Old schoolhouses pages in history of immigration, education, in county

Portage County is dotted with abandoned old schoolhouses. Some have been renovated for private homes, but most of them stand empty, windows broken, doors hanging open, vulnerable to summer and winter storms.

Most of these buildings have replaced the little log cabins which were built in the forests of Central Wisconsin soon after the great sweep of immigrants around 1840. Yankee, Irish and Scottish, they came to this area from New England and Europe, using the same route-steamboat up the Hudson River, transferring to boat on the Erie Canal to Buffalo, then around the Great Lakes to Green Bay, then, either by boat inland, or the Fox and Wolf waterways to Gills Landing at the mouth of the Tomorrow River.

Early day schoolhouses were the center of social life as well as a place to learn the "3 R's". Visiting preachers and missionaries used the buildings to present their sermons. Political meetings, elections, were held here, and often they were used as courtrooms for settling neighborhood differences.

School terms often started about the middle of October and continued for two months, depending on weather conditions. The second term might start in February and continue until spring. Boys attended the winter sessions — they had to work during the spring and summer months. Men teachers were often hired for the winter months — they were better able to disipline the boys, and then, too, there were heavy winter chores, keeping stoves full of wood, emptying ashes, shoveling snow.

Schoolteachers, paid scanty salaries, were expected to "board around", staying a week at one place and another the following week. Later, as salaries were raised, the teacher was requested to find a regular boarding place and pay for board and room. Rural teachers, themselves, with only a country school education, took a teacher's examination, to begin teaching, or, more often, had just a statement by the town superintendent of schools that the qualifications for teaching were suitable.

"The desks were built around three sides of the room, all facing the arena, where the pupils were called out, lined up along the cracks in the floor, and put through their mental paces". This was quoted from a paper read by C.E. Webster, an early day teacher, at a Red and White School Reunion in 1908, which continues, "Sometimes, too, discipline was enforced, making it lively for the open eyed spectators in the surrounding seats, by a lively and exhuberating struggle, whereby law was satisfied and discipline improved. I had a maple ruler, long, smooth and broad, which I carried proudly, as a soldier a sword, and which applied in the right place at the right time, did much to develop a sense of the majesty of the law in the then rising generation".

The first two schools built in the Amherst area were the Pipe School and the Fleming school, both in 1855, and on the main road between Gills Landing and Stevens Point.

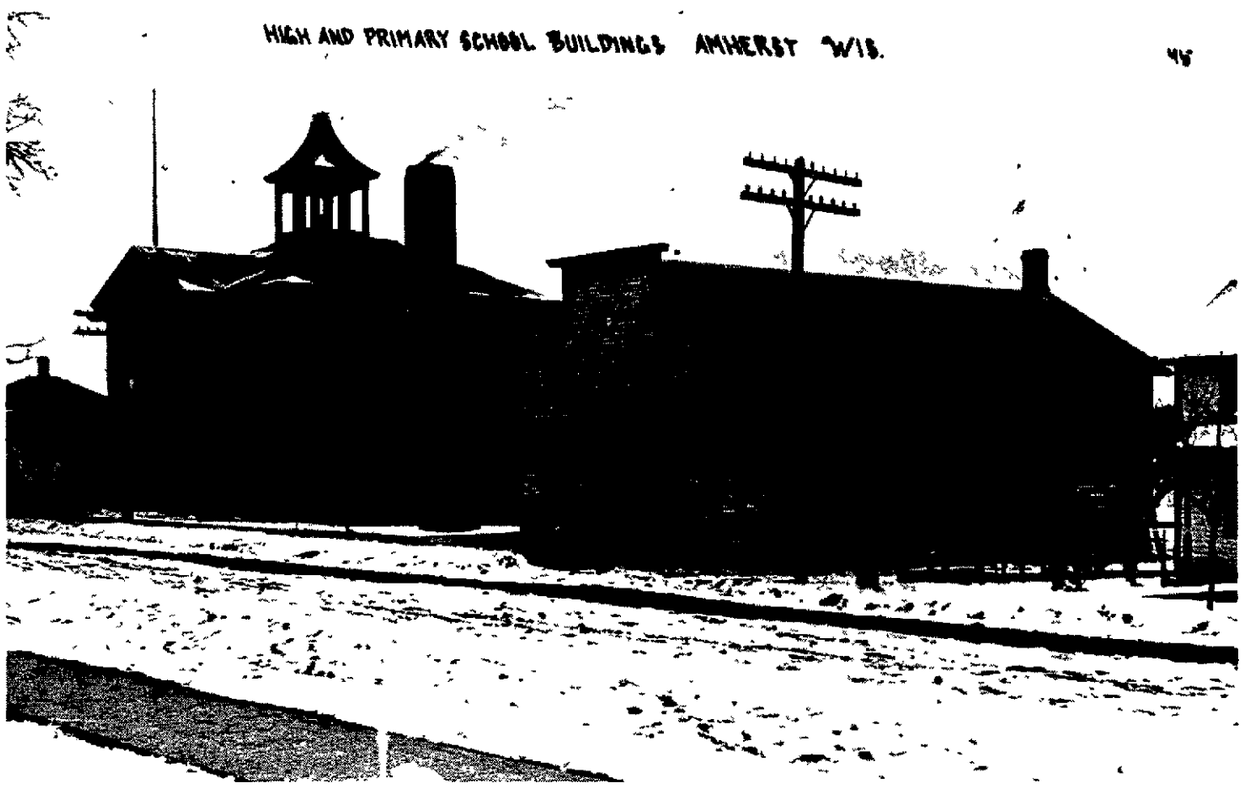
The Pipe school, about six miles east of the village, was built on land owned by John Severance. Miss Eliza Ann Jeffers was the first teacher. Books used were Sanders spelling books, Sanders and McGuffey's readers, Thompson and Davies arithmetic, Mitchell's geography.

