The windows of the old schoolhouse are gaping holes, the sagging porch threatens to break away from the building, and the bell tower clings to the roof like a fragile skeleton. Abandoned and vandalized, Foltz School on Route 8 in Butler County, Pennsylvania, stands as a battered remnant of a once bustling center of education and community life. Its companion schools of the Slippery Rock Area School District have not fared much better.

One-room schools served Western Pennsylvania for 128 years, appearing shortly after the Common School Law of 1835 and continuing to the mid-twentieth century. In the Slippery Rock Area School District, a six-township area in the northwestern corner of Butler County, the last one-room schools closed their doors in the spring of 1963. They may have been among the last in Pennsylvania, where only the Amish still use them. Forty-three rural schoolhouses served Mercer, Slippery Rock, Worth, Brady, Muddy Creek, and Franklin townships at varying times. Together they provide a picture of life in the rural schools, their progress, and their eventual end.

Except for the addition of electricity, the schools underwent very little structural change during their existence. Changing characteristics of student population, teaching, and curriculum, however, divide their era into three periods. The first was from 1836 until shortly after the turn of the century. Earlier schools had been by subscription: parents

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1 History of Butler County (Chicago, 1895), 186.

paid a fee for each child enrolled. Buildings were often log cabins, and teachers could be local scholars or itinerant school masters who held school wherever sufficient subscriptions could be obtained. The Common School Law of 1835 established public schools by providing for the first tax levy for school purposes. It was not popular at the time. The idea of taxing property to pay for the education of all children was new and met with general protest. Eventually, it "grew in favor, and many who were its most bitter opponents became its most fervent champions." 3 Townships began to improve the buildings. The Butler County Superintendent of Schools reported in 1861 that only ten out of 210 schoolhouses in the county were log buildings. 4 With the establishment of the Office of County Superintendent of Schools in 1856, the public schools were firmly established.

During these years, most children did not start school until age seven because of walking distances and road conditions. On the other hand, many stayed beyond eighth grade because there was no place for them to get more education. Sometimes the older school population also resulted from the slow progress of the older students. The older boys, and sometimes girls, were customarily kept at home for two or three months in the fall to help with the farm work.

At the beginning of this early period, teachers were usually men, but the ratio reversed before 1900. Statistics for Butler County in 1861 show 154 men and 100 women teachers. In 1876, the numbers were almost equal: 176 men and 175 women. In 1892, there were 137 men and 211 women. Any eighteen-year-old who had passed the eighth grade could receive a teaching certificate by passing a county examination. Although by 1864 Pennsylvania had three State Normal Schools (teacher training schools — Millersville, Edinboro, and Mansfield), 5 prospective teachers of Butler County had no such educational opportunity until the establishment of Slippery Rock State Normal School in 1889. Indeed, most eighth graders of that day had no access to secondary education.

The early schools were ungraded but gradually were organized by grades. The length of the term also increased. The statewide average in 1835 was a mere three and one-half months. By 1861, the average term in the Slippery Rock area rural schools was five months. By 1876

3 History of Butler County, 187.
4 Report to the Superintendent of Common Schools of Pennsylvania (Harrisburg, 1861), 49.
5 Report to the Superintendent of Common Schools of Pennsylvania (Harrisburg, 1864), 82.
most were open five and one-half months, and in 1881, six months.\(^6\)
The length of the term varied widely among townships and boroughs, however.

A great improvement in the schools came in 1893 with the passage of a law requiring that school books and supplies be provided at no cost to students.\(^7\) Compulsory attendance was mandated in 1895, and the schools began the twentieth century with a more stable school population and the tools of learning in the hands of all pupils.

The following period, stretching from before World War I until World War II, was the heyday of the one-room schools. Teachers were high school graduates and had received normal-school training. When Slippery Rock State Normal School became Slippery Rock State Teachers College in 1926, aspiring local teachers could obtain a bachelor's degree. In the classroom, these teachers had usable textbooks, closer supervision by the county superintendent of schools, and the guidelines of the State Course of Study. The township school boards each employed truant officers to enforce the attendance law, and the length of the average term increased to eight months in the 1930s and nine months by the 1940s. This is not to say that the teachers were ideal or that the buildings were without fault, yet it was a time when public support of the schools was strong, and teaching programs within the framework of the rural setting, even with its limitations, were well developed.

In the third period, following World War II, the rural schools rapidly changed. Bus transportation was available, and the state encouraged consolidation wherever possible. School districts received a bonus of $200 for each one-room school which was closed. Of the thirty-six one-room schools operating in the 1920s in the Slippery Rock area, only seventeen survived until 1949. When the Slippery Rock Jointure was formed in 1953, more consolidation took place, leaving twelve rural schools open for the 1954-55 term. At that time most seventh and eighth graders attended junior-senior high school. Students in the remaining six grades were bused so that most one-room schools housed only one or two grades. Support services were also available for the first time. Teachers in art, music, and physical education visited the rural schools, as did the school nurse.\(^8\) One-room schools had reached their declining years, and in another decade, the last five closed.

