

## A Brief Excursion into the History of McHenry County's Schools

The 1895 one room West Harmony School has been part of the McHenry County Historical Society Museum since March of 1988. It is a representation of the type of building and local education system that prevailed in this county until just after World War II. In 1945 this county had 127 separate school districts, each with the authority to levy a tax for school purposes. We actually had more school districts than any one of ten entire states.

Education as it developed in these county schools (a term used for the one room schools until the 1870's) got its start in the late 1830's. At that time "schools" were generally subscription schools. Parents voluntarily "chipped in together" to hire a teacher who often used a room in someone's cabin for his/her school. There were no standardized books or courses of study. One such school operated near Griswold Lake. Webster's Spelling Book was the major book used in such schools. Spelling was disproportionately prized.

Other early schools were private seminaries, often part of a religious order. There were four early seminaries in this county: the Woodstock Seminary which evolved into the Todd School for Boys, 1848-1954; the Lawrence Academy in Lawrence, west of Harvard; the Crystal Lake Academy of 1850 on the grounds of St. Mary's Episcopal Church; and the ill-fated five-story Marengo Institute of 1855, run by the Presbyterians. This building burned to the ground not long after it opened. Schools like these generally declined when the Illinois Free School Education Act of 1855 went into effect.

In 1841 McHenry County appointed its first county-wide official. Carlisle Hastings of Marengo became the School Land Commissioner. His job was to manage the sale of land in Section 16 of each township. The Northwest Ordinances of 1785-87 established that this section out of each 36-section township be set aside for the support of a public school system. It appears that Hastings was kept busy as a banker, loaning the money earned through land sales. There were no banks in this county until 1864.

The 1862 plat map of McHenry County identified over 140 little school districts. Each township had up to nine and they were spaced so that no one in the district would have to walk more than two miles to school. At first the schools in each township were numbered consecutively, 1 to 9. By 1901 that numbering system was replaced with a consecutive system throughout the county. This eliminated the confusion over district numbers. West Harmony became District 122.

During the 19th century, school terms were usually divided into winter, spring and summer sessions. Men were hired in the winter to teach older students who otherwise had to help on farms. In 1881 McHenry County schools had 55 male teachers. By 1911 that number had dropped to two. In some districts school was in session seven months while in others it was eight or nine months.

The typical schoolhouse was almost always a rectangular frame building, almost always painted white after the mid 1870's, and usually unpainted before then. They were built to accommodate the range of the human voice. As such, they were generally no larger than 30 x 40 feet. West harmony measures about 25 x 36 feet. Their importance went far beyond the teaching of reading, writing, and arithmetic. This was often the only public building in a rural area and had to serve for any purposes: church, Grange

Hall, polling place, singing school, card parties, temperance meetings, and political rallies. West Harmony was used as a church at one point in its existence.

The present West Harmony School is actually the second building that was built on its original site. Usually by the end of the 19th century, the first little schoolhouses had worn out and they were replaced. The 1862 plat map shows the existence of a school where West Harmony was located, although we don't know how old that one was. On April 20, 1895, the School Directors of West Harmony authorized the building of an addition. Just three months later, by a district vote of 8 to 2, an entirely new building was approved, the building now on the McHenry County Historical Society Museum grounds.

The first public schools often crossed the line into religious teachings with the moralistic and religious lessons presented in various textbooks. Some of the longest-lived of the early textbooks were the McGuffey Eclectic Readers. Four were published in the 1830's, another in 1844, and one in 1857. The 1879 McGuffey, however, was the most popular edition. By now the tone of the message was away from religion, salvation, and moral behavior, to concerns with civil and social problems of the late 19th century. In 1892, for instance, a Baptist minister and editor of "Youth's Companion," Frances Bellamy, wrote the Pledge of Allegiance. That resulted in a flurry of patriotic plays and flag purchases for rural schools. In addition, school grounds were given more attention, to instill the lessons of cleanliness. And, more and more frequently, interested people were holding entertainments at school to raise money for those things they had previously been too poor to buy for the schools. In 1902 West Harmony got a bell and bell tower thanks to box socials organized by teacher Allison E. Truax. One religious influence in this school is the two doors, one for boys and one for girls, just like early churches.

Teachers were hired by the three district trustees. By the 1880's, state law required teacher certification. Teachers had to be at least 16 years old and of good moral character. Finding qualified teachers was always a major challenge. By the last quarter of the 19th century, professional educators had a growing dissatisfaction with rural schools. They felt there were too many offices, too many elections on school matters (sometimes five a year), and incompetent directors. Also, when disputes arose in districts, parents would break away and want to form a separate district. By 1873, hundreds of school districts had been organized in Illinois for no more than four families, and some for no more than two or three. This resulted in small schools supported by only a handful of taxpayers, too poor to employ a good teacher, to build a good schoolhouse, buy school apparatus, or stay open longer than the minimum. There were also too few children for competition. These arguments would surface again in the 1940's.

The turn of this century brought rapid changes for the rural schools. Independence was being replaced by standardization. From 1912 onward McHenry County had uniform textbooks and courses of study. Just as teachers (certification categories in effect) and courses of study were regulated, so too were the buildings themselves.

During the last two centuries, schoolhouses almost always varied despite basic similarities in form. In the second decade of the 20th century, standardization of schools was well established. In 1912-13, McHenry County had only three standard schools, but by 1914-15, we had 38. In order to qualify, a school had to meet various requirements: separate and clean outhouses, ample playground and equipment, proper ventilation, desks for all sizes, and so on.

State laws worked to unify school conditions. The raised windows on the south side of West Harmony resulted from such laws that presumed that nerve disorders were traceable directly to eyestrain. Oaken buckets gave way to water dispensers or fountains.

In 1947, the tentative report of the McHenry County School Survey Committee was released. It recommended consolidation. I noted that this county had 127 separate school districts and that 100 of them were one room schools which had become very costly to operate. Twenty-four schools had an average attendance of only seven pupils. In some districts the schools were closed to have their children sent to other schools. Oak Grove School in Coral Township has 35 students in the spring term of 1894, but only seven in 1942-43. The day of the rural school had passed into the realm of the obsolete. The last country schools in McHenry County closed in 1962.