Each pupil was to provide a half cord of wood, and "every man that does not get his wood shall pay the money to J.G. Severance, fifty cents per cord", according to Raymond Pipes records.

Two years later, the Wisconsin Central railroad went through just west of the school, and a tavern house was built across the road, after the stage line between Gill's Landing and Stevens Point had been established. The original tavern house is now a part of the Pipe home.

The log school was moved, when a newer one was built in 1889, and it is now used for storage on the Stephen Rasmussen farm, a few miles west. The Fleming School, built on land owned by William V. Fleming, was constructed of poplar logs on the main road about a mile east of Amherst, near the "red mill" or "lower mill". Mary J. Wylie was the organizer and first teacher. Some of the first pupils were Charles Stanton, Jane Bangle, William Eugene, George B. Allen, Martha Wright, Millicent, Willie and Carrie Fleming, Charles Azuba, Augustine Webster, Charles and Alex Darling, Elizabeth and Willie Wilmot, Jane Wilson.

By 1857, schools in Amherst and Nelsonville were built, and in the northeastern part of the county. Fredrich Reinhardt was building a school in a settlement of Norweigian immigrants.



AMHERST SCHOOLS, 1912

Formerly the Amherst High School, the brick building, left, on the corner of School Street and Main Street in Amherst, now houses the Palmer Publishing Co. The primary school building, right, is no longer standing.

The first Amherst School was a shanty about a miles west of the village. It was destroyed by fire the same year. And then the "little red schoolhouse" came into existence on the banks of the Tomorrow River. Eliza Loing was the first teacher, then C.E. Webster, Samuel Alban, Julia Kemp, Martha Coburn, J.H. Felch, Hattie Gassmann.

Jerome Nelson, founder of Nelsonville, was securing land from Johanna Christenson for a schoolhouse on a hill east of the Tomorrow River. The first teacher was Sarah Nelson, his sister. The 14 by 20 foot building was used for 16 years, then a new school was built across the river. This building was 24 by 34 feet and it is believed that a part of it is the Bernard Stanke home. The present brick structure was built in 1904, very nearly back to the location of the first school.

The school caucus listing family names show that the very earliest settler were not of Norweigian descent. It wasn't until later that the development of the village and vicinity was carried on by immigrants from Norway.

The people who came to work for Nelson in his mill and other businesses in the locality came from the East and from other parts of Wisconsin. Listed family names are Darling, Snyder, Creel, Stoley, Mitchum, Joseph and Metcalf.