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\(^6\) History of Butler County, Pennsylvania (Chicago, 1883; Butler County Historical Society reprint, 1982), 146.
\(^7\) History of Butler County (Chicago, 1895), 188.
\(^8\) Worth Township School Board Minutes, Feb. 2, 1948.
Throughout its history, the one-room school meant more than just the school building. The entire surrounding area was an environment for pleasure and education. Every day was a field trip, where students learned by being part of the setting, not detached from the neighborhood as the modern urban school often seems to be.

Although most of the area was agricultural, a few rural industrial sites attracted immigrants from Europe just after the turn of the century. These locales were also served by one-room schools. Redmond was one example. The coal mining town had three sections: Italian; Polish, Slavic, and Russian; and Anglo-Saxon. In spite of the grouping, people of the town were reportedly friendly. Only the Russian families seemed to isolate themselves and mingled very little with the community. Protestant church services were held in the schoolhouse, usually by traveling evangelists, while Roman Catholic families went to church at Forestville. Evening classes were held for adults in reading and arithmetic.9

At Branchton, many Italian families arrived when employment at the quarry and limestone plant was at its peak, from 1912 to about 1924. The children learned English in school, and the teacher worked quite hard on reading. The children of the Greco family helped teach the English language and American customs to the younger children who were their classmates at Branchton School.10

Schoolhouse Buildings and Equipment

The rural schools did not abound in physical comforts, but the limitations of the buildings and the equipment were usually taken in stride by those who taught and attended there. The typical floor plan placed the blackboard at the end of the room opposite the doorway and put windows on each side of the building. Ideally, the doorway faced south so that the windows faced east and west for the best possible light. The advice of Professor G. Dallas Lind, author of Methods of Teaching in the Country Schools, in regard to ample size was widely followed:

A schoolhouse to accommodate 60 pupils should not be less than 32 by 40 feet . . . and include a hall and two ante-rooms. . . . The ceiling should be at least ten feet high. For a smaller school the building need not be quite so large, perhaps in some districts not more than 26 by 34 feet.11

9 Ralph Horseman, interview, Slippery Rock, Pa., Nov. 8, 1984.
10 Brose Thompson, interview, Branchton, Pa., Nov. 21, 1984.
11 G. Dallas Lind, Methods of Teaching in the Country Schools (Danville, Ind., 1880), 59.
Across the front of each school was a platform ten to fifteen inches high. This provided space for the teacher's desk and for children who came forward to recite their lessons or use the blackboard. It also doubled as a stage when programs were presented for the parents.

Armstrong School followed a somewhat different pattern. After the old structure burned in the fall of 1922, it was replaced by a prefabricated building brought in sections by wagon and erected on the site. On November 17, 1922, the Slippery Rock Township School Board had asked the Pennsylvania Department of Public Instruction for a permit to construct a temporary school. Apparently this was granted, for on December 23, 1922, the board examined plans and agreed to buy one Circle A Portable Schoolhouse from the Alexander Lumber Company for $1,407.12 One side was windowless, while the other was a wall of continuous windows. The door, which was on the same side as the windows, led into an entry hall, while beyond that was the cloakroom with one window.13

The stove of the nineteenth and early twentieth century was the potbellied model, an inefficient heating device. Those sitting near it were hot, while the children farthest from it were cold. An early nineteenth-century scheme was to eliminate cold corners by constructing octagonal buildings. Each wall of the school would then be equidistant from the corner. The Slippery Rock area had two such schools — one in Brady Township just south of the present Foltz School site, and the first Eight Square School in northern Worth Township. No record of the degree of comfort achieved is extant.

Beginning in the mid-1920s, the old “potbellies” were replaced by larger, more efficient stoves. Another innovation, a shield of sheet metal close to the stove and open at the bottom, improved the heat circulation. Cold air was drawn in at the bottom as hot air rose around the top, creating a current that warmed the edges of the room more effectively. That is not to say, however, that sitting by the windows was warm in winter. Of the forty-three schools in the area, only one — West Liberty — ever received the fabulous addition of a basement furnace.14

School sites were seldom selected with reference to a water supply. Although a few had the luxury of a well and a pump in the schoolyard, most depended on neighboring farms. The earliest schools sim-

12 Slippery Rock Township School Board Minutes, Dec. 23, 1922.
13 Helen F. Barnes, Recollections of Two One-Room Schools in Slippery Rock Township (Chippewa Falls, Wisc., 1984).
14 West Liberty Borough School Board Minutes, Feb. 4, 1952.
ply used buckets and dippers or common drinking cups. Keeping fresh water in the winter presented a problem, even for pump owners, for the pumps froze. Open water buckets eventually gave way to five-gallon milk cans and later to the "fountain," which was a granite jug (gray with blue stripes) having a spigot at the bottom. This sanitary improvement accompanied the demise of the common drinking cup. Each student was required to bring his own.

