

A Rural Secondary Education: Saskatchewan, 1958-1961

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ABSTRACT

Religion and local politics have always weighed on secondary education in rural Saskatchewan but so have the brute facts of regional economic history. Isolation and near-poverty helped to ensure low completion rates in the 1950s, and especially in the south-western section of the province. In this memoir the author details educational practice just when prosperity was about to strike the system and the region in the 1960s and 1970s.

RÉSUMÉ

La religion et les politiques locales ont toujours influencé l'éducation secondaire en Saskatchewan rurale. C'est ce qui ressort des données brutes de l'histoire économique régionale. L'isolement et la quasi-pauvreté contribuèrent au taux élevé d'abandon des études durant les années 1950, notamment dans le sud-ouest de la province. Dans ses souvenirs, l'auteur raconte dans le menu détail la pratique éducative au moment où la prospérité était sur le point d'atteindre le système et la région au cours des années 1960 et 1970.

Euro-Canadians first settled in Frontier, Saskatchewan in 1906. Just over eighty per cent of the region's farmers grew wheat and cereals; the rest took up mixed agriculture, livestock-raising included. Set in Saskatchewan's far southwest, the village waited until 1926 for construction of a CPR spur, 1956 for connection to the Saskatchewan Power grid, 1959 for unified telephone service, and 1966 for paved roads. Population hovered around 300. We were 25 kilometres north of the American border, 150 kilometres from Alberta. Mom and Dad consistently held that we "lived in the middle of nowhere." They, my younger sister, and I agreed that our isolation explained better than any other fact our region's "problems."

Every year it got harder to persuade teachers to stay at Frontier Public School, medical doctors to practice in our tiny hospital, and ministers to preach in the three local churches. Every year, Frontier's Missouri Synod Lutherans, well over half the people in the village and accounting for roughly 60 per cent of the surrounding farms, tightened their hold on the collectivity. From 1940 there were weekend movies in the town

hall, but from 1946 onward, no dances. In self-defence, my parents acquired a TV set in 1965 (four years after I left home). In that year a local association of television enthusiasts financed and installed an illegal repeater station east of town. My Dad waited for, oh, about five minutes after the repeater began to function, then bought a TV set. A day later he and Mom luxuriated in news from the CBS and NBC affiliates in Great Falls, Montana. They thought it an improvement over the gossip they heard from the Norwegians.

In religion, politics, business, and general culture, distance intensified everything. The "city" was for us Swift Current, 12,000 people, 145 kilometres on bad roads. Ottawa was unimaginably distant, although my francophone Laurier-Liberal grandfather – and a delegation of neighbours – travelled in 1936 to Ottawa to give MacKenzie King the benefit of their views.

On the other hand, for the young music-lover I was, CBK Regina broadcast Toronto Symphony Concerts every month, and of course, re-broadcast the Saturday afternoon Metropolitan Opera. KSL Salt Lake City, Utah, filled in musical gaps with organ and choral concerts live from the Mormon Tabernacle. This was education at a distance, and unforgettable into the bargain.

Questions of distance and local particularity counted for naught in the eyes of the Saskatchewan Department of Education. In 1919 there were enough children in Frontier Village to require the founding of a tiny school district and construction of a one-room school, Grades I-XII. There was no choice about this, and "a good thing, too," said Dad. My father attended it until his senior matriculation in 1933, then took up grain farming, forced by the Great Depression to give up his dream of aeronautical engineering. My maternal grandmother taught there, 1938-1942. Regina might be 450 kilometres away, but the Department's arm was long and strong.

By the time I entered Grade I in 1950, school consolidation had swept the province. Eastend School District #8 comprised a vast, scarcely populated region in the semi-arid prairie. Luckily for us, the District chose Frontier as one of two locations for composite schools. The school I knew had four rooms at first, doubling every decade until 1980. It drew children by school bus from five to ninety kilometres away. The Frontier Teacherage offered near-free accommodation to half the teaching force. Along with the CPR, our six grain elevators and the school (and more to the point, the salaries its teachers earned) were guarantors of the continued existence of Frontier, Saskatchewan.

