

The Development of the Elementary Schools  
of Conemaugh Township

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It is interesting to note that when the first settlers in our community had built cabins to shelter their families, they began to construct rude church and school houses. Most of the early settlers were God fearing people and they did not want their children to grow up without religious and educational training.

The first schools were usually held in a room in a settler's cabin or in a vacant cabin. Sometimes churches were used for school purposes. The early cabins, churches and schoolhouses were all constructed from logs and chunked and daubed with clay to keep out the cold. A large chimney was built at one end of the schoolhouse in which a roaring wood fire was kept burning during the day to keep the school room warm. Later wood burning stoves replaced the chimney fire place. The cutting of this wood, to keep the school room warm often occupied a large part of the big boys' school day which we might call physical education.

When the people of the community decided to build a schoolhouse they would meet at a selected location and all work together for several days, until the building was completed. The building was usually erected near a good spring of water, along a traveled path or road. Sometimes it was erected at a crossroads. The seats were made of split logs.

When a school was opened in a pioneer community, the children had to walk three, four, and even five miles to get the benefits of the limited advantages which the early schools offered. Often the smaller children could not be sent because of the weather and distance. The schools were open for only two or three months of each year and this was during the coldest winter weather when little or no work could be done on the farms. My early school I attended was for <sup>seven</sup> ~~eight~~ months and I walked one and one-half miles to and from school. We

carried our drinking water from a spring near by.

In the early days of our schools most of the boys were sent to school so they could learn to read and write; but the girls were kept at home and neglected, so far as educational training was concerned.

There were scarcely any text books in the homes or in the schools. The parents had to pay the teachers and buy all the supplies. Not so today; the citizens who own property pay taxes and some monies are provided by the State to pay for the teachers' salaries and to purchase text books and instructional supplies. In those early schools the Bible or Testament were often the only books available. Both English and German languages were spoken in the early schools. The language depended on the nationality of the parents.

Our early schools date back to the later part of the 1700s. From the log school houses with the limited seating and comfort came the era of the more modern, one-room schoolhouses which our township had up to around twenty. Some of these soon had additions because of small villages, towns growing up near or around them because of industry and other community interests. Some of these larger school buildings were in Grazier the town developed in 1900, Jerome where the coal industry began in about 1904, Maple Ridge developed in 1906, Hiyasota in 1918 through the coal industry. However Davidsville was started in 1831. Other communities grew and school building had to be enlarged to name a few, Tire Hill, Glessner Mills, Hollsopple (Eash School), Benson Boro. which became a part of our school system. Before the High School was built in 1938 we had about twenty buildings in use. Then some were closed and students were transported to the High School and different elementary buildings. In 1960 The Jerome and Central Elementary buildings were built and we continued to use the Benscreek building for our Elementary School program. All other elementary buildings

were closed.

Let me take a few minutes to say something about the teachers. The early teacher was not required to have any training except he was to be able to read and write. If he could do the four fundamentals in arithmetic, write his own agreement and fill out his own subscription paper, he was looked upon as having high qualifications for his task.

We also note that the early teacher was a male. When the Civil War broke out many of the male teachers joined the army and then the women were asked to do the teaching. After the war they continued to be teachers along with the male teachers.

In our community when one passed the eight grade and passed an examination for teaching he/she could then teach if he/she was granted a school to teach. These people then would attend what was called Summer Normal School to prepare them for the Fall school term. One such school was conducted at the Miller School building in Soap Hollow by the late Samuel G. Shetler. Many of our township early teachers were trained there. Soon Normal schools sprang up over the state and it became mandatory that one receive a Normal School training at one of these with a Normal School Certificate. Then after that came the era that one must have a Bachelors Degree to begin teaching. That law came in about 1934.

In 1869 Conemaugh Township established its first free school. The State Free School Act of April 1, 1834 stated that Spelling, Reading and Writing were the only branches required to be taught under this act. However it is worthy to note that the school laws have been amended from time to time. Those amendings can not be cited in this paper for want of time.

An action taken by the County Commissioners should be noted here for it effected our schools. In 1854 Joseph J. Stutzman was appointed

by the commissioners the first County Superintendent at a yearly salary of \$400.00. This appointment was highly criticised. Through Mr. Stutzman's efforts he overcame the criticism and held the first teachers' institute in 1855. This institute and the succeeding year was held in different areas so the teachers could attend without too much difficulty. In 18 57 all teachers assembled at one place for the institute. The development and changes cannot be noted here only to mention that this became a high light for the teachers of our county.

The development of the Curriculum is of significant importance today. Since the Free School Act provided for the teaching of Reading, Writing and Spelling our curriculum made significant changes for the improvement of our schools.

For many years after our schools were established in a one-room setting with grades one to eight the basic subjects taught were Reading, Writing, Spelling, Arithmetic, History, Language (Grammar), Geography. These being the basics other instruction was given in the way of right behavior in recognizing the rights of others in the form of the hickory stick. Science or Nature Study was taught when nature or pupils brought someting to the classroom which could be demonstrated or information given.

In the one-room school grades had to be combined thus a grouping of grades was practiced. Group one; Chart class and first grade; group two, second grade; group three, third and fourth grade; group four, fifth abd sixth grades; group five, seventh and eight grades. Even this grouping varied according to the distribution of pupils. Consolidation brought changes to this kind of grouping for there would be enough children of one grade to fill a room with one teacher.

During this process of change we emphasized and added additional specialized instruction. The first one being a definate course in

writing or penmanship instruction under the supervision of P.O. Peterson. At each monthly faculty meeting we were instructed how to teach the next months lessons. At the end of the month each student wrote a specimen copy of the months instruction and this was handed in at the monthly meetings to be evaluated. If the class specimens were standard or above they would receive a seal to be placed on a certificate which hung in the room. At the end of the year if the class got all monthly seals they would receive a gold seal to be placed on the certificate. Teachers would meet in different school buildings each month and a perfect display of certificates was envied.

