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Article Summary: Nebraska settlers considered the construction of a school very important. Poor facilities, old textbooks and inexperienced teachers were common in rural schools, however, until the twentieth century. Very few students went beyond the eighth grade.

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Photographs / Images: York County eighth grade graduates at commencement June 6, 1903; sod schoolhouse near Simeon, Cherry County, about 1900; log schoolhouse with sod roof, District 19, Frontier County, about 1889; third grade schoolroom at Fremont about 1904; log schoolhouse at Rushville, Sheridan County, about 1885; quasi-military cadet squad of older boys in Elgin, Antelope County, about 1900; Elgin "ring drill" unit for girls at Maypole-winding festivities; Alexander K Goudy; Alice E Daily Goudy



*York County eighth grade graduates assembled for picture taking at their commencement on June 6, 1903.*

# NEBRASKA PUBLIC SCHOOL EDUCATION 1890-1910

By RICHARD E. DUDLEY

Few 19th century settlers coming to that vast area between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains would agree with the earlier explorers and travelers that the region was uninhabitable by a people depending on agriculture for their living. However, new settlers found problems for which life "back east" had hardly prepared them. Cheap land was the lure that kept them coming despite the hardships.

By 1890, 1,058,910 people lived in that portion of the "problem area" called Nebraska. This figure had increased more than 500,000 in the decade of the 1880's because of favorable conditions; these were years of progress and prosperity—and rain!

Rain, the *sine qua non* of prosperity in Nebraska, fell in relative abundance; . . . Rainfall seemed particularly abundant in the central section where most of the new lands were being opened—the theory that "rainfall follows the plow" appeared to be demonstrating its validity.<sup>1</sup>

These conditions brought a "boom" atmosphere throughout the West. Yet, a check on farm prices indicates agriculture shared least in it. A downward spiral was manifest in prices paid for wheat and corn, and farmers received small reward for their bumper crop of 1889. Then followed the greater calamity—the drought of 1890. Frustrated, the farmer struck out in all directions. The Farmers Alliance sprouted from the soil and attracted the great mass of disgruntled "venerable hayseeds." The era of the Populists was at hand, and it was to extend well into the next century.

Railroads, prohibition, grain prices, gold standard, silver standard, rain, grasshoppers, Populists, Democrats, Republicans, and bank failures became the "watchwords" of Nebraska as her history entered the last decade of the 19th century. In no sense of the word was it "business as usual." The frontier was geared

to principles of profit, not culture, and these commercial and political interests were to dominate man's thought and deed in Nebraska in the 1890's.

Subordinate though it was in the turmoil of the 1890-1910 decades, education was still very much a part of that era. The people who had settled Nebraska, reflecting the traditional desire of Americans to provide some sort of education for their children, considered the construction of a school of prime importance.<sup>2</sup> In a speech published in *The Weekly Nebraska Press* on April 1, 1876, State Superintendent of Public Instruction J. M. McKenzie summarized educational conditions at that time: "At present there are but few schools in the State in which pupils can obtain proper instruction in any except the common branches. We cannot afford to stand still," wrote McKenzie, urging a state course of study, six months of school, and "competent, earnest, enthusiastic teachers." These ideals were not too exalted, he felt, noting that "other States are fast approaching it; and certainly Nebraska has fewer impediments in the way than almost any other state."<sup>3</sup>

Education in Nebraska between 1876 and 1890 did not stand still, though at times lack of money seemed to present an almost insuperable barrier. By school time in 1889-1890, there were 4,408 school districts in Nebraska conducting school for at least six months, although 2,015 had school for a period less than this, and 444 were conducting no school at all. The state superintendent's report for 1890 listed 5,937 schoolhouses, of which 4,655 were frame, 235 brick, 210 log, 45 stone, and 792 sod.<sup>4</sup> This was to be the high-water mark for the soddy, though in 1918 there were still 138 of these landmarks of frontier Nebraska education in use.

In 1902 when State Superintendent William K. Fowler edited the work *School Buildings and Grounds in Nebraska* in hopes of inspiring construction of better school buildings, he seemed to lament the predictable demise of the soddy:

Very few of the next generation of Nebraskans will have the pleasure of attending school in a Nebraska sod schoolhouse. They might go to school in poorer buildings than one built of sod, however, for it is as warm in winter and as cool in summer as any ordinary schoolhouse, although some of our lady teachers do object to the fleas and vermine that sometimes infest such a building. Many of our sod school houses are well finished, nearly all are floored and plastered, and many are finished around the doors and windows on the inside. Slate blackboards, patent desks, maps, charts, a school library, a globe and an international unabridged dictionary may be found in many of them. The better class of them have shingled roofs.<sup>5</sup>

However, circumstances less than pleasant were observed by a "lady teacher" in western Nebraska as she approached her new school for the first important day:

In the morning we drove to school and took with us the three children. As we rounded the base of a hill, the schoolhouse came into view. It was a long, low sod building with hills on either side. There were two rooms, a school-room and another, where the children played. . . . The rough dirt walls had been smeared over with some sort of a sand mixture and then white washed. One or both coats were broken off in places, leaving blotches of brown, white, or the bare black earth. There were two little crooked windows. The school-room furniture consisted of a rickety table, a broken rocking chair, two good chairs donated temporarily, two others with broken backs, a cracker box and a soap box. The blackboard was a piece of a man's rubber coat tacked on the rough wall. The roof was of branches covered with sod, but almost anywhere I could look up and see the little white clouds floating by.<sup>6</sup>

These were the schools of the remote countryside of central and western Nebraska well into the present century, when money was nearly always in short supply. The inexpensive soddy and homemade furnishings were frequently the best that could be provided.

The town schools in the state were somewhat better constructed and equipped. The school building at Sterling was illustrative of these structures. Erected in 1890 at the cost of \$10,000, it was a two-story brick building with a large bell tower on the front, a weather vane and flag pole on top, and a single front entrance. Often perched on a rise or located in the center of the village, the school building dominated the landscape. Seldom was there anything to break the full view of the building since large trees were virtually non-existent in many Nebraska communities at this time. Even the "outhouse" stood in plain sight of the passerby, entirely unprotected by any well-placed flora.

The furnishings of the town school were also generally more pretentious than those of the country school and much more likely to be of the manufactured variety. In the front of the rooms for the grammar grades and high school there was usually found one or two large unabridged dictionaries (*Webster's New International*, resting in a "Bartlett's Dictionary Holder"); a picture of Washington and one of Lincoln with the flag in the vicinity of these pictures; at least one map, most frequently one of the United States; a wooden teacher's desk; wooden chair; at least one or two potted plants; thermometer hanging near the teacher's desk; some type of musical instrument, usually a piano; and a few feet of slate or painted wooden blackboard.