Friedrich Reinhardt came from Saxony in 1849. After visiting acquaintances in New Hope, Pennsylvania, he came on to Wisconsin and settled in the northeastern part of the county, where, later, many Norweigian families would be homesteading.

By 1857, when the immigrants had settled in the area, Reinhardt held an organizational meeting for a school. He was elected chairman of the board, Sundrae Gunderson, clerk, Louis Anderson, director, and Peter Halvorson, treasurer.

Reinhardt gave the land for the school, a 16 by 20 foot structure to be built of pine or "tamrack", and "the first log to be of white oak six inches thick." Ryer Halvorson was to furnish all materials and built it for a sum of $95, and Peter Halvorson to make the roof of shingles and other needed materials, not to cost more than $30. A resolution was made that voters not able to express themselves in the English language, be able to do so in the Norweigian language. Anna Gassmann was the first teacher, then Gilbertina Gunnertson, Maris Ellis, A.A. Webster. Early day students were Charles Peterson, Jonas Peterson, Nicolina Halvorson, Caroline Thomson, Sarah Johnson, Peter Gjornson, Nels Bullikson, Ole Anderson, Louise Wenzel, Jacob Peterson and Julius Halvorson.

Reinhardt organized the town of New Hope also, about the same time as the school organization, naming it after the place he visited in Pennsylvania. The original log structure is in a marsh on the old Ben Anderson farm. Its original location was just a short distance east of the present building.

A skirmish developed on the location of the Carey Corners school. A long cabin was built in 1861 on land donated by William D. Spier. A short time later, a frame school house was built about a mile to the north. All was not well with this act however. In the southern part of the district, Bradley Rice, a school board member and "the Irishmen from the south" took their oxen, in the middle of the night, and pulled the schoolhouse back to the location of the original school. To make certain it wouldn't be moved back, they filled the walls with brick from a nearby brickyard. And there it remained. When the school was remodeled for a home a half century later, workers had to contend with solid brick walls.

Charles Hewitt was town superintendent at the time the first school was built. Elizabeth Swan, the first teacher, others were Gertrude McCrossen, Hannah Tobin, Mary Cartmill, Bertha Van Cott, Agnes Louis Nelson, Mary Mae Weller, Grace Van Skiver, Maude Lombard, Pearle Clark, Zelle Friar, Emma Bakie, Amy Whipple and Tressa Wilson Fred Clark, who had a college degree, taught his students high school work in the evenings. Later, he became a Baptist minister in Stevens Point. The name of the school was changed to Valley View between 1910 and 1920

The first Polley school was built about this time, for $200. The original building and early records were destroyed by fire. Fred Clark was a teacher there, and it has been reported that he taught his pupils the German language.

The "Great White Schoolhouse" in Amherst was built in 1867 by W.C. Holly Co. and it cost $1,563. Lumber was sawed out by Jerome Nelson at his sawmill up river, put on a raft and floated down the Tomorrow River to the school site. Gunder Wimme did the plastering and C.B. Buck the carpenter work. The first term in the White School was taught by J.H. Felch.

Another little log cabin schoolhouse district was formed and Johan Loberg Nelson was clerk, Niels Evindson, treasurer, John Nielson, director. The board voted to raise $150 by tax from the school district. The log school was in use for only about two years, then it was voted to build a new one. It was to be a "frame schoolhouse 20 by 30 feet and 10 feet high", and a school tax was raised to $250 on the district.

Some of the students in 1878 were Susan and Anna Lysne, Dena Bowe, Mathilda Allen, Clara Bleskey, Elsa Bowe, Rosa Hubal, Susan Anderson, Jane Iverson, Caroline Knudson, Edwin Lysne, Albert Anderson, Pergrin Hubal, Nels Loberg, John Blaskey, Lewis and John Alder, Martin Anderson, Carl Loberg, Bird Scholitrka.

Emily Webster taught in the school in 1867, then Peter Rversla, Berta Hotz, N.C. Nelson, Susan Lysne, Augusta Een. This school, called the Lysne School, was used for parochial school during the summer, and Thor Helgeson was one of the early day preachers. The present brick structure was built in 1913.

