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Article Summary: Strained relations between public school leaders and university administrators and faculty led to the creation of the Nebraska Schoolmasters Club. The club insisted upon the autonomy of Teachers College, a way of influencing the university's preparation of secondary school teachers.

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Photographs / Images: club founding members Charles E Bessey, G W A Luckey, David B Perry

NEBRASKA HISTORY

The Nebraska Schoolmasters Club, The First Quarter Century

BY R. MCLARAN SAWYER

Until nearly the end of the 19th century, the Nebraska State Teachers Association was the recognized spokesman for professional educators in the state. During its early history the teachers' organization had included among its active members and officers not only those associated with elementary and secondary schools but also faculty and administrators from the University of Nebraska and the other institutions of higher education in the state. By the last decade of the 19th century, however, those involved in higher education had largely withdrawn from membership in the Nebraska State Teachers Association. Those affiliated with colleges and universities throughout the nation were forming associations which focused their attention on problems of higher education. The increasingly professional professorate was forming organizations which centered on considerations of their academic specializations. These changes did not indicate a loss of interest in the public schools but rather a growing maturity and academic specialization in the nation's colleges and universities.

At the time of the annual meeting of the Nebraska Teachers Association, at Lincoln in December, 1898, the desirability of a new organization to provide a forum for the discussion of state educational issues by a small select group was recognized. One long standing educational problem was that of bridging the gap between the public schools and the institutions of higher education. As other land-grant universities, the University of Nebraska operated a secondary school from 1871 to 1897. The Latin School, as it was called, was at best a poor substitute for an adequate system of local high schools. University faculty often opposed the operation of the Latin School because they believed that it consumed needed financial resources vital for the development of the collegiate programs. Many public school leaders believed that the existence of the

Latin School had retarded development of public high schools by local school boards. The closing of the Latin School was a partial solution to improving the relations between school leaders and the university administration and faculty.

Also in 1897, the University of Nebraska Board of Regents appointed J. W. Crabtree as the University of Nebraska inspector of accredited schools. At the time of his appointment, Crabtree was principal of the high school at Beatrice. It was a wise decision of the university administration to develop a new relationship with the high schools of the state through a person so popular with secondary teachers, principals, and superintendents. In his first report as university inspector of accredited schools, Crabtree recognized a past conflict which had divided the educational leadership in Nebraska:

The schools in the eastern part of the state have objected all along to our doing preparatory work, and now that there is a good educational center in nearly every portion of the West represented in a good high school, the school men of that portion of the state are not likely to make further demands for preparatory work at the University.¹

The relationship between the University of Nebraska administration and faculty with the public school leaders of the state was strained. Crabtree recalled the period as one in which, "Fully half of the leading superintendents of the state were in a more or less rebellious state of mind towards the University because of what was termed University domination and University dictation."²

To confront this critical estrangement between the leaders of the public schools and the state university a small group met on the evening of December 27, 1898, in Lincoln, to seek better harmony among those engaged in educational work in Nebraska. The proposal was made that a small select organization be founded which would provide leadership and direction for the state's education profession. The inspiration for the proposed organization was the new School Masters' Club of Colorado which seemed to J. W. Crabtree as a model for Nebraskans to follow. Crabtree as the inspector of accredited schools for the state university was the ideal person to promote the idea of the club. At the time of his appointment to the university staff, Chancellor George E. MacLean had written him, "We must have a builder like yourself in that position."³

In addition to Crabtree, the founding members of the Nebraska Schoolmasters' Club were: from the University of Nebraska, Chancellor George E. MacLean; Dr. Lucius A. Sherman, who as a professor of English literature was well known for his excellent teaching and as the author of the widely used textbook; Dr. Charles E. Bessey, the famous botanist and sometime university administrator; Dr. Henry B. Ward, professor of zoology; Dr. A. Ross Hill, professor of psychology; and Dr. George W. A. Luckey, professor of pedagogy. Presidents David B. Perry of Doane College and J. A. Beattie of the State Normal School at Peru also represented higher education among the club's founders. The public schools were represented by: State Superintendent of Public Instruction W. R. Jackson; Superintendent of the Lincoln Public Schools J. F. Saylor; Superintendent of Schools A. A. (Major) Reed of Crete; Superintendent of Schools J. W. Dinsmore of Beatrice; Superintendent of Schools Carroll G. Pearse of Omaha. The other founding members were Principal A. H. Waterhouse of Lincoln High School, and Editor and Publisher John H. Miller of the *Northwestern Journal of Education*.