The students' desks with their wood tops, inkwells, scrolled metal sides, book slots immediately under the desk tops, and fold-down seats, stood in rows and frequently totaled well over fifty. The most frequent deviation from these "standard" furnishings might be a few "Perry Pictures," such as Emanuel Leutze's "Washington Crossing the Delaware" or Sir Joshua Reynolds' "The Age of Innocence," which were hung around the room.

Until 1891 students brought their own texts. "Each family provided its own books—anything they had on hand. Some parents had books saved from former school days; some a Bible or Testament; some books like *Oliver Twist* or *Robinson Crusoe*."<sup>7</sup> Township boards and those of the city and village had been given the right to determine texts at the fifth session of the territorial Legislative Assembly. However, availability was much more a determinant than the whim of any school board. Then in 1891 a special act was passed which provided that the school district would purchase textbooks to be provided free of charge to students.<sup>8</sup> Harry Harlan recalled that event in his school:

I remember when the new books came, large wooden boxes brought out from town in a farm wagon and delivered at the schoolhouse. Members of the schoolboard were there and opened the boxes and piled the new books on the rostrum. Piles and piles of brand new books—smelling just *gorgeous* of printers ink. The publishers name BARNES, stamped on the shinny (*sic*) brown covers. Primers, First, Second, Third and Fourth Readers, also Geography and History. Spellers and Arithmetic, I believe were by another publisher.<sup>9</sup>

The scholars who were the recipients of this new-found generosity were a heterogeneous group often ranging from the four- or five-year-old youngster to the middle-aged immigrant who was trying to learn English. By the compulsory education law of 1887, all persons between the ages of 8 and 14 were required to attend some public or private school.<sup>10</sup> But the law had no provision for enforcement and played only a minor role in increasing school attendance during this period. Most students who attended regularly were there because of their desire to attend or because their parents wished them to attend. Truancy was a problem which was overlooked. Boys and girls were needed at certain crucial times on the farm, and school attendance was secondary to these needs.

But lack of a strong law was not the only reason school attendance was sporadic. Many of the districts were too large,

compelling children to go four or five miles to school, and in some cases there was simply not enough room in the school for all the students at once. The problem of crowding was less frequent in the country school. In Lincoln, Everett Dick has noted, the cry in the late 1880's was "Give us more room," and it was even necessary to hold classes in the statehouse upon occasion.<sup>11</sup>

In 1890 there were 9,029 teachers in Nebraska, of whom 2,612 were male and 6,417 were female.<sup>12</sup> This number was not sufficient to fill the needs of the 6,243 Nebraska school districts.<sup>13</sup> This lack of teachers, especially good teachers, dominates many of the reports of county and village superintendents in the *Thirteenth Biennial Report*. F. A. Carmony of Jefferson County, in reference to the teachers in his county, talked of "a few untrained, inexperienced teachers," and "two or three 'fossils.'" <sup>14</sup> The problems confronting school boards in hiring teachers were those of age, tenure, nepotism, and qualification.

There was no minimum age provided by statute. In fact, many were teaching at age 14 and 15 with only an eighth grade education. State Superintendent A. K. Goudy assessed this aspect of the problem as follows: "I am persuaded that the best interests of the schools would be consulted if this age should be not lower than seventeen years for young women and nineteen years for young men."<sup>15</sup> The common pattern for women was to teach one or two years before marriage. Of her own teaching experience Arta Kocken recalled, "Quite the natural thing for me to do after being graduated from the high school was to apply for a country school. It was what 'all the girls' did, so it did not seem to be a matter of much moment."<sup>16</sup> Marriage automatically removed a woman from the classroom, with the exception of a few districts where necessity overcame 19th century prejudice against wives teaching. The majority of the men soon moved on to more stable and better paying employment. Even those who remained in teaching for several years did not solve the tenure problem, for movement from one district to another was common. Very often a school would have three different teachers for each of the three different terms of school for that year.

"Men teachers were preferred for the winter term, as they were supposed to be better disciplinarians and better able to



*Sod schoolhouse near Simeon, Cherry County, in about 1900. Note shingled roof.*



*Log schoolhouse with sod roof, District 19, Frontier County, in about 1899.*



*Third grade schoolroom at Fremont in about 1904.*



*Log schoolhouse at Rushville, Sheridan County, in about 1885. It must have been visitors' day.*

manage and discipline, if necessary, the 'big' boys and girls, who generally attended only the winter term of school." Women often taught the spring and fall terms, which were attended by the smaller children. One should not, however, overemphasize the discipline problems in these schools. Without enforced compulsory attendance the real "troublemakers" generally stayed away.<sup>17</sup> These problems became more common after the coming of the truant officer and the more feminine staffs of the second decade of the 20th century.

Contract violations and hiring policies were also aspects of tenure. A primary concern of boards of education in 1893 was finding substitute teachers for those who resigned during the school year. Such unprofessional attitudes were heightened by the hiring policy of some boards. Teachers were often inconvenienced because they were not awarded contracts until June and sometimes much later. In some cases teachers were hired on a one-month trial basis or for the unexpired portion of a term on a trial basis at a lesser salary.<sup>18</sup> The "fall term" or first term began the first or second Monday in September and closed the last Friday before Christmas. The second or "winter term" began the first Monday after New Year's and continued for twelve weeks; the third or "spring term" began the second Monday after the close of the second term and continued for eight or nine weeks.<sup>19</sup>

Even with the numerous disadvantages of teaching, it was still a job, and in depression years it was frequently the best one available. It was not uncommon to find jobs being awarded to relatives and friends of board members with little consideration for qualifications. All too often the name of a new teacher matched that of a board member. The most common form of nepotism was providing the recently graduated daughter with her first job.

Originally certification was by the board of directors and included an exam in spelling, writing, reading, arithmetic, geography, history of the United States, and English grammar.<sup>20</sup> It was also necessary after 1858 to have a certificate of good moral character which was signed by a board of three examiners. But, in 1881 a law was passed providing for three grades of certificates. To secure the third grade certificate, the candidate had to pass fundamental exams in orthography, reading, writing, geography, arithmetic, physiology, English

composition, and English grammar. The second grade certificate required passing exams more difficult than the above, plus history of the United States, civil government, bookkeeping, blackboard drawing, and theory and art of teaching. The first grade certificate required passing exams in all of the above plus algebra, geometry, botany, and natural philosophy.<sup>21</sup> There was also provision for a professional state certificate. These same certification laws were in effect through 1910. With this inquisitorial exam system it is difficult to see how a teacher could be certified and yet not be prepared. Still, the majority of the teachers held only third grade certificates, and there is evidence that some were certified even though they had not completed all of the exams successfully.<sup>22</sup>

Though the greater share of evidence for the lack of good teachers falls under those items discussed above, the very nature of the job was also a contributing factor. Generally the teacher in the country districts “boarded around,” a practice providing that time had to be spent proportionately in each home: the more children, the longer the stay. Arta Kocken’s brief description again sets the scene:

I shall never forget the first meal, the gravy made from pork grease, and the biscuits, none of your light, white biscuits, but nice yellow soda biscuits. And the flies . . . My sleep that night was not without dreams. I was occasionally compelled to turn over a cob in the mattress.<sup>23</sup>

Frequently they “stayed around” for a small sum paid for board and bed “and in some cases could hardly tell which was which.”<sup>24</sup> In a few instances the district built a home for the teacher on land adjoining the schoolhouse.