Before the High School was built we were directly under the supervision of the County Superintendent. Examinations for the eighth grades were held to determine if the students were ready for high school training. We worked hard to get our eight graders to pass this examination. Teachers were appointed to supervise the giving of these tests at a designated school building. The test papers were graded by the County Office and results sent to the Township schools. An eight grade graduation program was held administered by eight grade teachers. This was always a high light in the school career of an eight grader. Then the student could attend one of the high schools in the adjoining districts. Some went to Ferndale High School, some to Boswell High School, some to Johnstown High School, others to Hooversville High School, and for others formal school training stopped.

In the late 30's we added a music supervisor to our elementary staff. Christine Todhunter was the first to hold this position. She would visit all the classrooms on a weekly schedule. She taught a music lesson and then the homeroom teacher would teach the songs and other materials presented so the children would be ready to

recite the previous weeks lessons. Mrs. Margaret Crissafulli followed and supervised our music program for many years. County Music Festivals were a feature of the early music program and continued until the mid 70's. Also a music festival was held each year for the total music department of our elementary schools. For the first few years until we had our own new buildings at Jerome and Central this festival was held at the High School. When we had our own new building with the All-Purpose rooms we could hold these festivals there. Some modification in the structure of these programs took place in the early 80's.

About the time the music program was begun classes took field trips. The first ones were totally sponsored by the teachers and pupils by raising money to fund them. Classes raised money by selling candy at Easter and Christmas time and other special projects. The first of such projects was undertaken by the Girl Reserve Club at the Glessner Mills School by Ruth Livingstone, they went on a weeks outing at Camp Sunshine, Bedford Co. Also a Hi-Y Club was started by Harold Thomas, also from the Glessner Mills School, they raised money for a weeks fishing trip to Reynoldsdale, Bedford Co. Later my brother, Kenneth Thomas organized a Hi-Y Club at Jerome School as I had with the help of Johnstown YMCA.

As I indicated these first trips were totally financed by the classes themselves. Even when trips to Gettysburg were organized a few of our classes went together to hire two busses for the trip. Financing soon became a PTA project for our three elementary schools. These trips have always been enjoyed by the children. They have indicated this during their sixth grade promotion programs as well. These trips became an important part of the child's education.

The supervised physical education and art programs were introduced about the same time. The first Physical Education teacher

was George Kogut who taught the children of each room on a weekly schedule. This was a tremendous asset to our physical education in the entire school system. The program provided the children with opportunity to develop their various athletic skills.

The first teacher for the Art program was Doris Weaver. This program did much to help children express themselves through their imagination with the paint brush and crayon. Exhibits were a part of special programs held at the school which gave charm and color to the building and exhibited the abilities of the children. I heard, at times many proud parents, and rightly so, say, "That's my son's drawing" or "That's my daughter's art work." These activities helped to bring together the school and parents in a cohesive educational effort.

In the <sup>latter 60's</sup> ~~early 70's~~ a Kindergarten program was established at the Benscreek School. The parents paid for the transportation the first few years then the school district picked up the costs of transportation. In 1973 the Kindergarten was moved to the Central Elementary building where it is today. The Benscreek building was then closed and later sold.

Also in the early 70's a library program was started. A room in each building was equipped for this purpose. Mary Lou Berkebile was the first <sup>full time</sup> librarian. Books were purchased, library shelving installed and a library program developed. Book fairs became a part of the program which not only got good books into the homes but also provided funds to purchase new books. This program helped to provide interest in reading for the home and students. The children looked forward to library day as they called it.

In 1972 we again made a bold step in setting up an instrumental music program. It was my and Mr. Jim Carr's privilege to set up this first program with hardly any financial provisions because we

started it after the school budget was adopted and we really worked on a shoe string budget. The next year we got our needs into the regular school budget to buy music, equipment and other needs. What you see today in the instrumental program is the result of these past sixteen years of work.

In the early 60's the elementary music department was chosen by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania to participate in a student teacher training program. To be chosen by a University to participate in such a program spoke well for our music department. This program continued until the early 70's. Also in 1973 we were chosen by the University of Pittsburgh to participate in a similar program in the primary and intermediate departments. At one time there were ten student teachers assigned to our elementary schools. After three years this program was discontinued because of lack of student teachers at the University of Pittsburgh. To have been a part of this program was a challenge and good experience for our teachers.

Our township schools have grown in these past 118 years since the free school act was passed. They will continue to grow as we continue to give them our best.

In 1975 I initiated a plan to utalize our buildings and ~~the~~ distribution of teacher classroom load as I saw the future shaping of our schools. My plan was to use the Jerome building for Kindergarten and grades one and two. Use the Central building for grades three through six. My philosophy was:

1. To be able to equalize teacher load for each grade
2. To provide time for each grade teacher to work together on curriculum
3. To accomplish this the children of a grade would be scheduled to be in an art class, a library class, a music class, a physical education class thus freeing the teachers to assemble to work



on curriculum and coordinate teaching methods.

- 4. Reduce the costs in certain areas where dual purchases were necessary to accomodate both buildings .

I am pleased that this plan is being adopted in principle. It is a step forward. I forsee the elementary system in two buildings working as one unit.

I want to express my appreciation to have a part in this program in a way bringing to you the progress of our elementary schools of which I have been a part these past 71 years in some way, helping to shape the lives of many students in our schools. I will continue my interest as my grand children sit at the feet of dedicated teachers.

Thank you for inviting me to this gala occassion.

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