While all the founding members of the club did not remain in Nebraska, they did make major contributions to the nation's educational institutions. Dr. Hill later became president of the University of Missouri. A. A. Reed pioneered the development of the academic extension program at the University of Nebraska which became internationally recognized. J. W. Crabtree later served as state superintendent of public instruction, president of the State Normal School at Peru and as secretary of the National Education Association from 1917 until his retirement in 1934.

The 16 charter members of the Nebraska Schoolmasters' Club agreed upon a membership limit of 25 members. Admission was by invitation and approval of the membership. By the time of the second meeting of the club, an additional nine names were approved for membership, and the limit was reached. The small size of the membership and extreme exclusiveness of the club caused some criticism of the organization. In 1907 the Schoolmasters' Club increased its membership to 100.

In June, 1908, J. W. Crabtree answered the charges of exclusiveness in an article published in *The Nebraska Teacher*.

He believed that those who leveled the charge of clannishness against the state's educational leadership were in error.

Nebraska educators show a genuine interest in each others welfare. . . . While one man observing this absolute harmony in the ranks of Nebraska schoolmen speaks approvingly of it as "a most commendable fraternal spirit," another making the same observation condemns it as a detestable species of clannishness greatly hampering the progress of our schools.⁴

Even if one were willing to call this fraternal spirit among leading educators as clannishness, Crabtree believed much good came from it, since the group "stands for the best."⁵ To the charge that the Club controlled the hiring of key principalships and superintendencies in Nebraska his reply was:

It is certain that Nebraska educators are not trying to cut each others throats. There is no jealous rivalry here, no unfair advantages taken where several Nebraska men are seeking promotion to the same place, no undermining or assisting in ousting someone to make an opening for self or someone else. Still better, Nebraska educators render positive assistance to each other to an extent hardly known elsewhere.⁶

Clearly the Schoolmasters' Club believed that their club represented the highest levels of professionalism in education and that they operated to improve the public schools of Nebraska. In November, 1919, the club again amended its rules to permit a maximum membership of 150.

By the early 1920s the membership of the Nebraska Schoolmasters' Club was divided into several major components. Some 30 percent were city or county school superintendents; 26 percent were either assistant city superintendents, supervisors, school principals or teachers; 17 percent were faculty members at the University of Nebraska, and 14 percent were professors at the state normal schools. The remaining 13 percent were representatives of those from private educational institutions and the office of the state superintendent of public instruction.

The rules of the club were short and uncomplicated:

1. The purpose of the Nebraska Schoolmasters' Club is to promote good-fellowship by the discussion of educational questions around occasional dinner tables.

2. The membership is limited to one hundred fifty active members, and such associate and honorary members in addition thereto as may, from time to time, be received into the membership of the Club.

3. An active member shall be one who is actively engaged in public or private school work in the state, and only active and honorary members shall be eligible to hold office and to participate in the business meetings of the Club.

4. An associate member shall be one not actively engaged in public or private school work who is a resident of the state.

5. An honorary member shall be one who is received into the Club as such, shall be exempt from all dues, and shall be privileged to attend the dinners of the Club, with or without invitation, as the guest of the Club.

6. An active member who shall cease to be eligible as an active member shall forfeit his membership or become an associate member on the favorable report of the committee on membership: Provided, that this rule shall not be retro-active in its application to those who are members of the Club on the date of adoption of this rule. All such may continue as active members of the Club, unless they select on their own motion to become associate members in which event their names shall be transferred by the secretary to the list of associate members.

7. The officers shall be a president and a secretary-treasurer, who shall constitute the executive and program committee. These officers shall be elected at the last meeting of the school year and shall serve until the election of their successors.

8. In addition to the above officers there shall be a committee on membership composed of the president of the Club as chairman, and four active members to be selected annually by election at the last meeting of each year.

