

Improve The Country School

"Thou shalt Enrich and Enlarge the Life
: : : : of the Country Child" : : : :

By Hon. G. R. Coldwell, Minister of Education, Manitoba Government

"The new country house and the new country school are the forces that must mould a richer country life." So writes Mr. O. J. Kern, Superintendent of rural schools in Winnebago County, Illinois, a man who is of the people and who has given ten years of his life in the improvement of the country schools of his district in the old state of Illinois and has reached a gratifying success. But how are we in Manitoba and what have we done to enrich the life of our country child? It is true our farmers have prospered and everywhere one now sees splendid and commodious dwellings and farm buildings, in many cases adorned with nature's handiwork material, trees; equipped with all modern conveniences both in the houses and farm buildings, all modern machinery and in many cases the best and most improved breeds of stock. The new country home, so far as its material side is concerned, is being looked after and is on the way.

But what have the same people, the farmers done for their schools? Practically nothing.

The country school today in Manitoba, taken as a class is in much the same condition as it was 25 years ago. The teaching is little or no better and the equipment, which was then new, is now in hundreds of cases nearly worn out. Truly our country schools have not kept pace with the development of the country home. Our farmers have organized all their industries and are constantly studying how they may complete and make these organizations more effective. They have The Horse Breeders' Association, The Pure Bred Cattle Breeders' Association, The Grain Growers' Association, and even the poultry breeders have organized their Poultry Associations. They have great fairs and exhibitions for these organizations and hold great conventions. The municipalities have organized their Municipal Union and from all these united forces great good is wrought for the material interest represented.

Obsolete Methods

During all this improvement and organization, what has been done for the country school? What organizations have the people made who are most interested in this institution? Practically none.

The country school and its influence and board of three trustees is the same small, isolated, unlovely institution it was 25 years ago, with a few exceptions. No study seems to have been made by our farmers of what may be done and is being done elsewhere to organize and improve that country school, and when our farmers get wealthy, as they are now doing, and desire an improved education for their children, they leave the gold mine of the farm and move into the cities and towns or else send their children there at great expense for that education which will put them on an equal footing with the child of the cities and towns. The usual result follows, that these children never return to that mine of health, independence and wealth, which was the foundation of the opportunity they go to the city to enjoy. This brings up a consideration of the relative position of the town, city and country school.

Is there any comparison which may be made between the isolated, one-roomed country school and the great city school of ten or twelve departments? Can they be compared in equipment, in efficiency, in teaching ability? If so, why do our farmers move into the towns and cities or send their children to the schools there, whenever and so soon as they can afford it? Truly there is no comparison whatever. In connection with this also should be considered the cost to the people of the education being got in the town or city school and in the country school. The following are some figures taken from the published returns of schools in Manitoba in 1908, the last year for which complete returns have up to date been published.

The cost per pupil in 1908 based on the average attendance was in
Winnipeg, \$32.03.
Brandon, \$28.08.
Portage la Prairie, \$28.21.

While in 62 rural districts taken at random and not for the purpose of this compilation, and scattered over the whole province, the cost per pupil was \$69.56. This is more than double the cost in the three cities mentioned. When we compare the results obtained from this greatly increased expenditure with that obtained in the city schools, the cost to the people in the country districts produces a still greater disparity.

The above comparison of cost maintains in Manitoba in all our country districts when placed alongside the town and city schools. But Manitoba is not singular in this respect. The same thing prevails in the other provinces of the Dominion and throughout the United States, except in places where they have made an effort to improve it. Years ago our neighbors to the south



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of us woke up to the idea that the country child was entitled to, and should have, the same educational advantages as the city child. In Canada our people, with few exceptions, have been slower to realize the position of the country child and consequently to try and improve that condition educationally. One most public-spirited citizen, however, was found who saw the condition and had the means to do something to remedy it. In Sir Wm. Macdonald, of Montreal, Canada found a benefactor after the style of the great American who founded and equipped the Stout Agricultural High School at Menominee, Wisconsin, and an Industrial High School at Fairhaven, Mass.; two schools which are said by experts to be the best on the

American continent. Sir William Macdonald about the year 1902 made a splendid effort in Canada to bring home to the farmers of four of our eastern provinces what might be done to improve their country schools and to give the country child the same educational advantage that the town and city child has. That this might be done, Sir William has clearly demonstrated. Can the same thing be done for our country child in Manitoba? We think so and the Department of Education of our province thinks so and is carrying on a vigorous campaign towards that end. Our people complain of the inefficiency of their country school, of the small attendance and the irregularity of attendance, of the poor and indifferent teaching, and send their children to the towns and cities for a remedy.

