

CHAPTER IV

A HISTORY OF THE PLAINS PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Organized education reached the Meade County area about 1880. The very first school buildings were made of heavy sod and contained the simplest of furniture. The teachers of these schools were for the most part local men and women who had completed a few years of grade school and had persuaded the county superintendent to give them a certificate. A curriculum offering of reading, writing, and numbers was given in all grades. School terms ran from four to six months on the average. The prevailing salary for teachers was in the vicinity of \$25. Mrs. Rheses Singley describes her experience as a pioneer teacher in this fashion:

By the fall of 1890 there was not feed, money, or work. The last work that my husband was able to get that fall was carpenter work five miles away at one dollar per day. He wanted to go back East and leave me with the two children. I would do almost anything but this, so since I had been a schoolteacher in Missouri, I decided that he could stay home with the children and I would teach school. There were few teachers in the county, so finding a job teaching was not difficult.

The County Superintendent of Schools lived on a farm north of Missler. I got in the wagon and drove up there to take the examination for a temporary certificate.

I began teaching that fall at the Lone Star schoolhouse. It was made of sod with little furniture and was located three miles north of our home, on the

corner south of the late Charley Angell home. This was a five and a half month term and I received \$25 per month. I had sixteen pupils enrolled that winter, one of whom was Charley Angell.

This was a cold snowy winter. When the weather was bad I would ride one of our horses, but in spite of the fact that I would have on my heavy school clothes, leftovers from my teaching in Missouri, with heavy leggings and overshoes and a camp quilt wrapped around me, I would be numb by the time I would reach the schoolhouse.

In the spring I taught a three month term four miles south of us. There I had only three pupils and got \$20 per month. At the beginning of the term I was loaned a pony to ride, but before the end of the term, the party sold the pony so there was nothing left for me to do but walk as our team was needed for farm work.¹

On April 2, 1886, a preliminary notice for a school at West Plains was circulated about the settlement by E. M. Meairs. On April 14th the notices for the first district meeting were posted and on April 24th the first district meeting was held. At this meeting the following officers were elected: Director, E. M. Meairs; Clerk, C. F. St. John; Treasurer, Henry Awling.²

A two room frame school building was started in 1887 and was completed in 1888. Tom Dillinger was the first teacher of the school with a salary of \$30 per month for the

¹ Mrs. Rhees Singley, "My Pioneer Experience," Meade Globe-News, September 23, 1948.

² N. B. Clark, County Superintendent of Meade County, State Report, June, 1886.

1888-89 term. The "new" building was used by various church and Sunday School groups for their services and also served as a meeting place for the Woodman Lodge when it was organized.

The second teacher of the school was Mrs. Rhees Singley who began a nine month school in 1891. Her salary was \$30. The valuation of the school district at this time was \$71,429. A note in the county superintendent's report indicates that \$37,823 of the valuation was railroad property. Due to the general depression of the area at that time the valuation of the district had dropped to \$61,858 in 1897.³

The school was a one teacher pioneer "country" school from 1888-1912. In 1912 the old two room wooden school building was sold and a modern two story seven room brick building was built. The building still stands and is used by the grade school. The picture of the building is in the picture section at the back of this book.

At the time of the erection of the brick building the board of education decided to employ two teachers. These two teachers were F. W. Reuhlen and Ruth Bennett with Mr. Reuhlen acting as principal. Mr. Reuhlen's salary was \$720 and Miss Bennett's was \$490 for the term.

³ Miss Ola Granger, Interviewed at the County Superintendent's Office, May 9, 1953.

In 1913 another teacher was hired and F. W. Calvert was employed as principal with a salary of \$900 for the term. The enrollment at this time was approximately thirty.

One of the highlights in the educational history of Plains was the event of the beginning of high school work in 1915. It was decided to start a two year high school and add courses as the need arose for them. With this plan undertaken the board employed both a superintendent and a principal at the starting of the 1915-16 school year. Paul L. Hensel was employed as the superintendent at a salary of \$970 and Mary Coleman was the principal for \$720. There were no other teachers in the high school. When high school opened on the top story of the school building the enrollment was four boys and six girls. In the grade school department on the lower floor there were approximately thirty-five pupils taught by three teachers.

In a couple of years the high school had grown to a four year school. By 1917 the enrollment in this department had grown to 19. The grade school had experienced an increased enrollment and an extra teacher was employed in that department.

In 1918 Wade C. Fowler came to Plains as the superintendent. It is of interest to note that his salary was \$1080 and represented the highest salary paid any superintendent

in Meade County at the time. The position now pays five times the above stated salary.

At the beginning of the 1919 term the school enrollment had jumped to 37 and it was necessary to hire an extra assistant. The state department formally classified the Plains school as class "D".

In 1920 the Plains school board formulated plans for consolidating a number of rural schools in nearby areas. Before the consolidation action took place the land area of the district was 36 square miles with an evaluation of \$1,400,931; after a number of small rural schools consolidated, the land area raised to 101½ square miles with an evaluation of \$2,120,169.⁴

A number of problems presented themselves when the consolidation program took effect. First, the old building was much too small to take care of the enrollment of the grade school; second, school buses had to be bought to transport the children; and third, several extra teachers had to be employed.

To take care of the items mentioned above the school board called for a bond election to build a new building. The election carried by a large majority and in 1922 the old

⁴ Twenty-Third Biennial Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1922 (Topeka: Kansas State Printing Plant, 1923), p. 42.

building was taken over by the grade pupils and a new \$45,000 high school building was built on a site southwest of the grade school building. The building contained twelve rooms, a full basement, and a small gymnasium.

