

St. Michael Historian



Official Newsletter of the St. Michael Historical Society, St. Michael, Minnesota

February 2017, Winter

Volume 11, Issue 1



Above: the District 139 schoolhouse as it appeared in the 1930s. For most of the last 46 years it was the home of Roger and Kathy Stoick. Photo courtesy of Wright County Historical Society

1785 wherein the system for dividing public lands into six-mile square townships and 36 one-mile square sections was established. The use or sale of Section 16 was dedicated to the maintenance of public schools. Minnesota's territorial legislature added Section 36 as one to be used for the support of public education as well. Additionally, this legislature ruled that whenever a township had five or more families, they could establish a school district. One decision made by the territorial legislature in 1851, however, created a mess for Minnesotans a hundred years later. Because pioneer settlers wished to have schools located closer to their cabins in the woods and on the prairies, the legislature permitted county commissioners to create smaller school districts and totally disregard the township lines. Then in 1865 they permitted incorporated towns and villages to create their own independent school districts. The result of these decisions was the creation of over 8,000 school districts in Minnesota by the year 1900!

In Wright County, like the rest of the state, school districts were created by the Board of Commissioners and numbered consecutively as they were created. Since the current St. Michael-Albertville school district is primarily

Our Public School Heritage

by *Bob Zahler*

Of the 517 independent and charter school districts in Minnesota, the St. Michael-Albertville School District (ISD #885) is today among the largest one-tenth of all districts in terms of enrollment with over 6,000 students. It's difficult to imagine that just over 50 years ago state officials were trying to discourage the creation of the STMA school district since in the early 1960s we were still just a collection of small, rural, public schoolhouses with a private, Catholic high school in town. A lot has changed in the last 50 years. The district today boasts that "Excellence is our tradition," and that tradition started in those rural schoolhouses scattered throughout the countryside and in the villages of St. Michael and Albertville.

Before Minnesota was even a territory, a system for providing for schools had been established in the Land Ordinance of



District 139 about 1925. Top row from left: Ervin Georges, Eleanor Eull, Ruth Bruska, Lidia Frank, Sylvia Bruska, Catherine Zachman, Margaret Eicher, Adeline Eull, Mabel Shaw (teacher). Middle row: Lawrence Weber, Alvin Blake, Pete Georges, Jerome Blake, Arnold Ernst, Courtney Ernst, Marcus Bruska, John Frank. Bottom row: Vernon Blake, Ray Georges, Milton Ernst, Mildred Ernst, Isabelle Weber, Sarah Weese. Photo courtesy of Clarence Eull

composed of the lands that lay within the former Frankfort Township, these are the ones that will be listed as part of our history here. According to Franklin Curtis-Wedge, who published the *History of Wright County* in 1915, the following were the school districts that not only existed then, but also the ones that survived past World War II and closed by 1971: Districts 19, 20, 44, 46, 49, 134, and 139.

District 19 was located along County Road 36 in what is now a new housing development going in across from the Fox Hollow Golf Course. Curtis-Wedge commented in 1915 that this school was old but in fair condition and that they have mostly hired young and inexperienced teachers “to the loss of the school.” Despite having the lowest number of all of the school districts, this was not the first school created in Frankfort Township. Before the numbering system went into effect, the first school had been held north of the present downtown area of St. Michael in what would become District 20. According to Daniel Ross Farnham’s 1880 *History of Wright County*, the first school was held in the log claim shanty on the Gutzwiller farm. Today that is on the hill near Heights Road Northwest on the west side of County Road 19. This school opened in February 1862 and was taught by Mrs. Anna Fallihee whose husband was at the time away fighting in the Civil War. Ignatius Gutzwiller Jr. also taught school here in both German and English. In 1869 a new frame schoolhouse was built in the vicinity of what are today the Cornerstone and Main Street Farmer buildings. This structure faced Central Avenue but sat back away from the street. In 1906 Frankfort Township purchased this building to be used as the township hall. They moved it up to the street where it stood until they razed in 1966. District 20 built a new two-story school house that opened in the fall of 1906