Teachers went beyond guiding a group of scholars through the curriculum of the ungraded school in the country district or of handling forty to sixty students per class in the widely divergent assignments in the high schools of the village or city school. Although this consumed a busy seven- or eight-hour day, she was also janitor and truant officer, and expected to “control” the activities of scholars over the noon hours. The janitor work was more of a chore than one might imagine, since the school was seldom idle and was in every sense a public building. It was common for a church — especially one with a congregation too small to afford a building — to rent the school for worship services.<sup>25</sup> It also served as the town hall and overnight domain for the traveler. Thus, the fact that the

teacher's room was in perfect order late in the evening was no guarantee that it would be so the following morning. And in a very real sense the job went on even after these arduous tasks were completed, since the teacher was expected to follow through by "example" out of school. Educators were always under the watchful eye of the clergy, students, and interested patrons for actions not consistent with their daily advice in the school room. In fact, many school board meetings were taken up by patrons and ministers who complained about the unbecoming actions of teachers. Boards were cautious about selection of those who were to handle the scholars in the district.

Salaries were meager, averaging about \$45.00 per month in 1890. By 1894 this had dropped to about \$38.00 per month with the pay for the male teacher about \$8.00 to \$10.00 a month more than for the female.<sup>26</sup> Frequently, there were insufficient funds to pay the teachers, who had to take balance-due notes.

The local district officers or board of education had responsibility for control of the buildings, students, and teachers. The Nebraska Constitution of 1875 had set forth basic provisions for the establishment of a school system in the state. However, much of the responsibility for the establishment of that system was left to the local districts in accordance with the provisions set by the legislature. The basic school law was still that enacted by the legislature in 1869. During the 1870's as new laws were passed and amendments added, they were simply inserted in the old text. Finally, in 1881 these laws were codified, and since 1883 the important principle of local control was guaranteed by the words:

The district board shall have the general care of the school, and shall have the power to classify and grade the scholars in their district and cause them to be taught in such schools and departments as they may deem expedient; to provide a course of study which may include all studies necessary for a first grade certificate; and to make such rules and regulations as they may think necessary for the government and health of the scholars.<sup>27</sup>

In his *Twelfth Biennial Report* in 1892, State Superintendent Goudy reported on the qualifications of board members in Nebraska. He noted that there were 13,220 or an average of 254 per county in the state. Twenty-two of them were reported as not able to read, twenty-seven as not able to write, and nineteen as not able to read or write. "Many" were said to be unable to

read English. Only 33 percent were reported as having visited the school for which they had responsibility that year.<sup>28</sup> These statistics would apply much more to the village and country boards than those of the city. The members of the boards in the larger villages and cities, mostly professional persons and well-established businessmen, met frequently. Generally their meeting place was the office or store of one of the members. In recording the regular meeting of the Beatrice Board of Education on November 2, 1909, the *Beatrice Daily Express* said: "The regular monthly meeting of the board of education has hell (*sic*) last evening with all members present except Ed. S. Miller."<sup>29</sup> Although an error in print, this is an apt description of many board meetings throughout this era.

The two most pressing items of business of all boards in the 1890's were hiring teachers and voting the mill levy. In addition the village and city boards frequently faced the problems of maintaining a satisfactory janitor; acted on petitions of various kinds submitted by the voters of the school district (the most frequent petitions dealt with the hiring and firing of teachers or with the relocation of schools within the district); purchased books under the provisions of the new textbook law; and handled the mundane tasks necessary in all school districts—sewage disposal, disciplinary problems, coal purchases, enforcement of the quarantine of those who had contagious diseases.

One of the unique features of Nebraska politics in the 1890's was the number of women who were serving on these boards. Throughout most of this decade there were at least one or two women on the boards of most major cities. For example, Lincoln, Beatrice, Geneva, Hastings, Fremont, and North Platte all had women serving on boards of education.<sup>30</sup> Although the law was not explicit and the state was relying primarily on rulings handed down by state superintendents, the general interpretation was that women who had children of school age (though not necessarily attending school) or who were taxpayers could vote for members of the board of education and vote on school bond propositions. Utilizing this opportunity for franchise, women were a major element in school affairs in this period. In 1889 the *Dawson County Pioneer* reported that the annual school meeting of District No. 1 was dominated by women.<sup>31</sup>

