

CHAPTER SIX

TEACHERS FOR RURAL SCHOOLS

In considering the matter of teachers for rural schools it is well to remember that at the time Normal was founded the one-room rural school represented public education in Michigan. The graded, or union, school (forerunner of the public high school) was in its infancy; the one public institution of higher education (the University of Michigan) was in its early childhood and finding it very difficult to secure students who were adequately prepared for admission. Ninety-seven per cent of the population of Michigan was rural. Normal's function, therefore, was to train teachers for rural schools. One may well observe, at this point, the significant fact that the growth of this vital institution for public improvement and welfare came, as it were, from the bottom upwards, not from the top downwards. And as it grew, the Normal grew; as the demands of the society it served increased, the Normal responded—becoming in time a four-year college, and later the university that it is today.

Our concern here, however, is with the question of *when* Normal became conscious that it was no longer serving the rural school; *when* did the preparation of teachers for the rural school appear as a special function which called for a special curriculum?

By 1890, the rural population of Michigan had diminished to 65 per cent of the total. Normal's attention had been drawn to the preparation of teachers for the better-paid, more attractive positions in the urban areas serving the remaining 35 per cent of the population. In that same year Principal Sill included in his annual report a plea for the rural school.

In the ensuing years the Legislature took a series of steps to meet

this need. In 1895 (two years after Sill's retirement), after much urging, it voted to acquire the private teacher-training school at Mt. Pleasant. The act provided

That a normal school for the preparation and training of persons for teaching in the rural district schools, and the primary departments of the graded schools of the State, to be known as "Central Michigan Normal School," be established . . .¹

This limited beginning has evolved into the Central Michigan University of today.

In 1899, a normal school was provided for Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The act stated

That a normal school shall be located at Marquette, to be known as the Northern State Normal School, for the purpose of instructing persons in the several branches pertaining to a public school education, and in the science and art of teaching the same.²

This institution has become the present-day Northern Michigan University.

In 1903, a normal school was established for the western part of the State. In that year the Legislature voted that

A State normal school shall be located, established, and maintained in the western part of the state at such place as the State Board of Education shall designate, to be known as the Western State Normal School for the preparation and training of persons for teaching in the rural district schools, and in the primary departments of the graded schools of the state.³

Today we have in Kalamazoo the large and thriving Western Michigan University.

In the same year the Legislature authorized county training classes, not more than one to a county, to be organized under the direction of a county normal board, for teachers of rural schools. By 1912 there were some 50 county normals, admitting young people from 18 years of age who had completed the tenth grade in high school or had two years of successful teaching.

At Normal, under President Jones, a special short course for rural teachers was first offered in 1902.⁴

When President McKenny arrived (in 1912), his first annual report to the State Board gave considerable attention to the rural problem. The course being offered, he said, was not very successful, the reason being that the Normal did not have sufficient funds to develop a rural school department. Such a department should be organized and placed under the direction of a person who understood rural school conditions and the kind of training necessary for rural school teachers. He asserted that the boys and girls on the farm were not getting a "square deal." There was no response.

Six years later, noting that a department of rural education had already been established at the Western and the Central Normal Schools, McKenny renewed his plea with increased vigor, saying:

I believe the time is now here when the legislature should establish a rural school department with a recognized leader as its head. This department should establish practice schools in the rural districts near the college where teachers in training for country school teaching could learn the art of managing and teaching a country school under practical conditions . . .

The following year (1919), twenty-nine years and four presidents after Principal Sill's urgent plea, such a department was formed, and Ella Smith, at the time State Supervisor of the county normal training classes, became the acting head, serving while McKenny searched the nation for a director. Two curricula were offered—a year-and-one-summer program which led to a three-year rural certificate, and a two-year-and-a-summer program leading to a rural life certificate.⁵ Practice teaching was provided by a one-teacher rural school, the Stone School, located six miles from the campus, reached by the electric railway.

In 1921, McKenny found his man in Marvin Summers Pittman. Pittman had been Director of Rural Education at the Oregon State Normal School since 1912, and had just completed his doctorate at Columbia University. For vision, energy, and dynamic personality a better choice could scarcely have been made. Indeed, during his thirteen years of service at Normal Pittman established a national and international reputation in rural education.