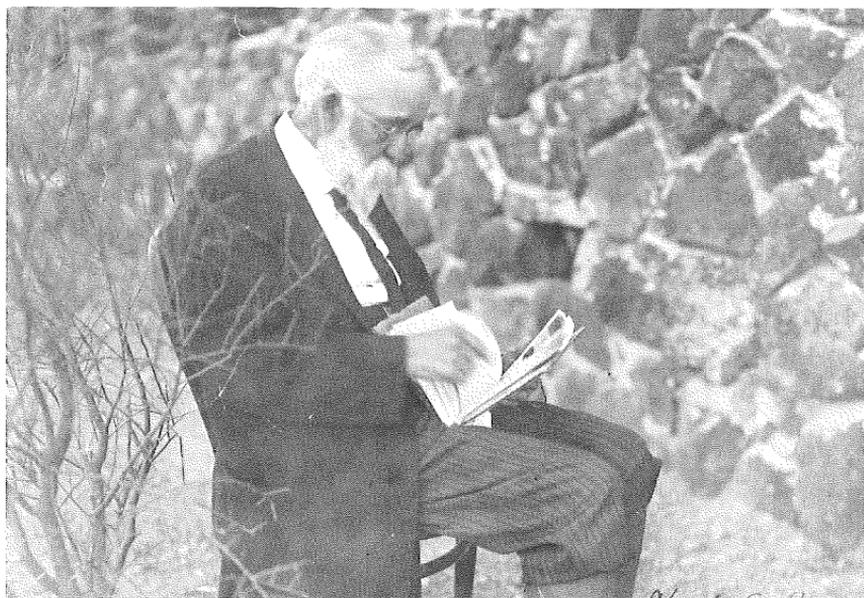
9. The committee on membership shall have full power to select all new members of the club,—active, associate, and honorary,—and it may report at any business meeting of the Club the names of the persons whom it has selected as members, and it shall be the duty of the secretary to notify each person, whose name shall have been so reported by the committee, that he has been received into membership of the Club in the class designated. Provided, that no person shall be selected by the committee nor reported by it to the Club who has not received the unanimous invitation of the committee to become a member of the Club.

10. The details of each succeeding meeting shall be determined by a majority vote at the preceding meeting.

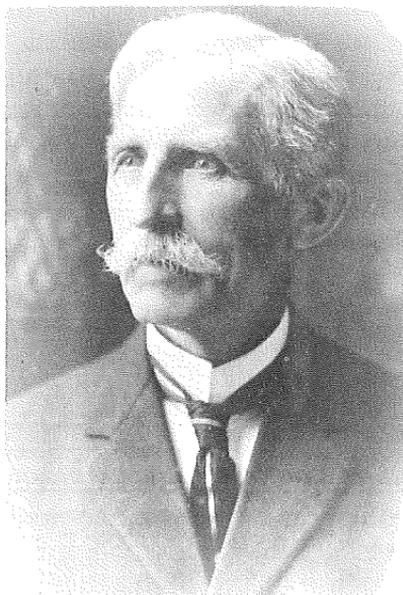
11. The regular membership dues of all active and associate members shall be \$2.00, payable at the first meeting of each year, or upon notice by the secretary. All other expenses shall be borne equally by all members, provided, however, that absent members who give twenty-four hours' notice to the secretary shall not be required to pay for plates.

12. Subject to the approval of the executive committee any member may, at his own expense for plates, bring with him guests to the meeting.

13. The Club, by a two-thirds vote of those present, may invite guests to



*Founding members of the Schoolmasters Club: Charles E. Bessey. . .
(Below left) G. W. A. Luckey. . . .David B. Perry.*



any future meeting. In case of an emergency the executive committee may extend an invitation to any prominent educator or public man who may be temporarily in the city at the date of the meeting. The executive committee is also authorized at their discretion to call a meeting of the Club in order to receive or entertain any distinguished men temporarily in the city.