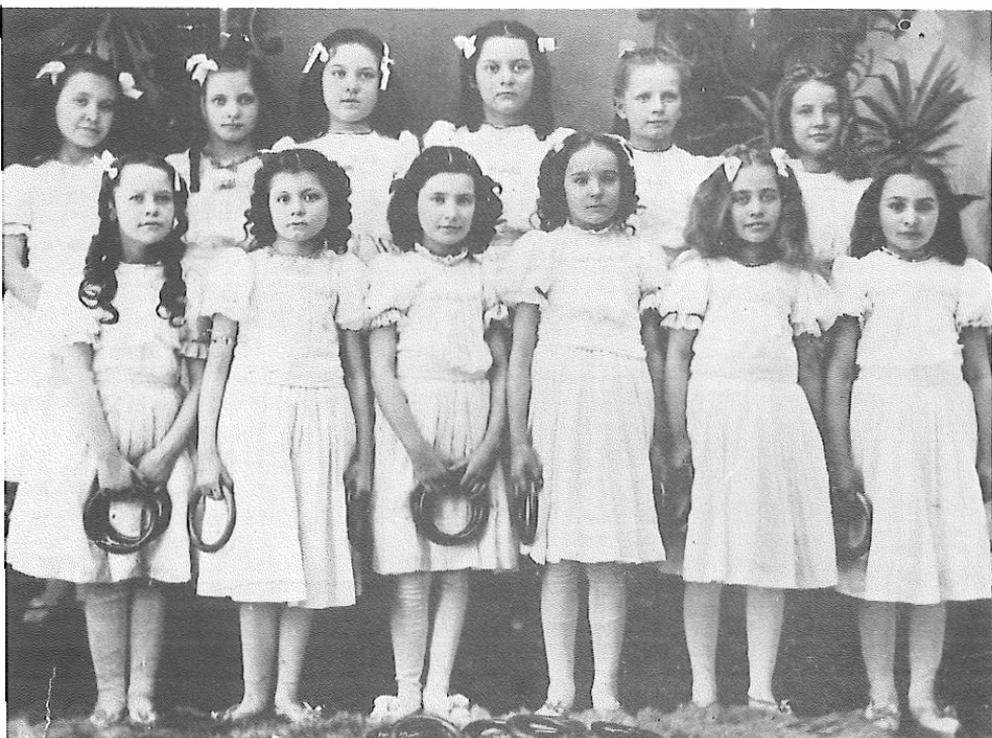
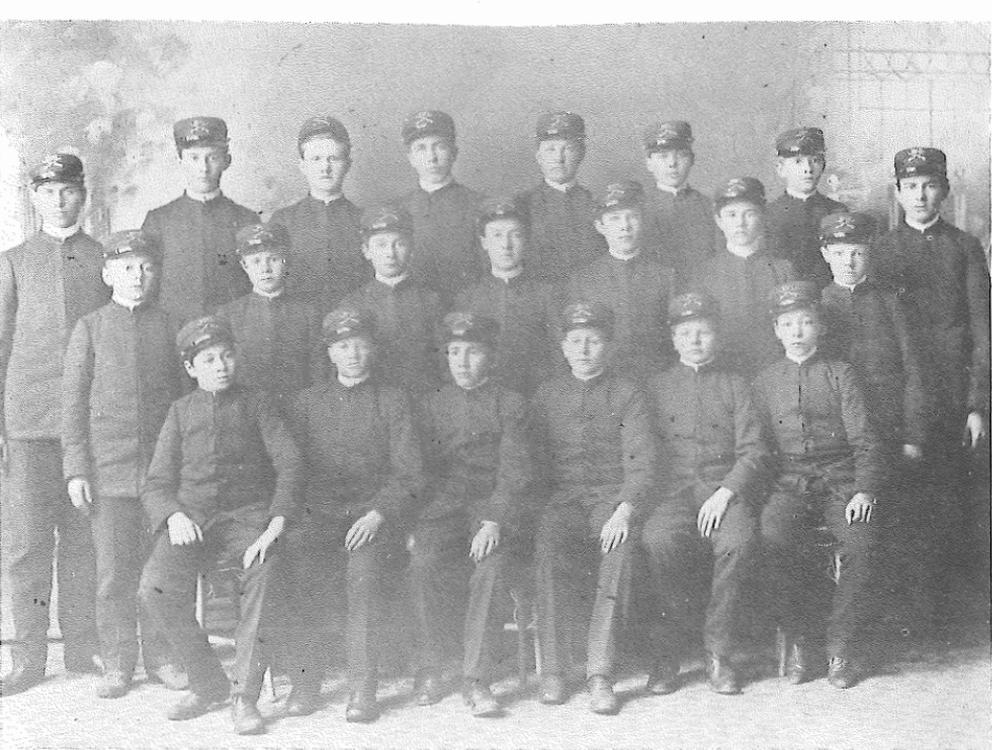
School districts in Nebraska were primarily financed by tax money from within the district, by funds from the sale of liquor

licenses, and by fines paid to the courts. Monies were also apportioned to school districts by the state from interest on funds gained from the rental and sale of school lands.

The *Twenty-Second Annual Report* of the state superintendent of public instruction gave the following breakdown on the financial support of schools in 1890: \$179,338.56 from the state fund; \$465,345.95 from local taxes; \$533,305.68 from fines and licenses; \$6,798.83 from tuition; and \$30,366.97 from "other sources."<sup>32</sup> The Omaha schools in 1893 received between \$25,000 and \$40,000 from the sale of liquor licenses.<sup>33</sup> Under the Slocumb Law the minimum fee for a saloon license was \$500.00, and all of this went to the school district. The *Nebraska State Journal* reported in 1892 that South Sioux City's school fund received \$230.00 from the county treasury and \$10,000 from license money.<sup>34</sup> Quite probably funds were also received either from fines or from illicit licensing of brothels—illicit because prostitution was never legal in Nebraska, though "houses" were not uncommon even in small communities. An article in the *Omaha Daily Bee* quoting the opening address to the Southwest Iowa Teachers' Association in 1896 noted that "in order to support a school in its work of enlightenment and intellectual healing" some Nebraska communities established "a saloon and a brothel to blight manhood and curse womanhood."<sup>35</sup>

Land which the state received from the federal government for the use of the public schools (i.e., sections 16 and 36) amounted to about three million acres in Nebraska. Early the state pledged itself to either hold the land or the proceeds from the land for the perpetual use of the schools. The rent from the land and interest from the invested school funds were to be paid every year to the school districts according to the number of pupils in each school, resulting in some gross exaggerations in pupil-enrollment figures. By 1897 a little over a million of the acres had been sold. Part of the money had been lost or stolen and never replaced. In 1897 a bill was passed by the Legislature forbidding future sales of the land.<sup>36</sup>

The basic financial problem was that too many districts were too small to support a school. Law provided that for the purpose of purchasing a site and erecting a schoolhouse, bonds were to be voted and issued in an aggregate amount not to exceed 5 percent of the last complete assessment of the taxable



*About 1900 the public schools of Elgin, Antelope County, sponsored a quasi-military cadet squad for older boys. An Elgin "ring drill" unit for girls performed at the springtime Maypole-winding festivities.*

property of the district. The only exception was made for those districts with an excess of 200 children which could vote bonds not to exceed 10 percent. But in many school districts the valuation was only a few thousand dollars, while a 5 percent levy would raise only two or three hundred dollars and the average yearly cost of running a country school district was between \$500.00 and \$700.00. Even when a district was able to pass a levy sufficiently high to allow it to meet the school building needs, selling the bonds was very difficult. In many instances the members of the board, who generally took the responsibility for selling the bonds, had to travel east to Chicago or beyond to find buyers.

Schools in the 1890's were organized very similarly to present-day public educational facilities. "Elementary" education in Nebraska encompassed the first eight grades. However, the term "grade" had little relevance to the organization of most of the country schools and many of the village elementaries. These schools were most frequently "ungraded." In others there were as many as sixteen "grades" with general promotions twice a year.