High school covered Grades IX-XII. For me it began in Grade VII, as Grades VII-IX were stuffed into Room 4. You couldn't help but know what the Grade IXs were up to. If you consider enrolments in 1947-50, there should have been 72 children in Room 4 in 1957. As it was, Room 4 had 31 children in September 1957. Drop-outs accounted for most of the wastage, as 14- and 15-year-olds had left in droves. In the classes that began school in 1948-50, three girls left in Grade VIII to become mothers. Several boys went farming. The law might say children could not quit until age 16. But this was Frontier, and it was (I may write this just once) on the frontier.

Our teachers were as varied as the country. Miss Scott¹ started us off in Grade VII, hoping to teach all subjects by osmosis. She gave vague and lengthy talks about her memories of Harry Mantovani's orchestra, which she had heard in Winnipeg. This

took up the mornings. Her lengthy chats with two of the Grade IX boys took up the afternoons. She disappeared at Hallowe'en 1957.

Miss Scott's replacement, Jonathan Fairmont, was a likeable but youthful product of Regina Normal School. He lasted until Easter 1958, when he was eaten alive by the bullying child-men who ruled Grades VIII and IX. Their minds were settled on cars, liquor, sex, and early liberation from the confining walls of school, town, and society more generally. The aging and already-ancient principal, Mr. Davidson, took over until end of school, June 30, 1958.

My daily stories of school life, highly coloured I realize, persuaded my parents that alternatives must be found. Sending me away to school was out of the question, partly because Dad needed my help on the tractor. I might be a book-reader as devoted as they come, but there were hundreds of acres to be plowed and tamed. There was outside work for me and my sister to do all through secondary school. They did agree I could continue piano studies with a fine local teacher, and practice every day pretty much as I liked. And I was encouraged to ransack the monthly book-box from the Provincial Lending Library. It was about a metre square, thirty centimetres deep, and heaven-sent. I had long since read through my Dad's strange collection of Zane Grey novels, Louis L'Amour epics, and ... his high school Homer (his eclectic tastes must have helped to shape my own).

Mom and Dad were thorough-going agnostics, but gave significant annual donations to the local United Church of Canada. Their argument was that the U.C. was a commonsense, liberal-rationalist organization, and presented the only sustainable alternative to the values of the combined fundamentalists in town. My Voltairean mother would never, of course, allow that Christianity made sense, nor would my apostate father. But for us children, it was a continual education to hear parental discussions of religion and politics. The talk raged on all through the winter months from the first day of the annual freeze-up, when Dad was released from his wheat fields. Even the grandparents took part in the grand conversation. I heard first of John Dewey and Bertrand Russell from my maternal grandmother, who professed to be a "wee bit shocked" by these philosophers' views. But my parents, conventional on the outside and rationalist on the inside, made sure we children grew up with a fair respect for books, and a mild scepticism about the faraway world.

In late Grade VIII, one hot May afternoon, the inspector (that is, S.D. #8's Superintendent A.L. Brown, B.A., B.Ed.) called me out of class. He asked me desultory and non-sequential questions about mathematics, literary history, and music appreciation. Because it was all a bit mysterious, I told my parents about Mr. Brown. They then revealed that it had "been decided" I would skip the last half of Grade IX and the first half of Grade X, but would write the Departmental Examinations for Grade X, then Grades XI and XII if I got that far.

By now I looked forward with anxiety, if not downright fear, to four years in high school. The news of my escape from one whole year of it was as wonderful as it was unexpected. By this time I knew there was no safe space in school or town for a book-minded, arts-oriented, self-conscious, and doubtless priggish boy. I remember later reading W.O. Mitchell's jokey account of schooling in east-central Saskatchewan with

disbelief. To me secondary schooling was no joke, ever. I saw my secondary schooling as a late mediaeval schoolboy might have seen the future in a French cathedral school – scarcely more than a tiresome and fearsome punctuation mark in a narrative leading on to university.

