

The Rural Schools of Saskatchewan

Some Practical Observations

By Augustus H. Ball, M.A., LL.B., Inspector of Schools at Yorkton



THESE are the farmers' schools and it is most fitting that THE GUIDE should give attention to them for they are the very foundation of a system, strenuously advocated by THE GUIDE, which aims at the intelligent administration of those affairs vitally concerning the progress of rural communities.

The needs of the rural schools of Saskatchewan do not lie in the direction of changes so much as in the direction of the efficient development of the possibilities which the system has already projected. Suggestions for realizing this efficiency will be given in the course of this article. As far as the external conditions governing the rural schools are concerned the machinery is in very good running order. The province has made generous provisions for education. Particularly liberal financial assistance is given for the maintenance of rural schools. The grants can be earned in full whenever an average attendance of six pupils can be maintained. The school districts tax themselves freely for educational purposes and fine buildings with excellent equipment are everywhere seen. Then, there are provisions governing the qualifications of teachers and regulations controlling the operation of schools, a system of inspection to see that the school law and regulations are observed, the course of study followed and the most approved methods of teaching practiced. But, notwithstanding all this machinery, the latest available information shows (1) that in 1908 only 36.59 per cent. of the pupils enrolled were in attendance; (2) that 450 provisional certificates were issued during 1909; (3) that in 1908, 1610 was the highest number of teachers employed at any one time whereas 1917 teachers were registered as having taught; (4) that during the last five years 4500 persons have received licenses to teach in Saskatchewan; (5) in 1909, 609 school districts were without a teacher; (6) in 1908 one-seventh of the schools were open less than 100 days; (7) at the beginning of 1909 there were 1733 school districts.

These figures, if your readers will take the trouble to think out their significance, indicate certain distinct needs and suggest some difficult problems that the man on the land will probably have to solve for himself. The problems refer to: (1) larger enrolment; (2) regular attendance; (3) qualified, experienced teachers; (4) permanent teachers; (5) longer school year.

The Rural School District

The average school district comprises an area of sixteen, twenty or twenty-five sections of land, that is, an area four miles by four, four by five or five by five with the school-house as near the centre as the road allowances permit. At present the even-numbered sections are generally settled and the odd-numbered "held by speculators." If any reader cares to draw a diagram of a district five miles square he will readily see that children living in the far corners have possibly five and one-half or four and one-half miles to travel to a school situated on a road allowance surrounding the middle section. This consideration reveals a prominent negative influence on the usefulness of the rural school, long distance. In the older or richer settlements there is a stable at the school and pupils drive or ride. In the newer or poorer the pupils residing at these long distances attend irregularly or not at all. A child who has travelled more than two miles over the ordinary prairie trails in summer or winter is, at the outset of the day's work, seriously handicapped. Add to the walk a cold lunch half eaten on the way to school or at recess, insufficient water supply and the long walk home; add also the farm work that often precedes and follows the period at school and it will be conceded that half the pupils of the rural district if they gain an education at all do so under circumstances that call into play the great virtues of

courage, perseverance and endurance. The pathetic side appears when the soul gains at the expense of the body and the whole being suffers a loss of efficiency. The obvious need here is conveyance, public or private, within the district.

Ventilation of the Schools

As now being generally erected the school-house is a building of commodious proportions. Formerly a school eighteen feet by twenty-four was the customary size, now a building twenty-four by thirty-six is common. The larger size provides more air and more even warmth; but, the provision for proper ventilation is almost invariably inadequate. I need not digress to prove the necessity of pure air. Let it be sufficient to say that, of the factors expressing the vital efficiency of the human organism, the lungs are the chief. No wonder there is a crusade for

The practice of beautifying rural school sites is increasing. We owe it to our boys and girls to educate them wherever possible amid beautiful natural surroundings. The school yard can be made attractive in a very few years and the work that the pupils do themselves towards this beautifying is an excellent part of their training. Our children are undoubtedly the better for it inasmuch as the love of the beautiful is a long step towards the love of the good. I need not refer readers of THE GUIDE to the large number of schools with ugly surroundings. I think they are still the rule. Yet I believe that this will not long be the case. The man on the land has it all in his own hands and as soon as he gets a little more time our school grounds will be objects of beauty. Lawns, avenues, flower gardens, experimental plots

social custom and a system that aims broadly will not neglect the great essential subjects of education and the vital, subtle influences that direct conduct. Balance we need in the presence of change. Our educational practices need sobering. But this is digressing.