near what is now the parking lot west of the Community Education Building. By this time most children near the village were attending the Catholic grade school. The public school building was then used to educate the older boys in grades 7 and 8. Men were typically hired to teach here. By the 1930s many referred to it as the “Korte School” after teacher Joe Korte who taught here many years. Or, the German-speaking kids also called it the “Freie Schule” or “free school” since tuition was required at the Catholic school. In 1940 in an odd mingling of church and state, District 20 started holding public school in the newly built Catholic grade school that opened in that fall. Minnesota law allowed the district to retain its school taxes as long as they offered at least two grades. It did not require those two grades to be taught in a publically-owned building. While which grades were designated as “public” changed occasionally, by the end of this strange arrangement it was the 1st and 8th grades. These two grades were taught by a lay teacher paid by local taxes while the intervening grades were taught by the School Sisters of Notre Dame. The County Superintendent made regular visits just to make sure they preserved at least the appearance of the classes not being run by the Catholic Church. While they met the letter of the law regarding separating public and parochial, each year the eighth grade students marked their graduation from public school with a special mass and by receiving their certificates from the priest. After the move into the Catholic school building in 1940, the old District 20 schoolhouse was demolished, with many of the bricks used to build a baseball grandstand that stood in that same location.

The District 44 schoolhouse is one of the two remaining schoolhouses in St. Michael. Converted into a home in the 1970s the building sets on the corner of County Road 34 and Ibarra Avenue near the southeast side of Beebe Lake. This structure was built in 1913 and replaced an earlier wood frame schoolhouse. According the Curtis-Wedge it was, in 1915, “the finest rural schoolhouse in Wright County”. For many years after its conversion to a private residence, it was the home of Larry and Louise King. The District 46 schoolhouse was located northwest of St. Michael on County Road 119 near the corner where it turns north at Pelican Lake. Interestingly, Franklin Curtis-Wedge commented in 1915 that “this is the only school in the county that has a term of five months.” His remarks illustrate the true independence of the individual schools in those days to run things as the parents wished, and those parents probably wanted their kids more available to do chores at home.



Top: District 20 schoolhouse 1869-1906. Bottom: District 20 schoolhouse 1906-1940. Photo from 1935 shows Joe Korte and 7th and 8th grade boys. Photo from collection of Bernard Hackenmueller.

The District 49 school house was located south of St. Michael on what is now 15th Street SE, about halfway between County Road 19 and Kadler Avenue by Lake Wilhelm. Records indicate that the schoolhouse was built in 1883. District 134 was located in the village of Albertville. The old district school building is still standing and is currently used as an indoor soccer facility. When they moved the public grades into the St. Albert's Catholic grade school building (as they did in St. Michael) the old public school building was repurposed as a village hall. The last of our rural schoolhouses was also the newest district. District 139 was organized in 1913 and the schoolhouse still stands west of St. Michael at the corner of County Road 35 and Hamlin Avenue NE. After closing as a school it was purchased by Roger and Kathy Stoick who converted it into their family home. They lived here until selling it in 2016. Back in 1915 Curtis-Wedge said that it was a "splendid school house, well equipped." The Stoicks even retained possession of the original school bell and used it in their home. The bell tower itself had deteriorated and was removed during the remodeling.

Teaching in a country school required great stamina. With the exception of District 20 in the village of St. Michael, the country schools were meant for both boys and girls, and a teacher had to be able to effectively teach and discipline first through eighth graders. Not an easy task, to be sure. Teachers tended to be young, unmarried women and men; although many of the best teachers were women who came back to teach after starting their families. In the early years, job requirements were minimal, many had high school diplomas or less. By 1900 teachers had to pass a test to obtain teaching certificates (but not necessarily degrees) from the County Superintendent or from one of Minnesota's "normal schools", schools for training teachers. St. Cloud State University, for example, started as a normal school. Teaching jobs did not pay particularly well, especially for women; but it was one of the few careers open to them. In 1914 in Wright County the average monthly wage for male teachers was \$110, for women it was \$58. Pay equalization for men and women in teaching would not become standardized until the 1960s. Women were also often required to be single. If a district allowed a married woman to teach, they were fired if they became pregnant (or as soon as they started showing).

One of the teachers who left a positive impression on her students in this area was Catherine (Pouliot) Mumm. Catherine was born in Loretto and graduated from Buffalo High School. After obtaining her teaching license in 1935, she started teaching grade school in Hamel. She had a "single contract", meaning she had to remain a single person. She married



District 21 school interior 1953. Row one (closest): Janice Marschel, Steven Richardson, LaVonne Marschel, Byron Ernst, Wayne Marschel. Second row: Joel Frank, Janice Richardson, Susan Weese, Dianne Weese, Roger Marschel. Third row: Loren Weese, Merlyn Marschel, Jerry Richardson, Terry Weese, Marlin Frank. Back row: Herman Ernst, JoAnne Richardson, Arlys Marschel, Cheryl Johnson, Jim Richardson, Catherine Mumm (teacher). Photo courtesy of Sharon (Mumm) Berning