The work in these elementary schools generally entailed study of English language, arithmetic (mental and written), geography, United States history, civics, natural science, temperance, hygiene, bookkeeping, spelling, music, drawing, and in some places kindergarten work. A typical daily program for a rural school went as follows:

8:50- 9:05	Opening Exercises	1:00-1:10	1st Reader
9:05- 9:15	1st Reader	1:10-1:20	2nd Reader
9:15- 9:30	U.S. History	1:20-1:30	3rd Reader
9:30- 9:40	2nd Reader	1:30-1:45	4th Reader
9:40- 9:55	3rd Reader	1:45-2:00	Grammar
9:55-10:15	4th Reader	2:00-2:15	Grammar
10:15-10:30	5th Reader	2:15-2:30	Writing
Recess for 15 Minutes		Recess for 15 Minutes	
10:45-10:55	1st Reader	2:45-2:55	1st Reader
10:55-11:05	Numbers	2:55-3:05	1st and 2nd Geography
11:05-11:20	3rd Arithmetic	3:05-3:15	3rd Geography
11:20-11:35	4th Arithmetic	3:15-3:25	4th Geography
11:35-11:50	5th Arithmetic	3:25-3:40	5th Geography
11:50-11:55	1st Spelling	3:40-3:45	1st Spelling
11:55-12:00	2nd and 3rd Spelling	3:45-3:50	2nd and 3rd Spelling
12:00-12:05	4th and 5th Spelling	3:50-4:00	4th and 5th Spelling
12:05- 1:00	Lunch	4:00-4:05	All Drawing <sup>36a</sup>

Disparities in organization were also evident in education on the high school level. There were two-year, three-year, and

four-year schools offering varying courses of study, and standards of admission were almost as divergent as the number of schools. Often the entire course was taught by one or two teachers, one of whom was the superintendent or principal. In a magazine report of April, 1891, on inequalities of high school education in Nebraska, Superintendent Henry M. James of Omaha and Superintendent W. H. Garner of Wymore concluded:

It appears that the entire number of high schools in the state, with a definite course of study and a fixed standard of admission, does not exceed one hundred. . . . It is evident that the number of well organized high schools in the state comes very much short of one hundred.<sup>37</sup>

In the same year State Superintendent Goudy stated:

Under present conditions, subject, as they are in their policy, to the caprice of every new principal or superintendent employed by the boards, with no fixed or well defined or well regulated line of procedure, the high schools of the state are not accomplishing what they should accomplish; and they have neither the reputation nor the character which they should possess.<sup>38</sup>

The curriculum in most of the three- and four-year high schools was divided into several courses—Latin, English, German, classical, scientific, or some combination of these. The small one- or two-year high school with only one staff member was hard-pressed to offer a single course of study.

The Latin, German, classical, and scientific courses were those which would admit a student to a university. The English course, relatively new to the curriculum, had developed from the proposal that there should be a practical course in the school for students who did not intend to go on to a university. Farm organizations were especially outspoken on this issue. This innovation, though slow in finding adherents, caused explosive debates in the 1890's on practical versus classical curriculums. A letter to State Superintendent Goudy from the superintendent of schools of Plattsmouth expresses the attitude of many educators in the state in 1893 toward the English course:

I desire to state that the so-called 'English Course' offered is only a nominal course and that our entire efforts will be to induce as many as possible if not all to plan for the University and we shall discourage the taking of this course as much as possible. I am compelled to place it with the other courses as a concession to the 'real-schule' element who might object to the introduction of Greek and German. We shall endeavor to make it a dead letter however in practice.<sup>39</sup>

This basic pattern of the public education in Nebraska in the

1890's differed very little from the earliest educational endeavors in the state. It was a traditional classical system that had been shaped by the special ties a frontier state had with its past.

Two events of national import and at least one educational movement left their mark on Nebraska public schools as these schools entered the new century. The first was the Trans-Mississippi Exposition, held in Omaha in 1898. Schools across the state devoted unnumbered hours of effort on displays for the exposition. Considering the amount of correspondence to the office of the state superintendent of public instruction in 1897-1898 pertaining to the exposition and from the emphasis given to it by school boards during the 1897-1898 school year, it is evident that this was the most important extra-curricular school event of the decade. Seventy-two of the ninety counties had requested space for displays, and of the forty-three schools employing ten or more teachers, thirty-seven made arrangements for exhibits. This overwhelming enthusiasm for the exposition, by schools necessitated numerous changes by the planning commission in the amount of space to be devoted to educational exhibits.<sup>40</sup> No previous event in Nebraska history had ever so completely captivated students, teachers, and patrons alike.

The Spanish-American War was another national event affecting education in Nebraska in the 1890's. When war was declared, military spirit quickly spread. Towns organized high school cadet groups, through which the students received military and patriotic training.<sup>41</sup> School children participated in marching demonstrations as the news media released information about the deeds of the 3rd Nebraska Regiment fighting in Cuba and the Nebraskans stationed in the Philippines. The cadet groups, in military uniforms and armed with government-issued weapons, drilled regularly during school time, frequently under supervision of army officers. War experiences were simulated on camping trips during vacations. Although the number and importance of these groups decreased after the war, military training remained a part of the program in many schools through World War II.<sup>42</sup> Patriotic training, which had previously centered around isolated programs commemorating Thanksgiving, Lincoln's and Washington's birthdays, and Memorial Day, became a part of the curriculum in Nebraska schools because of growing nationalism.

In addition to the impact of these two events, education in Nebraska in the last decade of the century was affected by an educational movement referred to as the "child study movement." Professor George W. A. Luckey of the University of Nebraska directed Study Clubs, through which schools were encouraged to carry on research about each student's height, weight, home environment, and other pertinent data. Professor Luckey promoted the thesis that "to know the whole child is to make it easier to educate him."<sup>43</sup> In September, 1896, the *North-Western Journal of Education* placed Luckey on its editorial staff and each subsequent issue included extensive writings on the value of child study to the community and the school. Like many of the fads in education introduced in the last decades of the 19th century, child study programs were more common in eastern Nebraska. Superintendent W. R. Siders observed in a speech before the Nebraska State Teachers' Association in 1896, that the western part of the state, especially the northwestern district, was

shut out from the civilized world by the Alps of Nebraska, or sand hills. The conditions there are not favorable. A large number of the schools are held in sod houses with roofs that leak, if it ever happens to rain. Notwithstanding these drawbacks, child study has been progressing. However, the parents do not feel kindly toward the movement in this district, and several times when the teachers sent inquiries to them they sent back word "It is none of your business." There is room for missionary work there.<sup>44</sup>

The demographic pattern in Nebraska between 1890 and 1910 was one of continuous growth, despite economic depression followed by slow recovery. The population of the state had grown to 1,192,214 by 1910.<sup>45</sup> Even the rather expansive areas in northern and western Nebraska, which had remained largely unsettled up to this time, were now filling with Kinkaiders. More land was put under cultivation each year. Nebraska agriculture had survived the depression of the 1890's and good times reminiscent of the previous decade were returning—at least to eastern Nebraska. However, for that area west of the ninety-eighth meridian, marginal existence was still a way of life. Even though frontier conditions were fast disappearing and rain had fallen in abundance during most years of the first decade of the new century, life in western Nebraska remained difficult at best.

Education in the first decade of the 20th century continued to mirror these extremes in Nebraska life. In 1900 U. O.

