

Early Rural School Teachers Had Many Responsibilities

I shared with you in May 2022 what it was like to be a teacher in the rural schools of Green County during the 1950s, when many of us were students. This week I will explain some of the different experiences that the earlier teachers had to deal with.

One of the differences was the buildings where schools were taught. An undated article from the Monroe Evening Times shared that the first school in the town of Cadiz (possibly in the whole county) was taught by Ralph Hilderbrant in Bennett Nolan's smokehouse in Section 36 in January and February of 1837. The earliest schools were probably wood cabins. There were only 10 school districts in Green County in 1842 compared to 120 about 60 years later.

Another difference is that teachers were not hired for a school year. The year was divided into four terms, fall, winter, spring, and summer. In the earliest days, a school might only be in attendance for one or two terms. As time progressed, most schools were in attendance for fall, winter, and spring sessions. Sometime between 1910 and 1920, each of the districts changed to hiring a teacher for the entire eight or nine-month school year.

Having terms meant that teachers might have to find a new school for each term instead of for the entire year. Imagine finding a job in the days before telephones or automobiles. An ad in the November 3, 1875 Monroe Sentinel said, "A competent teacher wishes to obtain a school to teach this coming winter; he is ready to begin at once, and at very reasonable compensation; has taught twelve terms. Address A. L. Day, Postville, wis." I have seen no other advertisements for a teacher.

Many boards preferred to hire a male for the winter term because students were allowed to go to school until they were 21 since the "boys" were needed on the farm in the spring and fall to assist with field work. Some of the students were possibly older than the teacher, which could lead to disciplinary problems. Men were also thought to be more capable of starting a fire to heat the school. The districts preferred to have female teachers for the spring and fall terms because the pay was less. Having terms also meant that the teachers would have to find another job during the terms when they were not teaching.

The pay difference is illustrated with two teacher contracts found in the clerk/treasurer records of the Hardscrabble School in Sylvester Township. In 1867 Esther Schoonover was hired to teach a 4-month term starting on May 6 for \$16 per month. George R. Mitchell was hired to teach the 4-month winter term later that year for \$27.50 per month.

Many of the schools were not located near any hamlet and roads were not what we have now, so the teachers would have to find a nearby home where they could reside. They would then have to walk to and from school in all types of weather as well as pay for their room and board. Imagine what it was like for the women to trudge through the snow and mud when their skirts reached the ground.

Teachers might travel home for the weekend, which wasn't usually a problem. An exception to that appeared in the Wednesday, February 3, 1915 issue of the Monroe Evening Times. Superintendent Burns estimated that between 30 and 40 teachers "were stranded in Monroe until today, unable to get to their schools in the country on account of the blockaded roads. Among those who were unable to get back to their schools was Miss Mary Tschudy, a member of the high school faculty at Monticello, who was unable to return by train or to communicate by telephone with Monticello. Most of the number, who came home to spend Sunday, were able to return to their schools today."

Teachers had to get to the school early to light the lanterns. The lanterns had to be filled with oil and the wicks trimmed, which might have been one of the students' duties. As mentioned earlier a fire also needed to be started in the wood stove to get the classroom warm before the students arrived. Sometimes this was the job of the teacher and, on occasion, the district would hire someone to do that. Grove School in Jordan Township actually hired three different men to build the fires for \$3 in 1876. Enterprise School in Clarno Township was wired for electricity by Sam Rubin in the spring of 1946 and they purchased an oil burner from Wenger & Kramer in October 1950. I would guess that other districts were also able to eliminate wood fires and lanterns within a few years of that time.



This early photo of an unknown school, the students, and their teacher came from the collection of Ron Disch. It shows a well house behind the students from which they would carry water inside the school. The job of those early teachers was not an easy one.

At a convention in May 1910, L. W. Wood, state inspector of rural schools made a plea to the school district officers and Green County Superintendent J. C. Penn who were in attendance. He felt that the officers who required the “girl school teachers” to build fires and sweep floors were inconsiderate. “He declared it to be radically wrong that young women hired for the work of education should be subjected to the unpleasant and unreasonable work of a country school janitor.”

Hygiene didn’t seem to be a priority in those schools as not much water was used — and no hot water. Some of the early districts did not even have a well so someone would bring a pail or milk can of water to the school each day. In the days before there was a pump, someone would have to take the bucket out to the open well and lower it down to get the water from the well and then crank it back up. Before the bubblers of the 1950s, there would be a bucket with one ladle for all of the students to drink from.

More differences will be shared next week.