lacs County school-board members voted to establish a school-survey committee; 13 were opposed. Nowhere is it indicated whether all districts were represented.

8. U.S., *Census*, 1950, *Population*, vol. 2, pt. 23, p. 23–20; School Survey Committee, “Our Public Schools: A Report to the Residents of Mille Lacs County,” tentative report, Sept. 1, 1948, and final report, Nov. 1, 1948, School Records. The reports were intended to be used together; final report, 3, and tentative report, 4, 8–9 (quote).

9. Tentative report, 4; Carol F. Bailey and Connie W. Corssman, comps., *Memoirs of East Side Township* (self-published, n.d.), 10–11.

10. Tentative report, 4.

11. For instance, the Milaca district, with the highest average rural mill rate of 79.67, was estimated to see a 24.14 mill reduction. Onamia, with the lowest—73.81—would see the smallest reduction—9.41 mills; tentative report, 14, 16. The state’s advisory commission on school reorganization was cautious in discussing tax impacts (“Optional School

Reorganization,” 11), since many other variables—building programs, curricular improvements—could also affect taxes. The “Minnesota Miracle” of the 1970s further changed the tax structure for education, making comparisons difficult. No one interviewed for this project remembered any noticeable change in taxes—up or down—traceable to consolidation alone.

12. School Survey Committee, hearing minutes, 1950, and Feb. 28, 1952 (Paulson quote), School Records. Following consolidation, Princeton superintendent J. A. Sater reported that the average length of bus rides decreased; Sater to Ruth Douglas, county school superintendent, May 29, 1954, School Records.

13. Tentative report, 4; final report, 5 (quote). “Closed” districts remained government entities responsible for educating pupils within their boundaries but did not themselves operate a school.

14. By the late 1940s many parents felt it was advantageous to send students to a separate junior-high school; in addition, some districts had so few students in these grades that it made sense to serve only grades one through six. Harry C. Wilkes, interview by author, June 6, 2001. Wilkes joined the Cove school board in about 1950 and was elected to the Onamia board after consolidation in 1958.

15. Here and below, “Optional School District Reorganization,” 10; Leonard M. Paulson, interview by author, Nov. 15, 2000.

16. Guidelines specified that residents of the rural and “urban” (high-school) districts would each vote as a block. Both electoral blocks had to approve the proposal for reorganization to move forward. The vote from the 16 rural districts was 360 against and 143 in favor, while Onamia’s Joint District 34 approved reorganization 85 to 50; School Survey Committee, minutes, Aug. 14, 1950, School Records.

17. Districts 15 and 33 in Mille Lacs (as well as the Isle district itself) and 76 and 3 in Aitkin were still holding classes; School Survey Committee, minutes, Jan. 4, 1950, School Records. Though Wahkon was a town school, it, like the similarly situated Cove district, was considered “rural” because it now served only elementary grades.

18. School Survey Committee, minutes, June 7, 1950, School Records.

19. *Mille Lacs Messenger*, Feb. 16, 1950, p. 6. Additional issues included student-teacher ratios, teacher qualifications, attendance, inadequate buildings, and costs.

The “illegal” consolidation is difficult to track. A vote on May 23, 1938, had failed. A successful second election on September 12 was appealed 10 days later on grounds that there was a lack of jurisdiction for the order of consolidation and that consolidation was both against the best interests of the area and in violation of the U.S. and Minnesota

constitutions. Consolidation was overturned, leaving behind unresolved issues involving trust and turf. See *Mille Lacs Messenger*, clippings and correspondence from Sophia Soule to T. C. Engum, in Mille Lacs County Superintendent of Schools, Consolidation Records, ISD 473 Isle, School Records, MHS. Documents related to the appeal are among county school superintendent consolidation records at the Mille Lacs Co. Courthouse.

20. Wilkes interview.

21. School Survey Committee, minutes, May 3, 1950, School Records.

22. *Mille Lacs Messenger*, Jan. 18, Feb. 8, Feb. 15—all 1951, p. 1.