Lack of plumbing in country schools, however, referred to drinking water second and outdoor toilets first. These were either two separate buildings or one building with boys' side and girls' side built back-to-back. For generations, the paper supply there was the same as that of the home privy — the mail order catalog — although rolls of toilet tissue made their way into school supplies by the late 1930s.

Schools were lighted in the days before electricity by kerosene lamps placed in wall brackets. There were cloudy days when the light was hardly adequate for close work. The Rural Electric Administration brought power lines to the rural areas starting in the 1930s; lights were installed in the Island Independent School in 1935. In December 1938, the Portersville Borough School Board looked at a $28.00 cost of labor-plus-materials for wiring their one school and decided to "pass up lights for the present." In August of 1939, they finally accepted a $34.75 bid for wiring and fixtures. By the 1950s, all schools of the Slippery Rock Area had electricity.

The orange school bus is a familiar sight on America's roads and is viewed as a facet of only the modern school systems, but busing is not new. It began before World War I and was called "hauling." The low bid of $125.00 made by H. A. Fair in 1915 was accepted by the Brady Township School Board for hauling pupils to Barley School. When Eight Square School closed in 1919, Glenn Studebaker was hired to haul students to Center School for a fee of $314.00. The trend continued as schools were closed by decreasing enrollments or other problems. The Slippery Rock Township School Board hired S. S. Snyder to transport the Oak Grove School children into Slippery Rock when the school closed in 1924, starting a bus line that continues to serve the Slippery Rock Area School District in the 1980s. By 1930, S. S. Snyder was transporting the Oak Grove, Ifft, and Armstrong children to Slippery Rock for $275.00 per month. By that time, motorized buses were the order of the day.

The original desks of the nineteenth-century schools were made of

15 Portersville Borough School Board Minutes, Aug. 21, 1939.
16 Slippery Rock Township School Board Minutes, June 5, 1930.
plain pine boards and had benches with straight backs. They were not very comfortable. Pupils were delighted with the new style desks and seats that arrived in 1896. They were resplendent with black "lacy" metal side supports and varnished wood. These became standard equipment in all of the schools. They were double desks, arranged with the smallest ones in front for the first and second graders. Boys and girls were seated on opposite sides of the room. Thirty-four "Twentieth Century" desks were purchased from Sears, Roebuck and Company for the Zion School in 1917. During the 1920s, most schools received desks that were singles, but of the same general design. Brady Township purchased "76 desks and 12 rears" (seats?) from the Columbia School Equipment Works for $527.07.17

Standard equipment in the schools also included a Bible, United States flag (some schools boasted outside flagpoles), wall maps or a globe, and an unabridged dictionary. Individual slates continued to be used until the 1920s; students of the early twentieth century treasured their slates and slate pencils. Later students used chalk on the slates and usually had a piece of cloth for wiping them clean.

Each teacher picked up supplies at the home of the secretary of the school board, usually at the same time as he/she received the monthly salary. In the 1940s, one pencil tablet and one pencil per student were provided each month. Other supplies were issued for the year. These included one pen and a box of steel pen points for each student, a large jar of paste, powder for mixing ink, a package of art paper in assorted colors, and a package of penmanship paper. Some townships provided art paper every two or three months.

Teaching and Curriculum

The teacher stands at the heart of any classroom, and the value of the education received there will hinge to a large degree on the capability of that person. The general success of graduates of the rural schools indicates that the teaching was successful, but the teachers faced a task that can be best compared to that of the master of a three-ring circus. The position included the work of janitor, nurse, teacher of all subjects, juggler of a schedule that would confound most modern teachers, drama coach, attendance secretary, librarian, guidance counselor, home visitor, and sometimes cook.

Teachers in one-room schools were responsible for their students'
health, and communicable diseases could be a problem. Measles and other childhood illnesses regularly made their rounds. A girl at Glenn School in 1919 was a victim of diphtheria, a serious and potentially fatal illness rarely seen today. She lost most of her vision. The other children of the school were given injections of anti-toxin, which imparted protection for thirty days. The injections were given under the shoulder blade and were quite painful. ¹⁸

The teachers' most basic challenge was to provide education for eight grades in one room. This meant meeting the needs of children ranging in age from six to fifteen, from the beginning readers to the advanced pupils who would take the all-important county eighth-grade examination. Given several subjects for each grade and daily instructional time of five and one-half hours, the schedule translated into class sessions of ten or fifteen minutes. Mathematics classes were usually twenty minutes. Time was precious when each group came forward to recite, and no noise or interruption from those studying at their desks was to be tolerated. In the time allotted, each class was expected to answer and demonstrate proficiency in work previously assigned and to receive the next assignment.