14. Any member, who is not present at least at one of the meetings of the year, unless excused by the Club, or who has not paid his annual dues, shall have his name dropped from the membership roll of the Club, at the end of the year. This rule shall not apply to honorary members.⁷

By the early years of the decade of the 1920s, the prestige and influence of the club was great in the shaping of educational policy in Nebraska. In 1927 the organization's membership included nearly all of the recognized educational leaders in the state; to be a member was a recognition of one's leadership role. The membership included the state superintendent of public instruction and his chief assistants, the president and secretary of the Nebraska State Teachers' Association, the president of the Nebraska Superintendents' and Principals' Association and five of the six presidents of the state teachers district organizations, and the superintendents of the large school districts of the state. The club was in a most powerful position.

The issue which marshaled the power and influence of the Nebraska Schoolmasters' Club was the control of the preparation of secondary school teachers at the University of Nebraska. Harry H. Reimund, a member of the club and superintendent of schools at Tekamah, joined the battle at the meeting of the high school section of the Nebraska State Teachers' Association in 1920. His address was entitled, "The Value to the High Schools of Nebraska of an Autonomous Teachers College in the State University." The speech was not a surprise to the university leadership, the text having been made available to Chancellor Avery and Dean Sealock of Teachers College. Avery had been a member of the Schoolmasters' Club since 1908 and Sealock since coming to the university to be dean in 1921.

Superintendent Reimund charged that, "Our young men and women have been graduated from the regular four-year course in the Arts and Sciences College and have been turned loose on the high schools of the state to get their training at the expense of the high school students."⁸ He further stated that

“the devotee of the humanities has been prone to cling to the idea that special preparation for teaching is not necessary. That is to say he believes that if one has a high degree of scholarship the teaching will somehow take care of itself.”⁹ Control of the degree requirements, the number and content of teaching methods classes, and the supervision of secondary school level student teaching by the academic departments of the university’s College of Arts and Sciences was regarded by the leaders of public secondary education as a serious impediment to the development of a professional corps of high school teachers in Nebraska. This concern regarding the control of the preparation of secondary school teachers was not limited to Nebraska. Nationally, educational leaders sought control over the academic preparation of those seeking to enter the teaching profession. They believed that if public school teaching was going to continue to develop the high standards of a profession and maintain a cadre of professional teachers, control of professional education must be in the hands of Teachers College faculties.

A leader in Nebraska of an opposite point of view was Dr. Hartley Burr Alexander, professor and chairman of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Nebraska. He was also a member of the Schoolmasters’ Club until his resignation in 1924. Dr. Alexander had earlier stated his position in a memo to Chancellor Avery:

The College of Arts and Sciences, the Teachers’ College, and the Graduate School, form an intimately related group. . . there is every reason, therefore, why these colleges should be organized in close cooperation. This can only be by subordination to some extent, and the proper subordination is that of the Teachers’ College (for which all but 15 hours of the required work is Arts work) and the Graduate School (resting upon Arts College requirements) to the Arts College. Indeed, the Teachers College ought to be no more than a department . . . of the Arts College.¹⁰

For the increasingly professionally minded members of the Nebraska Schoolmasters’ Club who were engaged in public school work, the autonomy of the Teachers’ College became a call for battle. In January, 1921, Superintendent Harry H. Reimund arranged for a meeting with Chancellor Avery to discuss the future of the Teachers’ College. The delegation which met with the Chancellor was composed of 12 educators and one school board member. Ten of those persons attending

the meeting were members of the Nebraska Schoolmasters' Club. The meeting with Chancellor Avery, a member of the club since 1908, was very cordial.

At the next meeting of the University of Nebraska Board of Regents on February 4, 1921, the matter was discussed, and Chancellor Avery was instructed to define more clearly the relationship of the Teachers College within the institutional structure. The leadership for this action of the board was provided by Regent Harry D. Landis. He was from Seward and worked with R. D. Moritz, the superintendent of schools at Seward, for a resolution of the issue satisfactory to the state's public school leadership. Superintendent Moritz was a prominent member of the Schoolmasters' Club.

On March 29, 1921, the University of Nebraska Board of Regents adopted a policy which recognized the autonomy of the Teachers College in the granting of degrees in professional education. This change in policy would not have taken place at that time without the considerable influence of the Nebraska Schoolmasters' Club.

