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Book Review

Call School: Rural Education in the Midwest to 1918. P. Theobald. Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995, 247 pp., ISBN: 0-8092-1859-8.

Review by

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The Midwest whose public school history Paul Theobald analyzes includes the states of Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, Iowa, Nebraska, Minnesota, and South and North Dakota, where rural people resisted state-sponsored schooling that originally had developed in eastern urban communities to mitigate the "crisis" children were facing in dense immigrant populations. The problems of the cities did not apply to the rural Midwest in the mid-19th century, and many people resented the schools' focus on such industrial values as individualism, competition, efficiency, and specialization. Another important factor in the early development of rural public schooling that Theobald narrates is his finding that "inter-Protestant competition resulted in both pro- *and* anti-common school sentiment among various groups," and he emphasizes that "rural resistance represents a profound contribution to the history of education in the United States." Other chapters explore the high degree of mobility of Midwestern residents and how schooling was affected by people moving around. Theobald explains the importance of school boards, who both caused varying districts to hold on to their regional characteristics and autonomy and, in aggregate, agreed on keeping women and people who did not own land from positions of power. He also details daily experiences of teachers and students and analyzes relationships among various layers of school authority.

In 1918, "more country schools existed than at any previous time in our nation's history," Theobald says, but they declined from then on, overcome by forces that had resisted free public schooling from the beginning. In the 19th century, religious groups veied for control of state departments of education, and in the early years of this century, landowners feared that free schools "might give an advantage to the ceaseless stream of transients who entered the community each year looking for a chance to become landowners." Male tenant farmers and women were the sorts these male landowners—hence, "community-builders"—had in mind, attitudes that rather spoil the myth of rural schools as cradles of democracy. The very success that rural schools achieved in educating the young who were filling up the Midwest led to their diminution. Rather than improve rural life, as such advocates as the Country Life Commission had hoped, better education encouraged young people to move to urban areas for better jobs. In addition, the passage of the 1914 Smith-Lever Act which gave county agents control over farmer extension programs and funding for agricultural education and improvements, also favored ever-larger landholders, the descendants of the men who had objected loudest in the first place. Hence the decline of rural populations, and with them rural schooling.

If women were late in gaining the vote, women certainly did gain places in the rural teaching profession. But, as Theobald observes, with limited advantages: "As teaching became more and more feminized, teachers held an increasingly subordinate position in rural agrarian society. In the view of most boards of education, the ideal teacher kept excellent discipline, made do with whatever books or equipment were on hand, maintained a secluded personal life in the community, and moved on to a different school when the term was over." Power in the administration of local educational policies and practices was with the boards who, though they might chafe under the requirement to maintain a free school system, decided on the location of the schoolhouse and who might use it, hired and fired teachers, selected textbooks, and might even have closed the school down. This, Theobald points out, created "a community conducive to the needs and desires of a minority population in the rural Middle West"—the population of white male landowners.

Theobald has combed the region's newspapers and manuscript collections for a rich lode of quotations from newspapers, official reports, and private writings, which gives texture and conviction to his historical analysis. There was an Indiana legislator who objected so strongly to tax-supported schools that he wanted his gravestone to read: "Here lies an enemy of free schools." And there is this on sanitary facilities: "During the 1870s, Nebraska's state superintendent of public instruction wrote that 'there are in the state 693 schoolhouses without a shadow of an

outhouse. Shame! Shame!! on such districts.'" One cannot regret the loss of such tyranny of the times as represented by the doctor who submitted testimony to the state superintendent regarding a case of two teachers accused "of having an illicit affair": "'I have this day examined Miss Clara Glumseth and find absolute proof that she has never had sexual intercourse.'"

Theobald's preface recounts an anecdote that is the source of the book's title. While attending a conference on rural education in Bismarck, North Dakota, he visited a one-room school in session. "Shortly after I arrived, a young pupil fairly begged the teacher for the chance to 'call school.' When this was granted, the child ran quickly to the door and quite literally called 'school' to the children playing in the yard. As they hurried in to take their seats, they whispered to one another about my presence. I began to feel much like a county superintendent of old as I sat and listened to first through eighth graders recite various lessons."

Call School describes the conflicts that led to the building of the free public schools in the Midwest, as well as the conflicts that persist in these schools' decline. These inescapably connect to national political, social, and economic policies that so far have not favored the improvement of rural communities that was the ostensible purpose of the Country Life movement. Theobald's analysis may not solve our problems in public education in the rural Midwest, but his book ought to help us understand them a little better.