The number of subjects varied with grade levels. Primary grades concentrated on reading, writing, and arithmetic. The upper grades covered these plus grammar, spelling, mental arithmetic, American history, geography, and physiology. Science or nature study was included, as one teacher stated, "... if by some act of nature some bird tried to build a nest on the window sill or a wasp had already built a nest in the corner." ¹⁹

For the nineteenth-century school, Methods of Teaching in Country Schools recommended a schedule based on Groups A, B, and C, which corresponded to primary, intermediate, and advanced levels. ²⁰ Recitation groups rotated so that each level received equal time. Study time for each subject followed the recitation time. This was practical for an ungraded school in which a student might be at different levels in different subjects.

Sometimes classes would be combined to make the schedule more manageable. At Foltz School in the 1920s, seventh and eighth grade reading classes were combined, as were the fifth and sixth, and the third and fourth grades. ²¹ Grades one and two, however, always

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²⁰ Lind, Methods, 37.
recited singly. Penmanship was often taught to the entire school at the same time, as each grade could practice at a suitable level of skill.

Roll was called orally and accurate records were kept, marking students who were either absent or tardy. Records were submitted monthly to the County Superintendent of Schools on forms required by the state. These were also subject to review by the township or borough school board. The state Register of Attendance required statistics on the number of days each student was enrolled during the month, days absent (excused, unexcused, and unlawful), days present, times tardy, and number of minutes tardy. Totals were always given for the month and term to date.

The daily routine did not entirely restrict a teacher. The 1924 teacher at Browntown School brought some geography lessons to life by taking children to the nearby stream and wading with them to find islands, straits, and peninsulas formed naturally there. Other favorite teachers played games with the children at noon and recess, and those described as "best teachers" took time to talk to the children on a personal basis.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, paddling and whipping were taken somewhat for granted. Many parents of that day subscribed to the adage: "Spare the rod and spoil the child." A school that was crowded with overaged scholars might call for drastic measures, particularly if a group of older boys had decided to "run out" the teacher. A Ralston School student of the late 1890s has said, "We also witnessed some being taught by the hickory stick; it wasn't funny. You would think it would discourage anyone from doing something that wasn't right, and I firmly believe that it did." A Miller School alumna of about the same time has stated that sitting in the corner was the usual punishment along with a possible shaking for the more serious infractions. A later student at Branchton School contends that the paddle was wielded when necessary and sometimes when not necessary; there was "a great deal of unfairness." Teachers of the time had little formal preparation for their work, and the less sure a person was, the more likely he/she was to depend upon the rod. Even then, the teacher who based discipline upon fear of punishment more than upon skilled instruction and positive rapport with the students was not very successful. It seems, however, that

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22 Catherine Simmons, interview, Harrisville, Pa., Oct. 12, 1984.
most teachers maintained discipline with a minimum of corporal punishment; many have stated that they never touched a child.

Preparing special holiday programs for parents was another challenge for teachers. A role had to be found for each pupil — a poem to be recited, a song, a speech, monologue, or character in a skit or play. For many children it was their only opportunity to appear before an audience. Sometimes a teacher encouraged students to write a play. Students at Rocky Hill School once won a prize for their adaptation of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol.*

Overall cleanliness was also the teacher's responsibility, and woe to the teacher who was visited by the county superintendent and found to have an untidy building! The Butler County *Annual* for 1923 admonished the teacher:

> Dirty rooms and a lack of good discipline go hand in hand.... The teacher who allows her classroom to be dirty is the type of person who allows things to drift.... The teacher who is indifferent to the appearance of herself and her classroom indicates to all who visit her that she will not take a firm stand on matters of discipline.

In the 1930s, some teachers were asked to perform an additional duty: the supervision of student teachers. Slippery Rock State Teachers College required each student teacher to spend four weeks in a rural school. Capable teachers undertook the professional responsibility of guiding and advising these college seniors.

A teacher who had to be absent found and sometimes paid his/her own substitute. Under those conditions, teacher absenteeism was not very high. An Ifft School teacher of 1917 relates that she taught on crutches for three weeks while recovering from a broken foot. The children behaved very well during this time, but performing the duties of a rural teacher in that manner must have been remarkably difficult.

For what salary did teachers perform these duties? In 1878, a Hickory Corner School teacher received the “bounteous sum of $18.00 per month.” The rate in the 1890s was $35.00 per month, and a teacher at Miller School in 1907 received the same amount. A woman who taught at Ridge School in 1913 and at Bunker Hill in 1914 was paid $40.00 per month. A man at Oak Grove in Muddy

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26 John T. Connelly, *School Annual of Butler County* (Butler, 1923).
Wolf Creek School, Route 8, near Moore's Corners, 1985.