This new policy of the Board of Regents was, however, not accepted without resistance by some University faculty members. Chancellor Avery wrote his colleague in the Schoolmasters' Club, R. D. Moritz: "I understand that a few people in the Arts College insist that they are going 'to fight' in regard to putting into effect the new regulations in regard to the Teachers' College."¹¹ It had been made clear by the earlier visit to Chancellor Avery, in January, 1921, by those representing the club that their continued strong support of the University of Nebraska depended on the policy change. Chancellor Avery recognized the powerful influence of the Club and was resolute that the new regents' policy be implemented. "Personally, I am not looking for any trouble, but always like to be prepared for any contingencies."¹² The chancellor and Regent Landis ultimately concluded that the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences was the person responsible for leading the obstructionism. He was granted a leave of absence by the Board of Regents to accept an exchange professorship. Upon his return to the University of Nebraska campus he was replaced as dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. To those knowledgeable in the politics of education in Nebraska the in-

fluence of the Nebraska Schoolmasters' Club could not fail to be recognized.

During the early years of the decade of the 1920s, economic forces beyond the control of the people of Nebraska were at work which would drastically alter attitudes toward public spending. Agricultural commodity prices declined rapidly.

Wheat, which had sold for \$2.02 per bushel on December 1, 1919, brought only \$1.31 per bushel on December 1, 1920. During the same period corn dropped from \$1.22 to \$.41, oats from \$.65 to \$.37, barley from \$1.00 to \$.50, potatoes from \$1.90 to \$1.20. Most farmers, pressed for interest payments on their mortgages and on loans which many of them had taken to put out their crops, had to market their 1920 crop in this period of suddenly declining prices, thus suffering heavy losses. Those who held on to their grain in the hope that the recession was only temporary suffered even greater losses; by December 1, 1921, wheat was down to \$.83 per bushel, corn \$.27, oats \$.21, and barley \$.28. Livestock prices also tumbled: beef cattle which had brought \$9.53 per hundred in 1920 brought only \$6.13 in 1921, hogs fell from \$12.61 to \$7.52, lambs from \$13.39 to \$7.68.¹³

With the dependence of public school budgets on the local school district mill levy, the decline in agricultural income produced a reaction against rising school costs. In some counties taxpayers' associations were organized to oppose the tax burdens on property owners.

In 1920 the total budgets of the Nebraska public schools were \$19,563,064. The next year, 1921, the cost had risen to \$31,171,999, an increase of 63%.¹⁴ This increase was not the result of extensive new programming in the schools but rather the extreme inflation following the World War.

By late 1921 a growing protest against the rising expense of public education and against those who provided educational leadership in Nebraska developed. Nearly all of the condemned educational leaders were members of the Nebraska Schoolmasters' Club. The champion of reducing educational costs and the leading critic of the state's educational leadership was Albert N. Mathers, a native of Otoe County. After attending Nebraska Wesleyan University for one year, he entered the University of Nebraska Law School in the fall of 1903. In March, 1906, he was permitted to withdraw as a student from the university. By 1911 Mathers settled in the Gering area, and by 1913 he had purchased the controlling interest in the Gering National Bank. He was clearly prominent in Western Nebraska—serving as the first mayor of Gering and as presi-

dent of the local school board, and the state irrigation society.

In December, 1921, Mathers began his public criticism of public education and educators in a speech at Bridgeport, Nebraska. He charged that public education had strayed too far from teaching the traditional reading, writing, and arithmetic and was "a system of frills and fancies. A system barren of results commensurate with money spent. A hierarchy of exclusiveness, imagination and snobbishness."¹⁵ Mathers further believed that the educational leaders of the state, largely members of the Schoolmasters' Club, were engaged in a conspiracy against the best interests of the public.

This system, and indeed it is a system, under the guise of "Universal Free Education," with a centralized headquarters, has worked its way over this state until it has become a great menacing machine. . . . This old machine in its extravagant and wasteful course, fostered by politicians, book sellers, school supply houses, welfare workers, reformers, and salary seekers, has been and is bounding along at a terrific rate.¹⁶

Because of the alleged inter-locking directorate which conspired to control public education, Mathers believed that local control of the public school was nearly lost.