Anderson, county superintendent of Seward County, wrote of marked progress in education throughout his county. He said:

Seward County is enjoying educational prosperity. Our school officers are generally liberal in supplying needed equipment for good school work. Our patrons are more deeply interested in the schools than ever before. Our teachers are of a better class than formerly. More than 55 percent of them have taught three years or more and only 11 percent are beginners; 10 percent are Normal school or college graduates; 10 percent have received less than two years high school education.<sup>46</sup>

However, U. C. Breithaupt described educational conditions in Harlan County quite differently. Writing to the state superintendent in his annual report in 1902 Breithaupt observed:

We are located in a comparatively new county, west of that line which marks the certainty of bountiful harvests. None of our rural population has begun to feel wealthy while past crop failures have depopulated our county and decreased our assessed valuation quite materially. These conditions have had their influence upon the schools, causing shorter terms, keeping down teachers' wages and causing districts to use old, dilapidated buildings for school purposes, while many schools were using textbooks that were copyrighted thirty years ago, and are also without maps, globes, sufficient blackboards, libraries, dictionaries and other appliances and conveniences that make school teaching and school life congenial and attractive.<sup>47</sup>

Essentially the same statements would have described education in 1892 in the Harlan County area; but when one considers the state as a whole in 1902, Breithaupt's description is more applicable than Anderson's. This fact is most evident in reviewing the statistical data for Nebraska schools in 1910. By 1910 there were over 7,000 school districts in Nebraska, nearly 1,000 of which had school for less than six months a year and 410 met for less than three months. There were 385 high schools in 1910 which had received approval by the state superintendent for enrollment of students under the new Free High School Law. Of these, 179 were accredited by the University of Nebraska, which meant that graduates of 206 schools could not enter the university without additional secondary work. Over 4,600 of the 7,000 school districts which existed in 1903 were rural schools, and there was very little change in this proportion by 1910. Of these, 489 had less than five pupils, 1,352 had from five to ten, 1,687 from ten to fifteen, and 1,243 from fifteen to twenty.<sup>48</sup>

Women continued to outnumber men in the classrooms and the proportion grew larger each year. In 1900, 7,401 or 78 percent of the state's 9,463 teachers were women; by 1910, 88 percent of the 11,099 teachers were women.<sup>49</sup>

Teacher tenure continued to be a problem. A study of men



*Alexander K. Goudy of Peru occupied the position of state superintendent of schools from 1891 to 1895. His wife Alice E. Daily Goudy was his deputy while they were in Lincoln. Both were teachers at Peru Normal.*

teachers in Nebraska, completed in 1902 by the Committee on Country Schools of the Educational Council, found that 44 to 48 percent of the new teachers remained in their positions but one year; 20 to 23 percent, two years; 12 to 17 percent, three years; 7 to 10 percent, four years; and that "not to exceed 10 to 15 percent see service the fifth year."<sup>50</sup> Mrs. Clara Dobson, Frontier County superintendent, revealed the seriousness of this situation in a report to the state superintendent in 1902:

We have found it very difficult to supply our schools with teachers this fall. Of the one hundred twenty-three who taught in this county last year, thirteen have moved away, ten are attending college or normal school, sixteen are farmers or farmers' wives and have no time for teaching this year, matrimony has robbed us of six, seven were from other counties and have returned to them, and ten have quit teaching or secured schools elsewhere.<sup>51</sup>

Records of the Neligh schools for 1904 show that six different teachers taught the students in the "grammar room" during that school year.<sup>52</sup>

This shortage made it necessary for more and more schools to "import" teachers to fill vacancies. Mrs. Dobson reported that Frontier County was bringing in "twenty teachers from abroad" in 1902. Letters to the state superintendents between 1900 and

1905 regarding certification indicate that many Nebraska boards were filling vacancies from distant areas. This shortage was only partially alleviated by the legislation of 1905 which established a normal-training program for Nebraska high schools.

Low wages continued to be the norm for teachers across the state. The average wage rose during the decade as Nebraska enjoyed more prosperous times, but it never reached the point where it was really attractive to men or sufficiently high to hold women. In 1904 men were paid an average monthly wage of \$55.24 and women \$41.40. By 1910 this had risen to \$73.43 for men and \$52.73 for women.<sup>53</sup>

Determination of the course of study was no longer completely the prerogative of the district school board, at least for the elementary grades. A law passed in 1903 read:

The district school boards shall have the general care of the schools, and shall have the power to cause pupils to be taught in such branches and classified in such grades or departments as may seem best adapted to a course of study which the school boards of any county shall establish by the consent and advice of the county superintendent thereof.<sup>54</sup>

The course of study in high schools continued through 1907 to be established by the trustees of the district as it had been previously. Considering the frequent change in personnel on boards,<sup>55</sup> it is not surprising that there were disparities in programs between and within districts from year to year. Nebraska University remained as the most powerful leavening agent on the course of study. It was necessary for schools to meet certain minimum standards in order to be accredited. However, this in itself created another problem in smaller high schools, where, in an effort to receive accreditation, more courses were carried than the teaching force and equipment could justify. This problem was discussed in a twelve-page report by the Committee on Country Schools of the Educational Council in 1902. The report concluded that the problem of the course of study was the most serious of all of the problems of the small high school. The committee concluded:

It seems to become more aggravated each year, and courses grow heavier and more unwieldy with each succeeding principal, who proves his superiority as an educator by adding more subjects to the course, until as here seen, in a third of the schools the enriching process has reached the point of absolute nonsense.<sup>56</sup>

In 1907 the Free High School Law, which had such an impact on the education of rural youth beyond the eighth

grade, brought a new dimension to the course of study of elementary and secondary schools. This law, passed by the Legislature on two occasions and then declared unconstitutional, in 1907 finally withstood the test of the courts. It provided for free public high school education to any youth whose parent or guardian lived in a district which maintained less than a four-year high school course of study.<sup>57</sup> This law also provided for a uniform course of study. The course of study for the first eight grades was to be prescribed or approved by the state superintendent of public instruction. In 1908 the high school course of study was published in the *Nebraska High School Manual* jointly by the University of Nebraska and the state superintendent of public instruction.