The first Amherst Junction school was built of logs, near Lake Emily, not far from a cheese factory, which was located half way between the school and the village of Amherst Junction. About the turn of the century, a two story brick schoolhouse was built in the village, a short distance to the rear of the current building. The current building was erected in 1928 and is now used for an apartment building.

Andrew P. Een was the teacher in 1870 in the Loberg School, a mile north of Nelsonville. The original school, a log cabin, was a little further south. Abraham H. Waller, who served as the first board treasurer, also boarded many of the teachers. Other board members were Gunder Wimme, and Lara Nelson It is probable that the newer building was constructed in 1885, according to materials purchased. The flooring was hauled from Stevens Point by Waller and Halvor Brua. Ole Thompson was the head carpenter, Halvor Waller did mason work, assisted by Jens Aslakson. In 1904, there was a major remodeling. Lumber was purchased from A.L. Rounds for $232. Construction workers were Albert Engum, Julius Grimland, Carl Hankey, Halvor Nelson and Andrew Anderson. The building was now insured for the first time by J.O. Foxen. In 1907, from the nature of materials needed, the school was moved to the present location, and a basement installed.

Some of the first teachers after Mr. Een were Carrie Sether, Susan Gunderson, Dora Webster, Serene Hermanson, Ellen Finnessy, Margaret Gassmann, Anna Lysne, Olive Slutts, Mina Childs and Mary Smith.

The Fountain Grove School was originally the Een school. Water had to be carried from a nearby marsh where there was a "boiling spring". In 1909, John Skoglund was digging for a well on the school grounds when he discovered another "boiling spring." Mabel Morgan was teaching at the time and recalls the great excitement at its discovery. School was let out so the children could watch. After this, the school was called "Fountain Grove." Among the first school board members were John Brathovde, Louis Skoglund, and early teachers were Clara Johnson, Sadie Riley, Cecil Boushier, Daisy Felch, Emily Phillips, Mamie Een and Zelle Fryer.

The General Irwin School, originally known as the "Anderson School," and then the "Brick School," was built on land owned by Tom Anderson. It is believed that it was named the General Irwin school when Rowena Allen taught there. The story is told that the children were studying about General Irwin at that time. Mrs. Laura Niven recalls that it was a settlement of German families, Stedmans. Morgans, Schlictings, Vogts, and that many families sent their children to school very early, so they could become acquainted with the English language. Early day teachers were Edna Lemerand, Frankie Jordan, Tom McTigue, Lloyd Sand.

The first Madley School was built over 100 years ago on land owned by Henry and William Blair, a few miles east of the present structure. A few years later a frame structure was constructed on land owned by Hans Proust. Situated in a settlement of Irish immigrants, it is believed that the name Madley came from a settlement in the old country.

As with all the others, the Hi Corners frame structure is not the original one. The first, a log cabin, was built a few miles to the east. For a time, the school shut down, there were not enough pupils, and the remaining ones were sent to the Pipe School, the Peterson School and the one in Amherst. The frame building, constructed in the 1890's, was built by Tom Johnson and the first teacher was Thomas Sand.

In 1884, another school was built in Amherst on Laconia Street, and the little red schoolhouse was moved away. Now there was a graded school of three departments, higher and intermediate in the White School, and the primary department on Laconia Street. Seven years later, it was voted to spend $6,000 for a five room brick high school building. Plans for the structure, which cost $6,000, were drawn by I.W. Moss. Building committee members were George Worden, Charles Sims and Alfred Anderson. The brick building was erected in front of the Great White Schoolhouse, which was purchased by the Good Templars and moved to the north side of Hill Street. The upper story of this "Temple Of Honor" was used by the organization and the lower story was used as an Opera House until it was destroyed by fire.

All these schools, a heritage to many generations here, became outdated as the wave of interest in integrated schools took over in the 40's. The Tomorrow River Schools were the first in Wisconsin to become an integrated system. The district was established in 1948 by the Portage County Board's Commission On School. So, the little rural schools died, but not without many "death throes." Many persons fought desperately against the integration that they feared would so completely change their lives, as indeed, it did. There were many heated and well attended school board meetings in those days. But it was impossible to stop progress.

By 1969, new elementary schools were completed in Amherst, and then all the children in the district were transported.

The little schools stand empty, perhaps waiting for someone to come along and say "that would make a nice little home."

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