So, how best to describe the physical and administrative meanings of that school and that place? Consider our library. Frontier School Library held multiple copies of all required texts for Grades I-XII, and exactly six additional volumes. The jewel of the collection was a spanking new 450-page compendium showing the chemical composition of 1,315 “popular chemical substances.” The other five books were dictionaries, among them two copies of the Merriam Webster Collegiate dictionary-thesaurus for 1942 on soft paper. It was rumoured that the 11th edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, on India paper, had disappeared during the War.

A chemistry laboratory, 3 metres x 4 metres and unventilated, opened in 1959. Its collection of twelve bottled substances served well enough in its first year, but became unusable in 1960 when the last knowledgeable chemistry teacher left for better job prospects.

There was no gymnasium and no physical education, although all pupils were required to leave the building at recess time. The janitor lurked in a gloomy basement closet, just down from the boys’ toilets, four holes dug deep.

There was no biology laboratory and no biology teaching, as biology did not figure in S.D. #8’s secondary curriculum. In Grades IX-XII one studied

English Literature	Social Studies	Physics
English Composition	Algebra	Chemistry
French	Geometry and/or Trigonometry	Latin (optional)

I was lucky to have four years’ Latin instruction, which was crammed into my Grade XI year. Mr. Broadley had arrived the year before, and with him, enthusiasm for the classics. Alas, his days in Frontier were numbered, as he had elected to conduct an affair with an impressionable Grade X girl.

After Ron Broadley’s decline and fall in June 1960, we were left with the services of Mr. Faro Larsen. Mr. Larsen was an able man with the advantage of a marriage tie to a local Norwegian-Lutheran clan. Considering local school politics and the Lutherans’ attitude to public education (“a moderately Satanic enterprise,” said Pastor Pegelow), Mr. Larsen’s service struck me as calm and courageous. Yet he could not teach everyone and everything. Superintendent Brown therefore desperately looked for a new person to take Grade XII and the principalship. At the last possible moment, he found Mr. C.R. McEwan.

Mr. McEwan (B.A. Trinity College, M.A. Calcutta) came to Frontier from a “small school in Rajasthan.” His chaotic mind must have been revealed at the first staff meeting. All six of us Grade XII pupils figured it out soon enough. We “learned” history, using as our text Thomas & Hamm, *The Modern World*, by writing in our notebooks those sections underlined in advance by Mr. McEwan and recited slowly by him in an Irish drone. English Literature was a travesty. English Composition slid entirely out of view.

By Christmas 1960 three of the Grade XII class remained, two of them victims of terminal boredom, one pregnant. In January one more left, as Marlene's father was called by the CPR to take over a new station in Alberta. We were down to two pupils.

But the highlight of the 1961 school year occurred in March. Mr. McEwan had worn the same broad-checked grey suit since September. By mid-January we speculated it need no longer be hung in Mr. McEwan's closet in the teacherage, as it could stand in a corner unaided. One cold, bright February day, Mr. McEwan arrived in his newly cleaned suit. We guessed it had been laundered in his kitchen sink. It was so crinkled as to be *res sui generis*, a unique thing. Behind those thick public-issue horn-rimmed glasses, Mr. McEwan now became more confused than ever.

On March 1, 1961, Mr. McEwan "went away." As we soon learned, his destination was the Weyburn Mental Hospital. Hearsay suggested this man had been fired a number of times for incompetence in the British and then in the Indian Education Services, moving undetected from one miserable rural school to another. Nobody ever found out if Superintendent Brown had known of Mr. McEwan's professional record before appointment in Frontier. I think Mr. McEwan went on to teach in other corners of the old Empire. Mr. Larsen told me a couple of years later that he had received a postcard from Kingston, Jamaica.