*A Course of Study for the Elementary Schools of Nebraska* was issued in 1909 as the approved course of study. While these courses were heralded as significant achievements by many educators, many districts found it impossible to adopt them. The following statement from the annual report of Leocia Fletcher of Chase County summarized the problems that some school districts faced:

Some serious problems come up with our attempt to adopt the course of study. A large number of our teachers are young and inexperienced, and with but little training. They do not understand how to use it and do not use it successfully without much supervision. Many of the text books found in the schools cannot be used with it. Under the present arrangement of the course covering nine months' work in a year and our schools holding but an average of five months each year, we find at the beginning of each year much confusion in placing classes where they should be. Some of our most experienced teachers, by much perseverance, are surmounting the difficulties where they continue several years in the same school, but by the majority they are not conquered.<sup>58</sup>

By 1910 the course of study in most Nebraska high schools had broadened due to several factors, not the least of which was popular pressure to put in practical courses. Industrial education had seized the interest of educators between 1905 and 1910. The Nebraska State Teachers' Association in 1909 had gone on record in a Declaration of Principles for "such a modification in courses and methods as will the more surely result in a progressive scheme of industrial education, a scheme by which efficiency in labor or living may be attained by those who must begin suitable labor at any time before or after a school course is complete."<sup>59</sup>

New offerings in agriculture, domestic science, and manual training became common in Nebraska high schools. Still, the

classical course maintained its select position through the decade. The Latin course, though not as dominant in 1910 as in 1900, was still selected by the majority of those preparing for college and by many others who did not intend to continue their education. Even the Nebraska State Teachers' Association's Declaration of Principles concluded that the only hope for these practical courses probably lay in the extension of the school year to forty-eight weeks, with summer vacations reserved for the industrial subjects.<sup>60</sup>

Because many of the teachers were young, inexperienced, and had little training, the textbook maintained its dominant status in the classroom. Textbooks were still supplied by the district from tax funds as prescribed by law in 1891, though there were serious challenges to the practice in the first part of the century. In 1903 a bill had been introduced in the Legislature to repeal the law, but it was postponed after a floor fight. State Superintendent William Fowler suggested that boards were finding out that one purchase of books each fifteen years was not sufficient, a fact which was disturbing many boards.<sup>61</sup>

The state courses of study through 1908 at both the elementary and secondary levels continued to recommend that the laboratory or source method be pursued in English, history, civics, geography, and sciences. This method, which emphasized the use of original sources and documents in pursuit of answers to major questions rather than a fact-oriented curriculum, created a need for supplementary material in addition to the textbooks. State Superintendent Fowler observed in an article in the *Lincoln Evening News* in November, 1904, that school libraries, especially those in rural areas, were very poorly supplied.<sup>62</sup> The School Library Law of 1907, intended as a partial remedy to this situation, made it mandatory that district school boards set aside 10 cents per pupil for the library fund.<sup>63</sup> However, even with this law, resource materials beyond the textbook remained relatively scarce in all but the larger schools of Nebraska.

School attendance and holding power were increased by many things throughout the decade, but especially important were the new Free High School Law and the Compulsory Education and Truancy Law.

Over 172,000 children registered and attended school for at least a part of the 1909-1910 school year; however, figures regarding attendance can be misleading. Across Nebraska school attendance and truancy was still a relative thing. Many schools established their yearly calendars to accommodate the work load of students living on the farms and ranches. In most school districts a working child was not considered a truant, at least not in western Nebraska.<sup>64</sup> Where other problems which hindered attendance did not exist, distance often did, and many elementary students found themselves three to five miles from the nearest school. High school students residing in districts without high schools were frequently more than ten miles from the nearest high school. Even when a "tightly covered wagon, with nicely upholstered seats and comfortably heated by a coal stove" called for the students in the morning and took them home in the evening, the problems of transportation and distances remained as serious deterrents to school attendance.<sup>65</sup>

Thus, Nebraska public education in 1910 differed little from what it had been in 1890. Poor facilities, a few old textbooks, and young, inexperienced teachers were still the rule rather than the exception. Most students discontinued their education at the eighth grade if they could hold a permanent job. The few who went to high school still found the classical curriculum the most accepted and often the only course of study available.

## NOTES

1. James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955), 203.

2. See Helen Siampos, "Early Education in Nebraska," *Nebraska History*, XXIX (June, 1948), 115-121.

3. *The Weekly Nebraska Press*, April 1, 1876, 4.

4. George B. Lane, *Twenty-Second Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction for the Year Ending December 31, 1890* (1891), 6-11. In 1895 in Scotts Bluff County, there was one "Temple of Learning" constructed of baled straw and in 1899 the state superintendent's report listed one school constructed of "iron." *School Buildings and Grounds in Nebraska*, ed. William K. Fowler (Lincoln: Department of Public Instruction, State of Nebraska, 1902), 27.

5. *School Buildings and Grounds in Nebraska*, 7.

6. Arta Ethlyn Kocken, "Teaching in the Sand-Hills of Western Nebraska." *The Nebraska Teacher*, IV (November, 1901), 330-331.

7. Harry B. Harlan, "I Remember Nebraska—Heart of the Great Plains" (Manuscript in the Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln), 24.

8. A. K. Goudy, *The School Laws of Nebraska as Revised and Amended in 1891, With Explanatory Notes, for the Use of School Officers* (Lincoln: State Journal Company, Printer, 1891), 100.
9. Harlan, "I Remember Nebraska," 22.
10. Goudy, *The School Laws of Nebraska*, 1891, 99.
11. Everett Dick, "Problems of the Post Frontier Prairie City as Portrayed by Lincoln, Nebraska 1880-1890," *Nebraska History*, XXXVIII (April-June, 1947), 140.
12. In 1871 men made up 52 percent of the teaching force of Nebraska, but in 1918 they made up only 9 percent. The most men teachers employed in the state up to 1918 was in 1890.
13. Lane, *Twenty-Second Annual Report*, 6-11.
14. A. K. Goudy, *Thirteenth Biennial Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction to the Governor of Nebraska for the Biennium Ending July 9, 1894* (1894), 654.
15. *Ibid.*, 122.
16. Kocken, "Teaching in the Sand-Hills," 330.
17. John Wiltse, *History of School District No. 50 of Richardson County, Nebraska* (Falls City, Nebraska: Falls City Journal Printing, 1941), 21.
18. North Platte School Board Minutes, North Platte Public School Archives, North Platte, Nebraska, October 4, 1893.
19. *A Manual of the Public Schools of Falls City, Nebraska* (1893), 8.
20. *Laws, Resolutions and Memorials Passed at the Regular Session of the First General Assembly of the Territory of Nebraska, Convened at Omaha City, on the 16th Day of January, Anno Domini, 1855* (Omaha: Sherman Strickland, Territorial Printers, 1855), 220.
21. *Laws, Joint Resolution, and Memorials, Passed by the Legislative Assembly of the State of Nebraska, at its Sixteenth Session, Begun and Held at the City of Lincoln, January 4th, A.D. 1881.* (Omaha: Henry Gibson Printer, 1881), 359-360.
22. Nebraska State Department of Education Papers. MS, Archives of Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska, to Miss Alice Thomason of Tekamah, Nebraska, February 27, 1897. Hereafter referred to as State Department of Education Papers.
23. Kocken, "Teaching in the Sand-Hills," 330-331.
24. Dale, "Problems of the Post Frontier," 296.
25. Fremont School Board Minutes, Fremont Public School Archives, Fremont, Nebraska, December 19, 1889. The Reverend Jordan Madsen Kokjer papers contain references to church services in schools in Keya Paha County, Nebraska, in the 1890's. Kokjer Papers in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Homer Osterhout, Crete, Nebraska.
26. Lane, *Twenty-Second Annual Report*, 6-11; Goudy, *Thirteenth Biennial Report*, 654.
27. *The Compiled Statutes of the State of Nebraska, 1881, 8th Edition with Amendments 1882 to 1897*, ed. Guy A. Brown and Hiland H. Wheeler (Lincoln: State Journal Co., 1897), 98.
28. A. K. Goudy, *Twelfth Biennial Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction to the Governor of Nebraska for the Biennium Ending December 31, 1892* (Lincoln: Jacob North & Co., 1893), 62.
29. *Beatrice* (Nebraska) *Daily Express*, November 2, 1909, 1.