Inception of New System

Sir William proceeded in a business-like way and procured an educational enthusiast in the person of Dr. Jas. W. Robertson, who knew his Canada from end to end and its educational needs. He decided to investigate and he found that in the United States a system had been started and was working out satisfactorily which was based on the union or consolidation of two or more single-roomed country schools into one large school of two or more rooms, as the necessities of the district might require, and transporting (by teams and vans) the children to the new or consolidated school as it was called. He found that the plan had originated in the state of Massachusetts some 20 years before and was in operation in over 60 per cent. of the country schools of that state, and, like the immigrants, had spread westward into Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Nebraska, North and South Dakota, and some 20 other states of the Union. Sir William and Dr. Robertson found that it met the difficulties that our country schools were laboring under and decided to bring it to the attention of the Canadian people. Sir William supplied the means and set Dr. Robertson to work. Four places were selected, one in each of the provinces of Ontario, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, at which a demonstration consolidated school should be established, and they set to work and built four new buildings for this purpose. Now it must not be lost sight of that the new consolidated school, in order to bring to the country child the same educational advantages which the city child enjoyed, required an improved course of study. One adapted to the surroundings and environments of the country child, the same as the city and town schools were adapted and equipped for the calling and environment of the town or city child. Consequently, school gardening and nature study were introduced, corresponding to the manual training of the city school and likewise a certain amount of the same manual training and also Domestic or Household science.

Let us now look at what was done and the results. In Ontario a magnificent

building was put up upon a portion of the agricultural college farm. It contained some eight rooms, with a large assembly hall which would seat some 600 people; was equipped with all modern sanitary appliances and conveniences such as are found in the best city schools and set upon a large site with beautiful surroundings. One would have thought that in the immediate vicinity of the great farmers' agricultural college, which is indeed said to be one of the best, if not the best, thing of its kind in the world, that the educational influence flowing from it should have been sufficient to have made the country schools close to it as good and efficient as they should be. We shall see.

The consolidated school was opened in 1904. At first four country districts were consolidated in it. Eight vans were used on as many routes to draw and deliver the children to the new school, and the longest route was seven miles. The test of efficiency may be judged first from two things, viz., the enrolment in the school and the regularity of attendance.

Here at Guelph in the old province of Ontario, the mother of our public school system and the province containing the highest percentage of literacy in the Dominion, according to the last census, something happened.

Before consolidation the enrolment in the four districts varied from 113 in January to 144 in June, and after consolidation the enrolment rose to 181 in January and 192 in June.

Before consolidation the average daily attendance was 59 per cent. in January and 68 per cent. in June, and after consolidation it was 87.84 per cent. in January and 91 per cent. in June. So here it was evident that the new school was doing two of the things necessary—it was bringing out the children to the school and bringing them regularly. A fifth district came into the scheme later.

This was a pure country consolidation.

Town Consolidation

Next they went to Nova Scotia and selected what may be called a town consolidation. At Middleton, a town of about 800 people, a similar building was erected to the one at Guelph upon four acres of ground. A similar equipment and improved courses of study were provided. Seven rural districts were united with the town district. The town had 130 children in its own school; the seven rural districts had 237 children in their schools, making a total of 367 in the eight districts.

The school was opened in 1903 with the usual transportation routes. Before consolidation the enrolment was 367, with an average daily attendance of 198 or 54 per cent; after consolidation the enrolment rose almost at once to 400 and the average daily attendance to 78 per cent.

Next a similar building and equipment was put up at Kingston, New Brunswick, and here it was out in the country and away from any town or village. The same improved courses of study were provided and similar transportation. The school was opened in 1904 and before consolidation the enrolment in the seven districts which were consolidated was 125 and the average daily attendance was 55 or 44 per cent. After consolidation the enrolment rose to 170 and the average daily attendance to 91 per cent.

Next a similar building and equipment was put up at Hillsboro in Prince Edward Island and containing the same improved courses of study, and transportation. Six districts were united in 1903. Before consolidation the enrolment was 148 and the average daily attendance was 60 per cent; after consolidation the enrolment rose to 161 and the average daily attendance to 74.

Now, a little study of these figures will convince the most sceptical that these new schools were meeting some of the difficulties. The children were being brought out and that regularly.

Continued on page 99.

TO IMPROVE THE COUNTRY SCHOOL

The farmers must take hold of the school organization work with the energy they display in other interests.

The schools must be better equipped or the children will be sent to the town schools and the farms be neglected.

The schools must be made more home-like and more efficient teachers secured.

Consolidation is the remedy for present evils as shown in the eastern provinces. The consolidated schools give the country children the same advantages as those of the city; they procure regular attendance; they have better teachers; the school life is more attractive and the benefits to the community are real and lasting.