Interior of the vandalized Foltz School, 1985.
Ridge School class, 1912. Teacher is Everett Stamm. (Photo courtesy of Esther Stoughton)

Class at Ralston School, 1914. (Photo courtesy of Everett Hines)
Class at Branchton School, 1913. (Photo courtesy of Lillian Thompson)

Armstrong School, showing its departure from traditional design. Photo was taken after it closed.
Bunker Hill School as it appeared in 1963. (Photo courtesy of George Allen)

Creek Township in 1929 received $80.00 per month. By 1935, the rate had risen to $100.00 per month. At Wolf Creek, $100.00 still prevailed by 1942. By 1952, a beginning teacher with a bachelor's degree might command $267.00 per month. Throughout the years, the salaries of men were higher than those of women. Married women were not welcomed as teachers during the Great Depression. Slippery Rock Township in February of 1932 passed a motion that: "No married woman shall be hired to teach any school in Slippery Rock Township unless the board deems it necessary." 29 Other boards acted similarly.

Salary levels of rural teachers were never high. Many school boards annually set salaries at the state-mandated minimum. Until the passage of the Tenure Act in 1937 (effective during 1938), salaries were kept at that level by forcing teachers to reapply for their positions every summer. Though rural districts were not wealthy, raises of 3 percent, 4 percent, and even 10 percent were sometimes given. When a local chapter of the Pennsylvania State Education Association was formed in the mid-1950s, raises were sought for a number of rural teachers who were facing retirement with salaries considerably below the maximum for their certification.

Competition and drill were two important facets of a curriculum that varied little from 1890 to 1930. That curriculum began to emerge when Butler County organized the first Teachers' Institute in 1855. The fifty teachers present selected and recommended Little Teacher No. 1 Orthographic Chart, McGuffey's Primer, McGuffey's Speller and reading series, Ray's Arithmetic, McNally's and Monteyth's geographies, and Pineo's series of grammars.30 A number of these were adopted in the Slippery Rock area. The Ralston School prior to 1890 used McGuffey's Reader, Ray's Arithmetic, The Western Calculator, and the United States Spelling Book.31 Books in use "when Bunker Hill was young" (well before 1890) included McGuffey's Reader and Pelton's Outline Maps.32 School directors selected and ordered textbooks, usually on the recommendation of the teacher. Worth Township in 1914 selected Gram's Progressive Course in English, Lyte's Elementary English, and

29 Slippery Rock Township School Board Minutes, Feb. 13, 1932.
30 History of Butler County, Pennsylvania (Chicago, 1883; Butler County Historical Society reprint, 1982).
31 Beatty, "Reader Recalls."
Health Lessons in Physiology. Brady Township selections of 1915 were the Golf and Mayne Agriculture, Hamilton’s Primary Arithmetic, and Civics by Maltby. All were publications of the American Book Company and were adopted for a five-year period. Other five-year adoptions by Brady Township in 1917 were Barnes’ History and the Champion spelling book.

As the decades passed, selection reflected a greater number of publishing companies. Slippery Rock Township in 1924 adopted Essentials of English by Kirchway and Pearson for grades four, five, and six. In 1925, they responded to the recommendation of the county superintendent by ordering Myer’s School Music Reader and First Lessons in Geography. Other Slippery Rock Township selections in the same year were the New Spell to Write, replacing the old Progressive Spellers. In 1927, they adopted Modern Arithmetic by D. C. Heath and Company. Portersville Borough made the following purchases in 1931: Spelling from Ginn and Company, Modern Practical Arithmetic from D. C. Heath and Company, and Hero Tales from the John C. Winston Company. Brady Township purchases for 1942 were English from Lyons and Carnahan and Arithmetic from John C. Winston Company.

Regular replacement of textbooks appears in school board minutes as bills to be paid. These entries, therefore, reflect changes in textbooks and would not give a complete list of books in use in any given year. Together they do give a profile of popular texts. Whether books were always up to date was another matter. One example shows that drastic revision was sometimes called for. Superintendent John T. Connell met with the Worth Township School Board on March 6, 1940, to discuss textbooks. He stated that the health and hygiene book in use was published before bacteria were discovered.

The two or three shelves of library books per school let students go beyond the textbook pages. Some of the titles recalled by teachers were Girl of the Limberlost, Little Women, Heidi, Tom Sawyer, and Toby Tyler and Ten Days with the Circus. Brady Township library purchases in 1942 were General MacArthur, Stand Fast for Freedom, and Wagons Westward. The Slippery Rock Township School Board of

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33 Worth Township School Board Minutes, May 16, 1914.
34 Brady Township School Board Minutes, June 12, 1915; May 19, 1917.
35 Slippery Rock Township School Board Minutes, June 14, 1924; Nov. 22, 1925; June 22, 1925; Apr. 30, 1927.
36 Portersville Borough School Board Minutes, Oct. 30, 1931.
37 Brady Township School Board Minutes, July 6, 1942.
1929 bought three sets of encyclopedias for their schools. Miller School and Branchton School each received the *World Book Encyclopaedia*, and Crocker School a ten-volume set of *Compton's Reference Books.*

Each school day opened with the reading of ten verses of scripture by the teacher, followed by the recitation of the Lord's Prayer and the salute to the flag. The scripture was to be read without comment, but Bible study was given by individuals who secured permission from the school board. Worth Township School Board in 1945 authorized teachers to "relieve" pupils of two hours of study per month in order to study with the Bible teacher.