Alan, my only remaining colleague in Grade XII, and I prepared for the final Departmental examinations for senior matriculation in the way so many Canadians have done: we crammed. We had no teaching whatsoever after April Fool's Day, 1961. Instead, our parents obtained from the Department of Education the previous ten years' worth of printed final examinations, and bought from Western Education Services, Regina, the *Recommended Keys and Answers in All Subjects for Junior and Senior Matriculation in the Province of Saskatchewan, 1950-1960*, offered on 8 x 14 inch paper, legibly printed on a Gestetner machine. We proceeded to memorize as much of this material as we possibly could in the weeks before examination time.

We came daily to school, despite the absence of a teacher or administrator. Perhaps our mothers decided we would be too much underfoot, had we stayed at home to do our "work." Perhaps I saw it as a way to get out of more summer-fallowing. At any rate, Alan and I sat in an empty room, memorizing, memorizing. Or rather, I sat, for Alan was busy with a new conquest in the Department of Romance, a Grade X girl.

When the results came, Alan had passed four subjects. I remember he did not pass French, despite my best tutorial efforts (he got 23 per cent, as I recall). I passed everything and Alan kindly suggested I should be valedictorian at the graduation ceremony in Frontier Hall.

Secondary schooling was by turns boring, terrifying, and fun. There's no need to expatiate on the boredom. Terror came from brutish schoolmates, male and female. What little order and discipline there was, especially in early high school years, resulted from the collective will of a few bullies. One of them repeated Grade IX three times, just because it was a pleasant way to pass the winter. By the end of my Grade X year, the bullies had faded out, moving on to marginal employments in local agriculture.

There may have been two dozen interesting hours in those three years of secondary schooling. Mr. Broadley's Latin was the work of an intellectual. Mr. Larsen's slow-

footed appreciation of Percy Bysshe Shelley gave us an idea what to look for in literature. Coming from a family that cared about ideas made a crucial difference to me, but I needed (and wanted) the tools of criticism. At times, Messrs. Broadley and Larsen kept us awake and alive to a new world of sentiment and practical reason.

My maternal grandmother is in the second row of a photograph of people at the 1935 Regina CCF meeting, but made no claim to authorship of that meeting's famous Manifesto. My grandparents and parents got my sister and me thinking about politics and history. Through my last six years of schooling, the family supported my musical education. We were lucky, as the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s were a period of relative prosperity in the region. The family could afford the time and money required for essential education outside school.

Meanwhile, every day on the street, I had discussions and arguments about moral and social values, for our fundamentalist Protestant neighbours were fixated (in their peculiar ways) on such questions.

On another hand, my father's unending love of the land, and his contribution of French and French culture marked our lives.

So, in politics, books, music, morality, language, and in our strong sense of the natural world, it may have mattered little that my younger sister's and my formal secondary education was of dubious quality.

In an economy as restrained as Saskatchewan's, the mere existence of broadly accessible public schooling counted for a great deal. In Frontier, I should say, too, that elementary education was uniformly good in the second half of the twentieth century. I similarly found that post-secondary education in the province was as good as any in the nation.

The educational difficulty of our village lay in children's "in-between" years, when attractive and solid secondary education might have helped. It seemed to me that the forces of geographical and cultural isolation strengthened, growing with each generation of Frontier children. This cannot be right, yet the experiential truth cannot be denied.

I have never known if the weaknesses and strengths of schooling in my village were typical of villages and towns across the Canadian Great Plains, and in what ways "typical." In all my adult life, discussions with university colleagues across Canada suggest that secondary schooling everywhere left much to be desired. Yet I am unsure in what ways this may have been widely true: Curriculum? Pedagogy? The material side of schooling?

I did get through it, more or less all right, as my colleagues have done. But the micro-history of secondary education remains to be done, *res sui generis*.

Note

- 1 I have arbitrarily re-named all the persons described in this essay to protect anonymity.