George Mumm in March of 1936, but they kept their marriage a secret or else she would have been fired before the end of the school year. They announced their marriage in June at which point she had to quit. When their daughter Sharon (Mrs. Robert Berning) was three years old, Catherine went back to teaching at District 46, on the west side of Frankfort Township near Pelican Lake, where she remained about three years. She then taught for six years at District 19 on the east side of Frankfort Township. This was all in the 1940s. Her last country school teaching was at District 21 on the west side of Pelican Lake in eastern Buffalo Township in the early 1950s. She went back to school herself, earning a bachelor's degree from St. Cloud State Teacher's College in 1957 and later a master's degree in reading from the University of Minnesota. She taught in the Spring Lake Park school district from 1959 to 1979 where she was a Minnesota Teacher of the Year finalist in 1969. Mrs. Mumm is remembered by many of the "kids" from St. Michael as a very effective and kind teacher.

The great number of districts was a perennial problem for the Minnesota Department of Education as it was difficult to manage, fund, and maintain standards at so many schools; but the legislature, fighting the desires of voters to keep their schools close to home, had difficulty encouraging school districts to consolidate. Although the state legislature tried new consolidation incentives in the late 1940s, it was not until the 1960s that they forced consolidation by statute.

**St. Michael
Historical Society**
11800 Town Center Drive
St. Michael, MN 55376

Phone: 763-416-7967

We're on the Web!

See us at:

www.saintmichaelhistory.org

Like us on **Facebook!**

Meetings are held on the second Monday of the month at the St. Michael City Hall in the Gries and Lenhardt Public Meeting Room adjacent to the library.

This newsletter is published quarterly for the benefit of the members of the St. Michael Historical Society. Reprints of this or any other newsletter by the Society are not permitted without the express written consent of the St. Michael Historical Society.

Publisher: Bob Zahler

Editors: Sheldon Barthel
Stephen S. Barthel



District 46 students in 1915. Front: Florence Robeck, Helen Endres, Linus Lenneman, Margaret Robeck, Teresa Steffens. Second row: Matt Lenneman, Tom Robeck, ? Reznicek, Dominic Lenneman, Ansel Ayd. Third row: Isadore Endres, Frank Robeck, Rose Robeck, Adolph Lenneman, Ida Reznicek. Back row: Lloyd Telkyie, Victor Ayd, Sophia Diedrich, Aggie Robeck. Top: Teacher, Theodora (Slovik) Robeck

to the conclusion that one-room schoolhouses could not provide a quality education as compared to the larger in-town schools. Consequently, the 1967 legislature passed a law that required all districts to offer a complete k-12 system, or join one that did, by July 1, 1970. This law effectively killed the rural schoolhouse. In St. Michael it also forced the closing of the Catholic high school since there was no way that the town could support both a public and a private high school. Under pressure by community members who feared the loss of tax dollars and the town's identity if forced to consolidate with Buffalo, Monsignor Geisenkoetter closed the Catholic high school after the 1967-68 school year. In the fall of 1968 District 885 began offering a complete k-12 education; and within two years all of the rural schoolhouses were closed and their properties transferred to District 885, which then began selling them. The brick schoolhouses were the only ones worth rehabilitating. The other properties were sold for the value of their land and the schoolhouses either destroyed or allowed to crumble and rot. Today, only a handful of the thousands of country schoolhouses that once existed in Minnesota remain standing.

First, to eliminate situations like in St. Michael and Albertville where only two grades of public school were offered within parochial facilities, the 1963 legislature required all public school districts to operate at least one "classified school" such as an elementary, junior high, or high school. This is what prompted the establishment of the new consolidated school district of St. Michael-Albertville in 1964 and the construction of the St. Michael Elementary building in 1965-66. Then, despite the many cries to keep the rural schools open, lawmakers came

Upcoming Events

March 13, 7 PM: Public Tour of new St. Michael Catholic Church by Jim Thorp, followed by our regular monthly meeting in the choir room, lower level of the church (public is also welcome). Tour goers are asked to enter at the east side of church using the two doors entering directly into the main sanctuary, just to the left of the main entrance. The Church is located at 11300 Frankfort Parkway, NE. Tour will start at the baptismal font.

April 10, 7 PM: NOTICE OF ANNUAL MEETING: The Annual Meeting of the Saint Michael Historical Society, 11800 Town Center Drive NE, will be held in the Library Conference room off the main hallway at St. Michael City Center. One of the items on the agenda will be the election of five board members to three-year terms each beginning in May.

May 8, 7 PM: Regular monthly meeting in the Library Conference room at St. Michael City Center, 11800 Town Center Drive, NE. Approval of standing committees for the upcoming year will be one of the items on the agenda.