Handwriting in the rural schools was called penmanship. Early schoolmasters not only mixed the ink from indigo powder but cut the quill pens as well. They also "set the copy book," meaning that they made a fine copy of writing exercises for the students to copy for practice. In some cases, there was but one copy book which the students would borrow to take home at night and "set the copy." Over the years came the steel pen point and the wooden pen holder, but the teacher still mixed the ink from powder. Writing was taught in the primary grades, of course, but instruction with pen and ink did not start until the fourth grade.

With the steel pen also came writing "systems" or educational firms that provided their own method of writing instruction and planned presentations for the use of the teacher. Grading guides were supplied and a supervisor from the system usually made a monthly visit to each classroom. The Worth Township School Board adopted the Zaner Writing System in 1914. The same system was in use in the neighboring township of Brady that year, for the school board ordered the *Zaner Writing Methods* and practice paper at a cost of $6.35. The Palmer Method was another popular one. It was in use in the 1920s at West Liberty School and was used by the Slippery Rock Township School in 1949 when $4.79 was paid for writing books. Undoubtedly, this did not represent a year's supply. The most widely used system was the P. O. Peterson System. It was in use in the Redmond School from 1909 to 1916 and was used at Armstrong School in the 1920s. Portersville Borough School installed it in June of 1935. In the 1940s, it was still popular with its push-and-pull exercises and its "round-round-ready-write" oval warm-up exercises. Worth Township in 1944

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38 Slippery Rock Township School Board Minutes, May 3, 1929.
39 Worth Township School Board Minutes, Oct. 8, 1945.
accepted the contract of P. O. Peterson for three years at a cost of $15.00 per month.\textsuperscript{41}

Mental arithmetic was another mainstay of the country school curriculum. Graduates of the system can often amaze their grandchildren or great-grandchildren with mental calculations that some modern students would not attempt without a calculator. The subject combined rapid mental calculation with arithmetic reasoning and the discipline of stating an analysis in good English form.

In the study of English, diagramming was an important exercise in grammar. Sentences were diagrammed daily, and eighth graders could diagram sentences of quite involved structure. Another mainstay was the memorization of poetry. Selections were made by the County Office, and a poem per month was required. Eighth-grade selections for 1923 were "Columbus," "Independence Bell," "In Flanders Field: The Call," with "America’s Answer," "Bugle Song," "Crossing the Bar," and "A Day in June." Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address was also required.\textsuperscript{42}

In all the subjects, drill and thorough mastery were expected. As one graduate has expressed it, "Day after day and week after week through the whole term of school these subjects were served up to us. Drill, drill, recite, and drill some more. There was no fooling about it. If an individual pupil or a whole class failed to recite properly, we were kept in during recess or after school. It just wasn’t any use trying to slight anything." \textsuperscript{43}

In the early schools, and well into the twentieth century, grading was by percentage. By the 1930s it had been changed to a set of letter symbols. In some locations the scale was: E=excellent, G=good, M=medium, D=doubtful, and F=failing. Later these were revised to A=excellent, B=good, C=average, D=weak, and E=failing. Testing was planned by the teacher; however, some standardized achievement tests were given by a Slippery Rock State Teachers College psychology professor beginning in the 1930s. Many teachers began to use the Metropolitan Achievement Tests in the 1940s.\textsuperscript{44}

Rural teachers sometimes tried to meet the needs of a particularly bright youngster by permitting him/her to skip a grade. This move required the approval of the county superintendent. In a school with

\textsuperscript{41} Worth Township School Board Minutes, Apr. 3, 1944.

\textsuperscript{42} Connelly, School Annual.

\textsuperscript{43} R. Thompson McCoy, Country School Life Sixty Years Ago (Slippery Rock, Pa., 1954).

\textsuperscript{44} Alda McConnell, interview, Harrisville, Pa., Oct. 3, 1984.
a small enrollment, there might be only one pupil in a given grade. This person, too, was “promoted” to the next higher grade. In either case, the skipping procedure was not always totally successful. An Armstrong School graduate has said, “this worked fine in the country school, but when we were sent to town school these promoted pupils had a hard time.”

Music and art were very limited in the country schools. Teachers included whatever their talent, supplies, and the full daily schedule permitted. Formal music classes started in 1952 with the hiring of an itinerant music teacher. Each week she made the round of nine one-room schools — Bloomfield, Hickory Corner, Foltz, Bunker Hill, Mt. Chestnut, Dick, Wolf Creek, Center, and West Liberty — with additional stops at the multi-room buildings at Forestville, Harrisville, Prospect, and Portersville. The art teacher was a link with the rest of the school district. She started the day at the main office where she picked up messages and school mail for teachers in the “outlying regions,” returning to the office at the close of the day with replies and return mail. This was an important service at a time when the country schools did not have telephones.