Eight school buses were bought with most of them being of the Henry Ford variety. Even in bad roads these buses made their appointed rounds in excellent shape. It is interesting to note the report of Supt. N. R. Nyquist to the state superintendent's office concerning the transportation department:

During the month of September the buses operated a total of 20 days and traveled a total of 7426 miles carrying an average of 327 pupils a day. Eight school buses were operated at a total of \$573.48 for maintenance costs at a daily cost per child of 47¢.⁵

Due to the enrollment increase three extra teachers were employed in the high school and four extra teachers were added to the grade school faculty.

From all reports the change from a small district to a large consolidated district was made with a high degree of success. Many schools later followed the procedure used at Plains for consolidating their districts.

By 1928 the enrollment had risen to 110 in the high school and the departments of industrial arts and vocal music

⁵ Twenty-Fourth Biennial Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1924 (Topeka: Kansas State Printing Plant, 1925), p. 215.

had been added to the curriculum. The band and vocal music classes were held in a little room on the first floor of the building. The industrial arts department was situated in one room in the bus garage.

In the fall of 1928 the Plains Consolidated High School became a member of the North Central Association of Secondary Schools and Colleges. Plains was one of the few schools in southwest Kansas to have this honor. It is still a member of this organization today.

In 1930 the board of education hired two extra teachers in the high school and two extra teachers for the grade building. W. E. Woodward was hired as superintendent to succeed H. C. Van Voorhis who had been in the office since 1926.

The period from 1930 to 1940 was indeed difficult for the school. The depression lowered the evaluation from \$2,984,082 in 1930 to \$1,723,332 in 1935 which in turn lowered the number of teachers employed and the salaries paid to teachers.⁶ Many of the needed repairs on the grade building could not be completed because of the lack of money. An interesting note in regard to teacher's salaries during the period is evidenced by Mr. Woodward's salary which was \$311 per month in 1930 and \$175 in 1936.

⁶ Item noted in the County Superintendent's Files of Meade County, Kansas, 1935.

One of the teachers who will long be remembered was Harold Elliott, the high school coach and mathematics teacher. During the several years which he served the school the Plains teams won numerous league championships in basketball. The basketball team won third in the state Class B basketball tournament in 1938 and has proven to be the best team the school has had before or since that time in regard to games won and lost.

From 1938 to 1948 the school had three superintendents: E. A. McFarland, Carl Riggs, and A. H. Bergen. Teachers' salaries came up slowly and the buildings were generally repaired. In 1941 the school entered into the Little Six League with Kismet, Copeland, Montezuma, Kingsdown, and Englewood. Activities in the league consisted of six-man football, basketball, track, music, and various speech and drama activities. During the period from 1941 to 1946 the Plains athletic teams "ruled the roost." The well-filled trophy case in the main lobby bears this out. Since 1946 the school has been a member of the Hi-Plains League with Elkhart, Johnson, Lakin, Moscow, Satanta, Rolla, and Sublette as fellow members. Many league championships have been won in this league.

At the annual school meeting in May, 1947, the patrons of the district voted bonds for an extensive remodeling and building program. Plans for the building of a vocational

agriculture and lunch room structure, remodeling and additions to the gymnasium, and extensive remodeling of the grade school were initiated. The gymnasium was doubled in size and new and modern dressing rooms were provided for both boys and girls. Plains had the best gymnasium in the area at this time and was awarded the district tournament at the close of the basketball season by E. A. Thomas, the director of the Kansas High School Activities Association.

The vocational building was made of concrete blocks and contained a large kitchen, dining room, music room, rest rooms, large metal and woodwork areas, and a modern agriculture classroom and office.

The thirty-five year old grade school building was extensively remodeled and a room added on the west side of the structure. Fluorescent lights were installed in all rooms and hardwood floors were laid on the top story. All upper grade rooms were furnished with the newest type of classroom furniture. The International Business Machines Company installed a complete new six circuit clock system. The grade school office was completely remodeled and is one of the most modern offices to be found anywhere in the area.

According to the records in the county treasurer's office the evaluation of the Plains district had risen to \$4,952,300 in 1948 with a mill levy of 10.3.

During the summer of 1950 a lighting system for the football field was installed, and on Saturday, September 23, at the first night football game ever to be held in the city of Plains, the American Legion dedicated the field in memory of the men who had given their lives in World War II. These honored men were Jack Staples, Joe Flemming, John Hatcher, Donald Knott, Bob Elliott, and Charles Weltje. Plains won the game from Fowler by a score of 12-0 with about 1200 people in attendance.

A driver training program was started in the high school at the beginning of the 1951-52 term with the new Chevrolet dual-control car furnished by Holmes Motor Company. Mr. Warren Peterson, the commerce instructor, doubled as the driver training teacher.

In accordance with the latest educational thinking, the patrons voted at the 1952 annual meeting to set up a special education program. The board of education employed Henry Patterson as the teacher for the room. Some of the children who would have been eligible for the room moved away during the summer so the work carried on by Mr. Patterson was of a remedial nature.

The present valuation of the district is close to the six million mark due to the annexation of a strip of land south of the Meade State Lake. On this land is located the Michigan-Wisconsin pumping station and has an assessed

valuation of \$500,000 which raised the total valuation of the district to \$6,056,996. One extra bus was purchased to take care of the increased enrollment.

At the present time the system is of the six-six type with grades one to six in the grade school and grades seven to twelve in the high school. The average enrollment of the grade school during the past year was 130 and the high school enrollment was 118.⁷

⁷ Adel F. Throckmorton, Kansas Educational Directory, 1952-53 (Topeka: State Printing Press, 1952), p. 60.