30. For additional data regarding the role of Nebraska women in local politics see Thomas Chalmer Coulter, "A History of Woman Suffrage in Nebraska, 1856-1920" (Doctor's dissertation, Ohio State University, 1967), 108-142. There was at least one woman city superintendent in the 1890's. Miss Eoline Clark of Fremont was elected to fill an unexpired term in 1892. Fremont School Board Minutes, Fremont Public School Archives, Fremont, Nebraska, February 9, 1892. Many county superintendents were women.

31. *Dawson County Pioneer* (Lexington, Nebraska), June 29, 1889, 1.

32. Lane, *Twenty-Second Annual Report*, 6-11.

33. *Omaha Daily Bee*, December 20, 1893, 4.

34. *Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln), December 11, 1892, 5.

35. *Omaha Daily Bee*, April 4, 1896, 6.

36. Nebraska State Board of Agriculture, Department of Publicity, *Nebraska as a State—Part Two—Twenty Year Period 1887-1907* (Lincoln), 5.

36a. Wiltse, *History of School District No. 50*, 24-25.

37. *The North-Western Journal of Education* (April, 1891), 254-255.

38. Goudy, *Twelfth Biennial Report*, 11-12.

39. State Department of Education Papers, Box 224, Material on Committee on Accredited Schools. See also Charles Arnot Papers in home of Mr. and Mrs. James Arnot, Lincoln, Nebraska.

40. State Department of Education Papers, Group 16. State Superintendent William R. Jackson was designated coordinator of the Nebraska Education exhibit for the Trans-Mississippi Exposition. His correspondence file for 1897-1898 contains over 1,000 letters concerning the exposition.

41. State Department of Education Papers, Group 16. See especially William R. Jackson Correspondence for 1898. See also *Fremont Daily Herald*, January 4, 1895, which credited Omaha with being the first city in the United States to take advantage of the high school cadet law.

42. See, for example, North Platte School Board Minutes, February 1, 1910.

43. *Nebraska State Journal*, December 30, 1896, 8.

44. *Ibid.*, 6.

45. *Thirteenth Census of the United States taken in the year 1910*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), I, 26. Reference is made to 1910 because it is cited by James Olson as marking the demise of the Populist Party.

46. William R. Jackson, *Sixteenth Biennial Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction to the Governor of the State of Nebraska, January 1, 1901* (Fremont, Nebraska: *Fremont Tribune*, 1901), 276.

47. William K. Fowler, *Seventeenth Biennial Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction to the Governor of the State of Nebraska* (Lincoln: Woodruff-Collins Printing Co., 1903), II, 838.

48. E. C. Bishop, *Twenty-First Biennial Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction to the Governor of the State of Nebraska* (1910), X, 108-110. Fowler, *Seventeenth Biennial Report*, I, 408.

49. Jackson, *Sixteenth Biennial Report*, 260. Bishop, *Twenty-First Biennial Report*, 108-110.

50. Minutes of the Educational Council of the State of Nebraska (Archives of the Nebraska State Education Association, Lincoln, Nebraska), 118.

51. Fowler, *Seventeenth Biennial Report*, II, 834.

52. *The Antelope County Schools* (N.P.: April, 1904).

53. William K. Fowler, *Eighteenth Biennial Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction to the Governor of the State of Nebraska* (York, Nebraska: York Times Print, 1905), ix-xiv. Bishop, *Twenty-First Biennial Report*, 108-110. A notation in the 1901 North Platte School Board minutes indicates the janitor's salary was \$60.00 per month, which exceeded the pay of twenth-three of the thirty-one teachers on the staff. North Platte School Board Minutes, (North Platte Public School Archives, North Platte, Nebraska), September, 1901.

54. *School Laws of Nebraska as Revised and Amended in 1903* (Lincoln: Jacob North and Company, 1903), 37.

55. State Superintendent Fowler in the *Seventeenth Biennial Report* indicated that 6,000 to 7,000 of the states 22,000 district officers were new each year. This rate of turnover of nearly one-third may have been true of the country districts, but this was not the case in the town schools. In fact, there was surprising stability on the boards in Grand Island, Hastings, Crete, Lincoln, Omaha, North Platte, Holdrege, McCook, Beatrice, Fremont, and Columbus.

56. *Minutes of the Educational Council of the State of Nebraska* (Archives, Nebraska State Education Association, Lincoln, Nebraska), 118.

57. *Laws—Joint Resolutions, Appropriations and Memorials, Passed by the Legislature of the State of Nebraska at the Thirtieth Session When Convened at the City of Lincoln, Nebraska, January 1, and Adjourned April 4, A.D. 1907* (Lincoln: Woodruff-Collings Printing Co., 1907), 402.

58. Bishop, *Twenty-First Biennial Report*, 538.

59. *Nebraska State Teachers' Association Minutes*, 1909 General Session, 427.

60. *Ibid.*

61. Fowler, *Eighteenth Biennial Report*, 79.

62. *Lincoln Evening News*, November, 1904, 2.

63. *Omaha Bee*, April 22, 1907, 1. The 1907 Legislature passed several key educational measures. Among these were the library law; the free high school law which was held up in the courts; a law enlarging the scope and increasing the number of junior normal schools; a law providing for normal training in the high schools; a law providing state aid to weak districts by appropriating \$50,000 from which a school could get funds not to exceed \$120.00 a year if it could not afford school for seven months a year in the first eight grades; a law making the minimum entrance requirement to state normal schools a two-year high school education or its equivalent; and a law raising the standard of certification of teachers by private and denominational schools by providing for more rigid inspection by the state board of examiners of life certificate candidates.

64. Fowler, *Seventeenth Biennial Report*, II, 860. A. Softly, county superintendent of Perkins County, indicated there had not been a single case of truancy reported for three years. However, he described their school terms as short, coming in the fall and winter when cattle required less herding.

65. *The Lincoln Daily Evening News*, February 13, 1909, 6.