The Administrative System

The office of the county superintendent had been established in 1856. The first superintendent, Isaac Black, received a salary of $300.00 per year for the task of traveling impassable roads and advising teachers who had, in some cases, only recently completed eighth grade themselves. He and those who followed him provided necessary supervision, held a large network of schools together, and gave professional leadership. In matters such as certification and evaluation of teachers, supervision of curriculum, and guidance in implementing the school laws of the commonwealth, schools also depended upon the “County Office.”

Behavior problems had a way of dissolving when the county superintendent was called in. At Kelly School, a feud based on family disagreements unrelated to school matters once developed. Students of the “warring factions” wanted to sit on opposite sides of the room. For a few days the teacher dismissed one group before the other in

45 Barnes, Recollections.
47 History of Butler County (Chicago, 1895), 187.
order to prevent fights. The outcome was briefly stated by an alumna of the school: "Mr. Connell came and settled it." 48

Besides observing teachers, the superintendent kept in touch with the various school boards. If parents had complaints about a teacher, the superintendent came to listen to both sides and to make recommendations. Likewise, a student problem might require his intervention. A Worth Township teacher in 1914 refused to reinstate a student whom she had suspended. He was reinstated only after the county superintendent had conferred with all parties. 49

The Office of the County Superintendent of Schools ended in 1971 when Intermediate Units were created. Each unit now provides educational support services to an area of several counties. The tasks of teacher evaluation and curriculum supervision have become the duty of the superintendent and other qualified administrators of each jointure, merged, or consolidated school district.

To assist teachers with curriculum, the county began to issue an annual handbook to supplement the work outlines in the state Course of Study. This little book was the close companion of most teachers, many pages showing the wear of daily use. The School Annual of Butler County for 1923 included notes on attendance records, special dates, teaching of writing, suggested work in first-grade reading, a minimum spelling list of 1000 words for eighth grade, suggested work in geography, history, and grammar, an outline of the geography of Butler County, poems for memorization, suggested professional readings for the teacher, a book list for the school library, and a four-part checklist for the superintendent’s rating of teachers. The preface of the volume defines its purpose as "an attempt to unify the work of some eleven thousand pupils who are using a number of different textbooks." 50

The county Teachers’ Institute was another attempt to upgrade the professional knowledge of the teachers and assist them with common problems. Organized in 1855, it continued until the 1950s. Originally, the five-day institute was held in December or January, giving the students an extended Christmas vacation. Eminent scholars and teachers came to its sessions to expound the "latest" in education. After the 1950s, the institute was replaced by in-service programs in each local school district.

Professor G. Dallas Lind felt that a weakness of the county institute

49 Worth Township School Board Minutes, May 16, 1914.
50 Connelly, School Annual, 1.
plan was that the program was often dominated by the interests of the city schools, not the needs of the rural teachers. In Methods of Teaching in the Country Schools, he urged the country teachers to supplement it with their own township institutes. He said, "Some of these prominent institute instructors I fear would not make a success of a school in a back-woods district. A good plan for country teachers would be to organize township institutes and instruct each other...." 51

Conducting the eighth-grade examination was an important responsibility of the Office of the County Superintendent. Passing this day-long examination was the only doorway to higher education. Many townships did not have a high school. When a student of such a township had been awarded an eighth-grade diploma, he/she could apply to any high school to which transportation was available. The township school board then paid the high school tuition of these students.

A teacher's reputation rested somewhat on whether or not all eighth graders passed this test. All scores came under the scrutiny of the superintendent in regard to the individual teacher's preparation of the students. Grades for all eighth graders were sent to the County Office of Education monthly. Teachers were admonished that grades should not be inflated. The test was given at one designated place in each township. Brady Township students, for example, went to Barley School for the 1929 examination. It encompassed grammar, reading, history, mathematics, spelling, physiology, poetry, and a sample of handwriting. Each section was timed, and selected teachers of each district scored the papers. 52

The school directors were elected officials of the people, responsible to the people for overseeing the public schools. In that role, the school board members had to secure competent teachers, maintain the buildings or build new ones, order all books and supplies, safeguard the welfare of the children, oversee the tax structure while maintaining the financial integrity of the school district, and carry out the laws of the commonwealth. They were responsible for many duties that are performed today by the trained staff of the school district's central office. They took their responsibilities very seriously.