The tax-paying communities, patrons of schools and board of education have absolutely nothing to say in the conduct of their local schools. All alike must take orders from an organized group of super-educators [the Nebraska Schoolmasters Club] and educational spendthrifts in and about Nebraska's capitol and university headquarters.¹⁷

Within a month a public debate developed between Mathers and E. L. Rouse, the school superintendent at Scottsbluff and a prominent member of the Nebraska Schoolmasters' Club. The debate brought forth quite opposite educational philosophies. Mathers deplored the high cost of public high schools which resulted from the efforts to meet the standards required by the state university for admission. Professional educators argued that all the state's young people should have available to them the program of study necessary to prepare for higher study. In this time of declining farm income, the Mathers argument attracted considerable attention. Within the year, the editor of the *Gering Courier* recognized a change in public opinion.

Behold, what a change has come over the trend of public sentiment after a lapse of but a few short months. Not only is it now recognized that we have

permitted an almost autocratic dictation to grow up whereby such local control as we have over our schools and teachers was practically nil, but we go farther. We ventured also to assert that the expense of the university itself was so disproportional to the percentage of students who reach that institution that a system of tuition whereby those who attended should pay an actual tuition as a means of relieving the taxpayers to some extent, was criticized as an attempt to ruin the great university. Now one may speak of these things with impunity.¹⁸

Experiencing such considerable acceptance of his views, Albert N. Mathers sought a seat in the Nebraska State House of Representatives and was elected. He was honored by his fellow Republicans by being elected as speaker, a most unusual event in the life of a freshman legislator.

State spending and local school expenditures were a major political issue. The Nebraska Taxpayers League was advocating a 25 percent cut in state appropriations and was calling for legislation which would permit local school districts to reduce cost by changing state school policies.

The Nebraska Schoolmasters' Club because of its efforts to raise the quality and availability of a comprehensive curriculum in the secondary schools was a target for those seeking economic retrenchment. Furthermore, the alleged exclusiveness of the club offended the ever present spirit of populism and equalitarianism present among educators not included in the club, newspaper editors and the public. The position taken by the Schoolmasters' Club on the issue of the independence of the Teachers College at the University of Nebraska caused resignations from the organization by those outside the field of professional education who did not support the change in university policy.

As the Nebraska Schoolmasters' Club ended its first quarter century of existence, its members could believe that it had worked successfully for the improvement of the state's schools. It had supported outstanding capable persons for education leadership in Nebraska. Educational quality was rising as was the availability of educational opportunity. To those who believed that expanded educational opportunity was the means of improving the quality of life in Nebraska, the Schoolmasters' Club had served the state well.

Although the Nebraska Schoolmasters' Club is no longer the center of controversy that it once was, it still exists. With the coming of the Great Depression, World War II, and the post-

war period, other educational organizations have shared the power which had earlier been exercised by the club. Today no single educational organization has the vast influence once enjoyed by the Nebraska Schoolmasters' Club.

NOTES

1. Report of J. W. Crabtree, University Inspector of Accredited Schools, *Fifteenth Biennial Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction* (Lincoln, 1898), 277.
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4. J. W. Crabtree, "The Nebraska Clan," *The Nebraska Teacher*, June, 1908, 535.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. Rules of the Nebraska Schoolmasters' Club, MSS.
8. Harry H. Reimund, *The Value to the High Schools of Nebraska of An Autonomous Teachers College in the State University* (Tekamah, Nebraska: Tekamah Journal Print, 1920), 1.
9. *Ibid.*
10. MSS, University of Nebraska Archives, Avery Collection, Alexander file, undated memo.
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12. *Ibid.*
13. James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2nd Ed. 1966), 286.
14. Twenty-Sixth Biennial Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, January 9, 1919-January 5, 1921 (Lincoln, 1921), 64-77. Twenty-Seventh Biennial Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, January 5, 1921-January 4, 1923 (Lincoln, 1923), 63-64.
15. *Bridgeport* (Nebraska) *News-Blade*, December 1, 1921, 4.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Gering* (Nebraska) *Courier*, December 22, 1922, 4.