In the best tradition of the Normal faculty, he went abroad in 1928 to study rural education in France, Spain, Germany, Denmark and England. In 1929, McKenny placed him in charge of all teacher training at Normal. In the summer of that year, at the invitation of

the University of Mexico and the Mexican government, he held a series of conferences with federal directors and inspectors of schools. In 1932, he was asked by the Cuban government to make a study of Cuban schools and teacher training. In 1934, he resigned his position to accept the presidency of Georgia State Teachers College.

The Lincoln Consolidated School

Pittman's lasting contribution at the Michigan State Normal College was the creation of the Lincoln Consolidated Rural School. His achievement was noteworthy because it meant the self-effacement of thirteen small primary school districts whose autonomy was long-standing. It was almost as if thirteen independent nations were to give up voluntarily their sovereignty.

The achievement draws attention to the means. When Pittman arrived at Ypsilanti in 1921 he at once acted to enlarge the training facility. In 1923, the Denton and Carpenter schools were added to the Stone School, and in 1924, the Begole school joined the list.⁶ Pittman founded a Rural Education Club of a dozen members, gave it a new name, and boosted its membership almost overnight to 600 rural teachers, with a campus membership of some 30 student teachers. The campus group met bi-weekly in the home of either Pittman or Professor Hover. The nature of this organization was described thus:

The name, "The Michigan Trailblazers," was adopted as symbolizing the broader vision and task of this earnest group. Trailblazer enthusiasm was felt in every corner of the campus. Members in every county of Michigan, in five other states, and in Canada have carried the Trailblazer spirit with them into their work this year. In May they will return to the Normal College for a reunion known as the "Hatchet Sharpener," and here make their hatchets keen to blaze new trails into regions of great need.⁷

But the step which led to Lincoln was the inauguration of the Zone School plan. This was a plan of supervision for rural schools. It appears to have been developed on a fairly large scale first by the Oregon State Normal School. At least this is where Pittman first saw it.

The plan was to divide a supervisory district into zones small enough to enable a supervisor to make the rounds of visitation and to conduct zone meetings for teachers. It was these meetings that led first to mutual acquaintance, then to cooperative effort.

Pittman, in inaugurating the zone idea, involved the local Kiwanis Club. His project was to give a dinner for the 40 teachers of the 40 one-room schools and the 120 officers in the Ypsilanti area. Thirty-seven accepted the invitation and the dinner was held in April of 1922. This first "County Club Dinner" (it became an annual affair) provided the occasion for adoption of a plan for the future.

Each school (teacher and school board) was to state in writing a desire for affiliation with the Normal. To defray expenses, each would pay a small fee. In return, the College would visit the school at least once a month, hold a monthly meeting for the teachers, publish a small paper for the pupils "that would boost them in their work," and in general render "whatever service possible to the school and the school neighborhood." The Kiwanis Club, too, was to play a continuing role. Each member would become an Honorary Patron of a school.

In the course of time, many found opportunities to contribute to their respective schools—the job printer printed school stationery; the music specialists gave music scholarships; the electrician wired his school; the historian conducted a contest and told stories; the photographer donated pictures, etc., etc. The club as a whole also found opportunities to be of service. At the annual meetings of the Hatchet Sharpener, it provided entertainment and organized sight-seeing trips; it organized the annual Country Club Dinner; it provided for medical examinations for pupils in special need. It was a beautiful demonstration of how, lighted with imagination and warmed with enthusiasm, Town and Gown could be brought together in an undertaking of great importance, serving a vital interest of both.

Ten of the 13 school districts that were soon to form the consolidated Lincoln School District were involved in this zone pattern. And when Pittman happened to mention (in October of 1922) to two leading citizens of the area, Willits Derbyshire and Henry Champion, that the College was contemplating the construction of a training school for rural teachers somewhere in the Ypsilanti area, the response was electric.

The matter was promptly brought up at a meeting of Fraternity Grange and a mass meeting of the citizens of the area planned. This

meeting took place in the Willis Methodist Church on November 22, 1922 (seven months after the first Country Club Dinner), and there McKenny and Pittman outlined their project. A committee was formed which, with McKenny, met with the State Board of Education in December. From this meeting came the following resolution (freely rendered):

In order to prepare teachers for the rural schools of the State, said Board agrees to designate a rural agricultural school, accessible to the Michigan State Normal College at Ypsilanti, provided a schoolhouse is suitably constructed for such purpose, as a part of the training school system of said College; and upon a cooperative agreement between the State Board and the School District, the State Board of Education shall employ and pay all teachers and janitors necessary for said school, and shall pay one-half the cost of transportation of pupils who are required by law to be transported to said school.