School Interiors

The same considerations of child-culture that apply to the external surroundings apply also to the interior. Good pictures are so cheap that there is no excuse for leaving the walls dismally bare of decoration. They should be supplied by every district and tastefully placed. So also the school furniture, wood-work and interior finish should all provide an education in good taste.

The Janitor

It will be a matter of surprise that allusion is made to such a commonplace topic as the "janitor-work" of schools but I know that many of your readers are trustees of rural schools and I wish to make this article as helpful as I am able. That the school-room should be as comfortable as possible for teacher and pupils is a safe assumption. They should work under the best conditions obtainable. It follows that provision should be made by the trustees for the cleaning and heating of school houses. Many and many an hour of precious time is lost in the morning waiting for dust to settle or for the school to "warm up." Pupils and teacher arrive at the school chilled through and there is no comfort till well on in the morning. It is pitiful to see little mites of six or seven stamping and shaking and blowing to keep themselves warm in a frozen school-house. Truly, those who survive will make a hardy race! Another need appears: Look after the comfort of the children attending school.

Child-Labor on the Farms

Few of the readers of THE GUIDE realize the extent of child-labor on the farms. This is closely connected with the unsatisfactory attendance in the rural schools. I need not point out the consequences to the child of excessive toil before maturity. These, physical, mental and temperamental, are all bad and no child should be subjected to them unless out of dire necessity, a supposition that is unwarrantable in this province. I know of one case where two very bright girls, daughters of a man, a first-rate citizen otherwise, who has the reputation of being "well-fixed," have worked at the hardest kinds of farm labor in all weathers up to an age when they are almost ashamed to go to school. When children are intelligent and ambitious this sort of treatment breaks their hearts and though physical harm may not follow, a broken spirit casts a shadow over their whole after life. Regret and resentment take the place of gratitude and filial love when thoughts of their home come into the mind. I could give many such instances but one illustration suffices to bring this injustice to the children under notice. Thousands who should be at school during July, August, September and October are kept at home to participate in the various farm duties of the haying and harvest season. It is a serious thing for the State that children should be reared in ignorance; it is sadder for the children to grow up without that consecutive training of mind and heart that modern education gives. There is another side to it. This province for many, many years to come will continue to add to its population thousands of immigrants who come mainly with the object of tilling the soil. The professional and commercial services for all these people will be the work of our own children—those now in the schools. They should be educated in prospect of filling the useful and desirable places in the community. They will not stay on the farm if the call of the city appeals to them and they have the energy to heed it and the ability to succeed. And, they should heed it for the race renews itself

Continued on Page 28



HOLY NIGHT

pure air. Trustees are responsible for the proper ventilation of school buildings and parents should bring pressure to bear on them until their duty in this respect is done. Tired teachers, drowsy children, disorder, even disease are necessary consequences of impure air in the school. The rural trustee while oiling his threshing engine should meditate at the same time on the fact that fresh air provides the lubrication for the occupant of the school-room ensuring smooth, efficient working as far as this condition is a prerequisite.

School Grounds

The rural school is usually the only public building in the settlement and by its plainness or beauty, care or neglect often registers fairly faithfully the interest of the district in educational matters.

of vegetables and grains may all be seen around some of the rural school houses of Saskatchewan. Some day they will be seen around all. How much of the work should be done by teacher and pupils is a matter for question. At present I am satisfied that the useful and practical in education must be strictly and steadfastly pursued and that even experimental work in the cultivation of school grounds is apt to become a fad and in the hands of teachers and trustees with want of balance essential work may suffer, leading pupils and parents to a distrust of the usefulness of all the school exercises. We want our pupils trained to become intelligent, law-abiding citizens of good habits and ideals, trained to respect those great safeguards of public and private life, the sanctions of religion, law and worthy