Major decisions included setting the millage for real-estate taxes, setting the per capita tax, and agreeing upon a contract with a tax collector. Tax rolls were reviewed annually to remove the names of those who had moved or died. There were also requests to exonerate

51 Lind, Methods, 32-33.
some tax bills due to changes in the property. When the Brady Township School Board of 1949 levied a tax of ten cents per ton on coal production, they heard complaints from small coal operators who felt that the tax was excessive. In March of 1949 the board replied, on the advice of their attorney, that the tax could not be changed until the end of the fiscal year. In May, the board voted a ten-cents-per-ton tax on strip-mined coal and three cents per ton on deep-mined coal, retroactive to the time of the earlier action.\textsuperscript{53}

Consideration of coal bids was another major item on many a school board agenda. Coal was available from local mines, and was a necessity for fueling all those schoolroom stoves. Coal for the Armstrong School was purchased from George Reed in 1864. Four loads were bought; the first one of twenty bushels cost $1.60, the last was $3.30 for thirty-three bushels, and the total for the year was $8.10 for ninety-three bushels.\textsuperscript{54}

Coal bids and taxes were, perhaps, easier than mediating some of the human problems that arose from time to time. In 1940, a special meeting of the board was called to investigate damage to the stove, breaking of lights, and trouble between "white and colored" children at Thompson School. Mr. Hogg of the County Office presided. He heard complaints of the parents that their children were mistreated, and he questioned the teacher. The parents were instructed to return their children to school. The teacher was sternly admonished to be on the school grounds at all times and to see that all pupils were treated alike. The case continued into March when the father was arrested for not sending his children to school. He claimed that the children were not protected and were called names. The case went to the county court, where the judge declared the father not guilty because of justifiable circumstances. All involved in the case were directed by the court to strive for fair and equal treatment of all children. In the wake of the case, one board member was blamed by the others for not being present when trouble arose at the school. He resigned as president of the board, but was promptly reelected. The board also notified the teacher of her dismissal, effective at the close of the term, but reinstated her when the patrons of the school voiced their support and asked to have her retained. The children of the complaining family were later transferred to Foltz School.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{53} Brady Township School Board Minutes, May 20, 1949.
\textsuperscript{54} Business ledger of George Reed, 1864 entry. Old ledger is now owned by Clair Reed of Slippery Rock, Pa., interviewed Oct. 18, 1984.
\textsuperscript{55} Brady Township School Board Minutes, Mar. 18, 1940; Apr. 2, 1941.
Frequently, in order to pay the teachers, the boards had to borrow money in anticipation of taxes to be collected. Even so, there were times when the teachers were paid late. Worth Township borrowed $1200.00 for sixty days from the Citizens National Bank of Slippery Rock in 1914.56

School board members were only men for many decades, but women began to run for office in the 1930s. By the 1940s, it was quite common to have a woman or two on the board. These, then, were the venerable citizen directors who kept the public trust and managed everything from the annual convention to vaccination, from borrowing to vandalism, from taxes to tuition.

Conclusions

The little country school with a bell tower is a national memory, a symbol familiar to nearly everyone. But what lies behind the legend? What was the quality of the education received there?

First, it was a thorough education. The curriculum was limited in comparison to a modern school, but the subjects were intensively covered through drill and questioning. Second, it was a personalized education. The short recitation time was offset by the small class size, so that the teacher had the opportunity to speak to each pupil during each class period and to hear answers and respond with corrections or advice.

Some disadvantages had their positive aspects. The buildings were often isolated, but distractions were few and the teacher had the opportunity to order the day largely as she/he pleased. Unfortunately, until the establishment of teacher tenure, teacher turnover was very high. Seldom did a school have the same teacher two years in a row. Continuity of studies must have been hard to maintain, but a benefit was derived from the varying talents of different teachers.

The shortcomings of the buildings themselves — heating, water supply, and toilet facilities — were definitely disadvantageous. By the mid-twentieth century, the schools of the larger towns were also beginning to use films, filmstrips, and other audio-visual aids as a routine part of the curriculum; the country students missed these and the advantages of a full library. Teachers did not have access to duplicating equipment, which can do much to improve the quality of instruction.

56 Worth Township School Board Minutes, Mar. 14, 1914; Mar. 3, 1915.
Nevertheless, the rural schools since at least the turn of the century offered two strengths. The first was a sound basic education. It provided the tools for higher education or for the quiet rural life, and it schooled its graduates in the discipline of study. The second strength was the spirit of the schools, an atmosphere in which student behavior was not a major problem. The personal contact between parents and teachers produced a sense of involvement that made the school an integral part of the neighborhood.

The *Slippery Rock Signal*, in a 1963 article on the closing of the last one-room school, stated, “No matter how far knowledge may progress, it must still begin with the fundamentals that were a part of the first curriculum at Bunker Hill.” A souvenir booklet given by the teacher of Bloomfield School to students on closing day, 1920, has these sentiments:

**THE SILENT BELL**

The school bell will not ring tomorrow,
   It is the last day of the year;
Feelings both of joy and sorrow,
   For the parting time is here.

Many residents of the Slippery Rock area remember their one-room schools with such nostalgia.