A vote on consolidation was held by 12 school districts on May 2, 1923. By a narrow margin (279 to 210) consolidation was approved. The favorable vote on the bond issue to finance construction of the new school was closer (212 to 196). On July 23, a thirteenth school district petitioned to be included, District No. 2 (the Vedder School) of Augusta Township.

Thus the new school district was formed, a site in Augusta Township was purchased (the Island School site), an architect (Warren S. Holmes of Lansing) employed, contracts were let, the cornerstone laid (April 16, 1924) and on October 31, 1924, the Lincoln School opened its doors.⁸ Thirteen school districts had joined to make this possible; thirteen one-room schools went out of existence.

At least one was older than the Normal College itself, Model, whose existing site had been purchased in 1844. Another one, Lowden, dated from the year Normal opened its doors (1853). Each of them represented strong community loyalties of long standing (the youngest dated 1876). Nearly all held a reunion at some time during the summer of 1924. As recently as 1937 the Morgan School was still holding an annual Memorial Day reunion.

Nor should it be overlooked that, in the campaign for consolidation, the 13 rural teachers (not one of whom could qualify for a place on the staff of the new school) stood as one in favor of the change.

The original name of this new school district, “Agricultural Rural Training School No. 1 of Ypsilanti and Augusta Townships” was soon changed to “Lincoln Consolidated School” because, as its historian, Clara Smith, says:

They (the School Board) felt it was the fulfillment of the ideals for which Abraham Lincoln stood—equal educational opportunity for rural as well as urban students.⁹

The people of the District had wanted to name it after Pittman but yielded to his dissent. Henry A. Tape became its first principal.

A year later (December 5, 1925), the worst that could happen happened—fire, of undetermined origin, destroyed the building. Stronger evidence of the increasing enthusiasm of the Lincoln community for their school could scarcely be found than the resulting vote on an additional bond issue, not only to rebuild but to enlarge the structure. It was 225 to 143 in favor. The re-dedication took place on Lincoln’s birthday, 1927.

Through the ensuing years the story of the Lincoln School District was one of continuing enlargement of the school, increase and change in character of population, and sustained enthusiasm. Additions were made to the original building until it was nearly doubled in size. These included an industrial arts shop and a garage for the 13 school buses (1928); a cafeteria, girls’ gymnasium, and industrial arts room (1936); a new and larger garage, and transformation of the old garage into classrooms (1948); a north wing to house more classrooms, a large cafeteria, and some specialized vocational training rooms (1951). A separate elementary school building (ten rooms) was constructed (1956). Six rooms were added to it and a 40-acre site for a new high school building purchased (1959). A new \$2,100,000 high school building was constructed, with the most modern swimming pool (1961).

The original four-fold objective was faithfully adhered to: greater educational opportunity for the children; a practice school for Normal; inclusion of the practical arts of agriculture, home economics, and industrial arts; and a community center for adult groups.

The community-center objective was met by the use of the school as a meeting place for the various organizations within the district, the organization of evening class programs, evening church services

during the summer, an annual fair, baseball games, community suppers, and numerous other activities.

The relation of Lincoln to the Normal College was beneficial to both.

When the twenty-fifth anniversary of Lincoln was celebrated in 1949, it was noted that some 6,000 student teachers had gained experience there. Ten years later, the figure was 10,000. Originally, only students intending to teach in rural schools were accepted; later, as the pressure on Normal for practice teaching facilities increased and Lincoln became larger, this restriction was lifted.

In the course of time, great change had taken place in the character of the Lincoln district. World War II spawned the great bomber plant at Willow Run. In the postwar years this was replaced by the Kaiser-Fraser automobile venture, then not only replaced but added to by General Motors which located its Hydra-Matic operation there and also its Corvair plant. And in 1957 the Ford Motor Company opened a large plant at nearby Rawsonville. Farmers were replaced by industrial workers. Enrollments in the Lincoln schools skyrocketed from the original 595 (in 1925) to more than 1,900 (in 1968).¹⁰ By 1951 less than 12 per cent of the pupils enrolled in the vocational agriculture classes were from the homes of full-time farmers.