23. The full text of this resolution appeared in the *Mille Lacs Messenger*, Mar. 22, 1951, p. 5.

24. Mille Lacs County districts 45 and 58 and Kanabec County district 54 were dissolved; the other two petitions filed on that date were for Aitkin County district 3 and Mille Lacs County district 15; *Mille Lacs Messenger*, May 10, 1951, p. 6. The school-survey committee advised the county board that it favored these dissolutions; minutes, May 2, 1951, School Records. Action on districts outside of the county also required approval from their school-survey committees and county boards.

25. Opponents held that some of the signers were not freeholders in the district and others wished to withdraw their signatures. Here and below, *Mille Lacs Messenger*, July 5, 1951, p. 1, Mar. 13, 1952, p. 1, June 18, 1953, p. 1.

26. *Mille Lacs Messenger*, Nov. 26, 1953, p. 6.

27. Final report, p. 11.

28. School Survey Committee, minutes, Oct. 6, 1952, School Records; *Princeton Union*, Oct. 14, 1952, p. 1.

29. Here and below, “Reorganization for a Princeton Community School,” unpaginated brochure, Mille Lacs Co. Historical Society, Princeton. It is unclear who produced the brochure. The last page states: “This informational booklet and its distribution is made possible by individuals (farmers, business and professional men) who have a genuine interest in their community and its educational program.”

30. *Princeton Union*, Feb. 19, Feb. 26, Mar. 5—all 1953, p. 6. The vote was reported both in *Princeton Union*, Mar. 12, 1953, p. 1, and School Survey Committee, minutes, Mar. 11, 1953, School Records.

31. School Survey Committee, minutes, May 26, 1953, School Records.

32. *Princeton Union*, July 23, 1953, p. 6.

33. *Princeton Union*, Oct. 29, 1953, p. 1.

34. *Princeton Union*, Nov. 12, 1953, p. 1.

35. *Princeton Union*, Dec. 3, 1953, p. 1, Dec. 10, 1953, p. 6. Since the largest part of the proposed district was in Sherburne County, that county’s superintendent of schools oversaw the election.

36. O. S. Dahlager, Milaca superintendent, to rural school board officers, Oct. 3, 1958, Jan. 26, 1960, June 17, 1960, copies given to author by Leonard Paulson, a member of the Milaca board of education. In 1950 additional lots were acquired adjacent to the school for use as a play area; additions to the building came in 1951 and 1955; and an elementary school was built in 1961. *Mille Lacs County Times*, Aug. 17, 1950, p. 1; *Mille Lacs Messenger*, July 12, 1951, p. 1; dedication program, Sept. 24, 1962, author’s possession.

37. Paulson interview.

38. The records of North Hayland CSD 46 (1940 through dissolution in 1958) are in the Milaca Area Historical Society.

39. Albert Stark, interview by author, Aug. 12, 2000.

40. Here and below, Wilkes interview. It is unclear exactly how long high-school classes were taught at Cove; see Mille Lacs County Superintendent of Schools, Consolidation Records, CSD 17, Cove, in records of ISD 472 South Harbor Twp., School Records.

41. *Minnesota Session Laws, 1963*, p. 801, 1967, p. 1722 (quote).

42. *Mille Lacs Messenger*, Dec. 17, 1970, clipping; *Onamia News*, Dec. 17, 1970, clipping, Superintendent of Schools Consolidation Records, ISD 473 Isle, School Records; Bernice Zeroth, administrator, Mille Lacs Co. school office, to Commissioner of Education, Superintendent of Schools Consolidation Records, ISD 473 Isle.

43. Mille Lacs County was not alone in its uneven march to reorganization; see Dept. of Education, publication (Code XXXII-B-103), Jan. 4, 1965, County Superintendent Records, Mille Lacs Co. Courthouse. There were still 1,463 “districts maintaining ungraded schools only,” of which 448 would soon be dissolved because they had no schools open.

44. Ellen Gilder, interview by author, June 21, 2001.

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