Administratively, important changes took place almost from the beginning. In 1929, Pittman's title was changed from Director of Rural Education to Director of Teaching Training (a title that was modified two years later to Director of Laboratory Schools). At about this time too, Pittman's attention was drawn to foreign projects, first Mexico, then Cuba. But he brought in Harvey Turner as Director of Rural Education and Francis Lord as Supervisor of Zone Schools.

Turner came to Normal from Arkansas State Teachers College where he had been, in turn, Professor of Rural Education and Head of the Education Department. Lord came from the Oregon Normal School of Pittman's early experience. When Pittman resigned in 1934, Turner was given his post as Director of Laboratory Schools. Lord was shifted to the Education Department where he served under Charles Elliot in the growing area of Special Education. He succeeded Elliot in 1941.

In 1941, the man who had headed the Lincoln School from its beginning, Henry A. Tape, resigned to become president of North-

ern State Normal School at Marquette. He was replaced by the head of Normal's city-oriented Roosevelt Laboratory School, Ben H. VandenBelt. During VandenBelt's administration the original contract between the Normal College and the Lincoln School District (which ran for 25 years) expired (1949). It was replaced by a similar contract for 15 years.

VandenBelt retired in 1954 and was replaced by Bruce K. Nelson, a native of Marquette, Michigan, and at the time Assistant Superintendent of Schools at Loraine, Ohio. Under Nelson's administration at Lincoln the six-room elementary school building was successfully financed. In January, 1956, Nelson was transferred to the College as Dean of Instruction. Two years later he was elevated to the status of Vice President for Instruction.

George Ruwitch replaced Nelson. Ruwitch was brought to Lincoln from Escanaba, Michigan, where he was Assistant Superintendent of Schools. During his administration the Lincoln School complex was expanded by the construction of the impressive new high school building.

Ruwitch resigned in 1961 to accept the superintendency of the East Grand Rapids schools, and was replaced by a member of the Lincoln faculty, at the time principal of the Lincoln Elementary School, Vernon H. Jones. During his administration the 15-year contract expired (1964). A petition against renewal was signed by more than 50 electors of the district but the Board, sensing the will of the district as a whole, voted to renew the contract for another 15 years.

This contract, like the previous one, had a provision for modification by mutual consent. In 1967, the University approached the Lincoln board on the matter of implementing this provision. The proposal was that the Lincoln faculty no longer be selected and appointed by the University but by the Lincoln board instead, thus severing the direct tie which had existed since the district was formed. This was approved by the school board and the Board of Regents (June 26, 1968) and became effective in September, 1969.

Lincoln continued to provide facilities for the University's student teachers, however, and the University paid a lump sum annually for this service. The agreement was for a five-year period running through 1973.

The Lincoln School District had been organized by rural people in the high hope that it would provide a much better quality of

education for their children (equal to that made available to city children), a broader curriculum (including vocational skills that would be of particular value in rural areas); and that it would serve as a cultural stimulus and a community center for the adults. That it served these ends well is shown by the consistent financial support that was given and increased as needs grew. The story of a prosperous citizen of the area, Charles Eli Alban, is symbolic. He had strongly opposed the campaign for consolidation on the ground that too heavy a tax burden would result. He became a thorough convert. At his death in 1929 it was found that he had left his entire estate to the school district, to be used to help pay off the bonds.

From the standpoint of the College the aim was not only to provide a facility for the training of rural teachers and administrators, but also to promote and provide a model of school district consolidation.

If Lincoln attracted special attention it was largely because of three factors: its size, the extent to which it met the goals of the consolidation movement, and the fact that it was affiliated with the oldest teacher-training institution in the "West," which made it of national interest. Lincoln School was visited for many years by leaders in education, school superintendents and teachers, and members of Grange chapters. The United States Office of Education sent many foreign visitors, especially from countries in which rural education was still a problem. In 1931 the National Education Association held its annual meeting in Detroit, and many educators traveled out to Ypsilanti to see the Lincoln School.